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Classical Editor: Rob Barnett

Founder Len Mullenger Len@musicweb-international.com

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REVIEW



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Antonio VIVALDI (1678-1741)

The Four Seasons - concertos for violin, strings and basso continuo, Op.8, No. 1-4 (pub: 1725):

- Spring*, in E major, Op. 8/1, RV 269 [9:45]
- Summer*, in G minor, Op. 8/2, RV 315 [9:50]
- Autumn*, in F major, Op. 8/3, RV 293 [10:09]
- Winter*, in F minor, Op. 8/4, RV 297 [8:57]

Astor PIAZZOLLA (1921-1992)

Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires) arranged solo violin and strings by Leonid Desyatnikov
Otono Porteño (Autumn) (1970) [7.17]
Invierno Porteño (Winter) (1970) [6.38]
Primavera Porteña (Spring) (1970) [5.16]
Verano Porteño (Summer) (1965) [5.57]

- Lara St. John (violin)
- The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela/Eduardo Marturet
- rec. no date given, Sala Simón Bolívar, Centro de Acción Social por la Música, Caracas, Venezuela. DDD
- **ANCALAGON ANC134** [64:19]

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So here we go again folks, yet another version of Vivaldi's ubiquitous *The Four Seasons*. In the last few years the recordings of *The Four Seasons* that have arrived for review have tended to be period instrument performances. These interpretations by solo violinist Lara St. John presented on her own Ancalagon label are played on a Guaragnini violin with modern strings and bow.

The suite known as *The Four Seasons* from Vivaldi's opus 8 set of 12 violin concerti are wonderfully inventive and melodic scores. But if any works have been overexposed these are they. I believe that there are now well over one hundred versions in the catalogue, available in arrangements that probably range from

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panpipes to bagpipes. I ask myself is there a need for yet another version? I suppose it all depends on the version as the competition is exceedingly intense. Cleverly Lara St. John has freshened up the appeal of this release by including Astor Piazzolla's take on the four seasons of the year titled *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)* in Desyatnikov's arrangement.

Lara St. John was a new name to me and the first thing I did was to browse her website www.larastjohn.com to discover that the violinist is Canadian-born; hailing from London, Ontario. My brief inspection of her biographical details reveals an impressive pedigree. St. John a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia, studied at the Moscow Conservatoire, the Guildhall School in London and the New England Conservatory, Boston. From a young age St. John appeared with several of the world's leading orchestras. In 1999 St. John exchanged her loaned 1702 'Lyal' Stradivarius violin for the permanent loan of a 1779 'Salabue' Guadagnini violin. In 2007 St. John released her accounts of the J.S. Bach 6 *Sonatas & Partitas for solo violin*. Her recording was made at the studios at Skywalker Sound, California on Ancalagon SACD AR 123.

Lara St. John's latest recording on her own Ancalagon label is a collaboration with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. Founded in 1975 the orchestra was joined in 1999 by their charismatic conductor Gustavo Dudamel to forge a partnership that has gone on to achieve remarkable success in a short space of time. On this recording the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra is conducted by Eduardo Marturet. In 2006 conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, Marturet was nominated for a Latin Grammy award for the release *Encantamento* in the Best Classical Album category.

This Ancalagon release of *The Four Seasons* commences with the concerto *Spring*. In the opening *Allegro* St. John and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra certainly do provide a fresh feel of renewal. St. John in the *Largo* conjures up verdant pastures in this bucolic scene and in the final *Allegro* the air of the country dance is compelling.

In the opening movement of *Summer* the soloist evokes the harsh rays of the sun basking in a dry and sweltering heat. I loved the call of the cuckoo in a scene permeated by birdsong contrasting with the fear from the strong winds howling through the valley. St. John's interpretation of the short central *Adagio - Presto* communicates a strong sense of weariness and the final movement *Presto* convincingly depicts a summer storm of thunder, lightning and hailstones.

The concerto *Autumn* opens with a movement marked *Allegro - Allegro assai* a pleasing musical description by St. John of peasants carousing in celebration of their abundant harvest. The ridiculous drunken revelry that ensues in the *Adagio molto* inevitably results in a pleasant feeling of drowsiness before the onset of sleep. In the final movement *Allegro* St. John represents the thrill of the chase with hunters enthusiastically pursuing their quarry.

The final concerto *Winter* commences with a *Allegro non molto* movement a musical picture of a snow covered scene with a bone-chilling winter wind. A brief *Largo* is a tuneful and passionate representation of hearing the persistent rain dripping outside the dwelling. St. John in the final movement *Allegro - Lento - Allegro* gives a persuasive account of the carefulness and apprehension of walking on ice. To conclude I especially enjoyed St. John's illustration of the chilling winter wind.

My three premier recommendations are all performed on period instruments. For the incredible rapid-fire energy and the amazing virtuoso pyrotechnics I greatly admire the wonderfully colourful interpretation by Fabio Biondi as baroque violin soloist and director of Europa Galante. Using original manuscripts Biondi's recording includes terrific accounts of the remaining eight concertos from the Opus 8 set; a real bonus for any collector. Biondi recorded the set in Sion, Switzerland in 2000 on Virgin Veritas 5 61980 2. A most convincing alternative is the brilliantly imaginative 2000 release from baroque violin soloist Giuliano Carmignola and the Venice Baroque Orchestra under the direction of Andrea Marcon. On Sony Classical SK 51352 Carmignola just oozes class, controlled power and sophistication. The set includes three additional Vivaldi *violin concertos*: RV257, RV376 and RV211. I have also enjoyed the interpretations from Concerto Italiano under Rinaldo Alessandrini. These are performances of varied expression,



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impressive imagination and a fiery passion. Interestingly, the ensemble use a different soloist for each of the four concertos. Alessandrini's set was recorded in 2002 at Rome and is available on Opus111/Naïve OP 30363. Of the many alternative versions on modern instruments I still enjoy Nigel Kennedy's thrillingly maverick performance with the English Chamber Orchestra on EMI Classics 5562532.

Astor Piazzolla composed his set of *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)* between 1965-70. Not conceived as part of a set of the four seasons of the year the earliest piece *Verano Porteño (Buenos Aires Summer)* was composed in 1965 originally to serve as music to accompany a play. Piazzolla's original scoring was for bandoneón, violin, electric guitar, piano and double-bass. Piazzolla's other musical depictions of the remaining three seasons of the year were composed later in 1970 to the same scoring. Piazzolla rarely performed all four pieces as a suite and they were listed in his works list as separate scores. Only after Piazzolla's death in 1992 were the marketing possibilities explored for making an integrated suite of the four pieces as companions to Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. It was in 1999 that composer Leonid Desyatnikov made an arrangement that added neo-Baroque themes in the style of Vivaldi. On this Ancalagon recording Lara St. John has chosen Desyatnikov's arrangement for solo violin and strings. Sometimes heard are versions of the *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas* prepared by cellist José Bragato.

In the opening score *Otoño Porteño (Autumn)* Lara St. John and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra confidently infuses an atmosphere of furtive mystery combined with the dancing rhythms of the tango. I experienced the soloist's interpretation of the tuneful *Invierno Porteño (Winter)* as sultry and passionate. In the *Primavera Porteña (Spring)* I enjoyed the bright and uplifting rhythms and St. John gives a vigorous almost muscular performance of the *Verano Porteño (Summer)*.

Lara St. John supported by her Venezuelan youth orchestra do a splendid job with Piazzolla's striking Argentine nuevo tango rhythms. Very few recordings contain that convincing nuevo tango fusion of deep passion and raw emotional power that Piazzolla himself on bandoneón with his preferred quintet were able to convey. Several of these recordings made by Piazzolla himself in listed in the catalogue. I have in my collection a quite superb disc by Josep Pons and the Orquesta de Cambra Teatre Lliure of various Piazzolla scores that I believe is one of the finest recordings made in the genre. Produced in 1995 at Barcelona, Pons's recording includes the *Invierno Porteño* on Harmonia Mundi HML 5901595.

Lara St. John made the recording in the Sala Simón Bolívar, Centro de Acción Social por la Música in Caracas. Producer and recording engineer Martha de Francisco has provided good standard sonics. The set has a rather convoluted gatefold presentation. However, I found the booklet notes to be interesting and informative. Helpfully included are reference points to the key verses and descriptive headings of the accompanying sonnets used in Vivaldi's published score.

I enjoyed these performances of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* but the competition in the catalogue is extremely fierce and in truth there are many alternative versions I would prefer. Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* are splendidly played and are certainly worth investigating.

Michael Cookson

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