Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

“Winter” from The Four Seasons: Opus 8, No. 4
Written: Published in 1725
Movements: Three
Style: Baroque
Duration: Seven minutes

To the many facets of Antonio Vivaldi’s life—violinist, music master, composer, priest, lady’s man—we must add the somewhat less glamorous occupation of writer of program notes. Even though he was thoroughly Italian, Vivaldi was never mired in provincialism. Commissions for his works arrived from the far-flung corners of the Habsburg dynasty. So, on the first page of his collection of violin concertos called The Trial of Harmony and Invention (which contains The Four Seasons), we find Vivaldi listing himself as the Concert Master of the Pio Ospedale della Pietà (an orphanage for girls in Venice), Director of Chamber Music for Prince Philip, Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt and Maestro in Italy of the Lord Wenzel Count von Morzin of Bohemia. This man got around. He was also crafty in selling his music. Vivaldi composed and performed each of The Four Seasons long before he published them. When he sent Count von Morzin a “new” collection of violin concertos, he confessed that the Count would recognize The Four Seasons, “which have so long enjoyed your indulgence and generosity.” In order to make them appear new, Vivaldi included some sonnets that explained the music. He also cued each line of the sonnets to the exact place in the music to which it corresponds. His role as program annotator has eased the burden of many later writers of program notes!

Four separate violin concertos make up The Four Seasons. Each can be, and often is, performed alone. They all follow the standard Baroque form of the concerto with a fast first, slow second and fast third movement. The first and third movements follow a
plan where the orchestra begins and then alternates with the soloist. Of course, the soloist gets all of the flash and dash. The second movements have the soloist playing over simple accompaniments by the orchestra. Unlike many of his other more than five hundred concertos, Vivaldi’s *Seasons* are not the cookie-cutter type. Each movement demonstrates a wealth of invention and witty musical depictions of each of the seasons. Here is Vivaldi’s guided tour of “Winter”:

First Movement: Shivering in the frozen snow and at the cruel blast of the biting wind. Stamping one’s feet continuously and, because of the excessive cold, one’s teeth chatter.

Second Movement: Resting by the fire in peace and contentment. Meanwhile, outside the rain pours down.

Third Movement: Walking on the ice, cautiously at first for fear of slipping and falling, then walking more boldly. Finally slipping and falling down. Once again on the ice, walking with growing confidence, until the ice cracks and breaks.

Hearing, through the iron gate, the Sirocco, the Bora, and all the winds in conflict. This then is Winter, which, despite everything, also brings great pleasure.

A contemporary of Antonio Vivaldi once described him as “an excellent violinist and a mediocre composer.” The great twentieth-century composer Igor Stravinsky felt that Vivaldi was “greatly overrated - a dull fellow who could compose the same form over and so many times over.” Regardless of his contemporary’s views (or Stravinsky’s sour grapes), he is a composer whose best music has stood the test of time and who would fit comfortably into the twenty-first-century fascination with celebrity musicians.
of prodigious talent and scandalous lifestyles. His *Four Seasons* are on any list of the top ten most popular classical compositions.

**John Rutter (b. 1945)**

*When Icicles Hang*

Written: 1973  
Movements: Five  
Style: Contemporary  
Duration: 17 minutes

In terms of sheer amount of music, John Rutter is almost the Antonio Vivaldi of the contemporary choral world. The man seems to be everywhere. His compositions are a staple on choral programs—especially holiday programs—and if he is not conducting the Cambridge Singers, he is probably a guest conductor somewhere. These days, it would be hard to find an American who has sung in a choir and *not* sung something by John Rutter. NBC’s *Today Show* called him "the world's greatest living composer and conductor of choral music."

John Rutter was born in London and went to Clare College, Cambridge. In 1975, he became the director of music at Clare College, and then in 1981 he started his own choir, the Cambridge Singers. In addition to writing original compositions, Rutter has edited and arranged others’ works, most notably found in his collection of *Carols for Choirs*.

Some complain of Rutter’s lack of depth or seriousness as a composer. In an interview with Alan MacFarlane in 2009, Rutter explained his approach to music:

> C.P.E. Bach put it rather well when he said that if you don't please yourself you can't hope to please anyone else. Because I have been commercially successful, people accuse me of just targeting my non-critical audience and
writing down. I hope I don't do that. I do try to write simply because when I think back to my dad, he had no musical learning, but I think he could recognise music that spoke from the heart. You can write for a sophisticated and knowledgeable elite but I have never felt called to do that myself. Possibly because I was for some time an only child, possibly because my parents weren't musicians, I have felt some need through the music I write to be accepted. Leonard Bernstein said the same thing; I do like to be inclusive and accessible.

Tonight you will hear five of the six songs that Rutter included in *When Icicles Hang*. The texts all come from English Renaissance writers, most notably William Shakespeare and Thomas Campion. John Rutter provides the following notes:

*When Icicles Hang* will forever be associated in my mind with the much-missed figure of Russell Burgess, whose Wandsworth School Boys’ Choir was such a colorful and inspiring part of the musical scene in the 1960s and ‘70s. Russell asked me to write a seasonal, but not specifically Christmas, work for a December concert given by the choir in London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1973, and, in writing it, I think I unconsciously reflected some of the contradictory facets of Russell’s endearing personality: his rumbustiousness in “Good Ale” and “Hay, Ay,” his gentleness in “Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,” perhaps also something of his underlying melancholy (so often to be found in great men of action) in “Winter Wakeneth All My Care.” We all lamented his untimely passing at the age of only 48, but his work lives on in the gift of singing he gave to so many young people.
Ernst Bloch (1880-1959)  
*Sacred Service (Avodath Hakodesh)*  
Written: 1973  
Movements: Five  
Style: Contemporary  
Duration: 51 minutes

There are innumerable settings of the Roman Catholic Mass for soloists, chorus and orchestra. Throughout the entire history of classical music, composers have used the Mass as a vehicle to express profound personal emotion while at the same time providing music for a worship service. Masses by Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven up through Bernstein are monuments of music, and that isn’t even counting the great Requiems.  
Curiously missing from the repertoire are any settings of the Jewish Sabbath Service. They are out there, but it took a twentieth-century composer, Ernest Bloch, to write one that would gain an established place in the repertoire.

Ernest Bloch was born in Geneva, Switzerland and began playing the violin when he was nine. By the time he turned ten, he vowed that one day he would be a composer. He studied violin with the famed Eugene Ysaïe and spent time studying music in Brussels, Frankfort, Munich, Paris and Geneva. In spite of his musical ambitions, he found himself back in Geneva working as a sales clerk and bookkeeper in his father’s business. A production of his opera in Paris in 1910 met with a good deal of success, and then in 1916 he came to the United States as a conductor for the notorious dancer Maud Allen. In 1920, the newly formed Cleveland Institute of Music hired him as its first director. He became a U.S. citizen in 1924. A dispute over his hands-on approach to the curriculum at the Cleveland Institute forced his resignation, so in 1925 he moved to San Francisco to lead the Conservatory there. The University of California at Berkeley then provided him with a stunning opportunity: an endowed chair that allowed him to live
wherever he wanted and didn’t require any teaching. He simply had to compose! He moved back to Switzerland until 1939, when the war brought him back to the United States, this time to Oregon, where he spent the rest of his life.

While he was in San Francisco, Reuben Rinder, the Cantor of Temple Emanu-El, obtained a grant for Bloch to set the Sabbath Morning Service from the *American Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship* to music. By this time, Bloch had established himself as a “Jewish” composer with compositions such as *Tres poèmes juif*, his symphony *Israel* and *Schelomo (Solomon)*, for cello and orchestra. However, Bloch had forgotten any of the Hebrew he learned for his Bar Mitzvah, so while he poured over the service, he relearned Hebrew as well. Bloch took four years to complete the *Sacred Service*. It received its premiere in Turin, Italy in 1934.

Bloch divided his setting of the Sabbath Service into five parts. After a somber orchestral introduction, the first part, Meditation, focuses on the prayers said upon entering the temple and inviting the congregation to praise God. The second part, Sanctification, comes from the book of Isaiah and is clearly the precursor to the Christian “Holy, Holy, Holy.” An instrumental section begins the third part, the Silent Meditation, and then a portion of Psalm 19 introduces the Taking of the Scroll from the Ark. After the reading, part four is a series of prayers during the Returning of the Scroll to the Ark. The final part of the *Sacred Service* is the Adoration and Benediction.

As Bloch was wrestling with his *Sacred Service*, he wrote: “I am battling against notes, sounds, rhythms, to extirpate out of my soul all the unexpressed music which has been latent – for centuries – which has been awaiting this marvelous text ... Though
intensely Jewish in its roots, this message seems to me above all a gift of Israel to the whole of mankind.”

©2010 John P. Varineau