

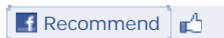


Akbank Chamber Orchestra's 'Seasons' with lara St. John

02 February 2011, Wednesday / ALEXANDRA IVANOFF, İSTANBUL



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A stellar example of the typically clever programming that conductor Cem Mansur plans every month for his Akbank Chamber Orchestra was presented at the Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall on Jan. 27 (and the previous night at the Caddebostan Cultural Center).

The program, titled "Living and Dying by the Water," interwove music from the Baroque era

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with 20th century compositions; they all were gently connected to a central figure, composer Marco Enrico Bossi, who died on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in 1925.

There was a myriad of cross-relationships among the composers and the pieces: two versions of "The Four Seasons" -- those of Antonio Vivaldi and Astor Piazzolla; Osvaldo Golijov's homage to Piazzolla: "Deaths of the Angel;" and Bossi's "Goldoni Intermezzos" wove a sentimental and poignant quilt of works that deal with the passing of the seasons, and passing on to another life. Both Vivaldi and Bossi were born in Venice, where Carlo Goldoni (whose middle name was Osvaldo) was also born and made his career as a playwright. Piazzolla and Golijov were both born in Argentina and the latter's piece was written in memory of the former and his "Muerte del Angel." The curiously intertwined Baroque connection is the use -- and even direct quoting -- of aspects of that particular style in the pieces written centuries later.

'The Four Seasons' from two different centuries

The two versions of "The Four Seasons," Vivaldi's from 1723 and Piazzolla's from 1964-70, were exactly the same format: violin solo with string orchestra. (Arranger L. Desyatnikov transcribed Piazzolla's suite for Vivaldi's original setting.) Vivaldi's well-known suite of four episodes describes the weather in each of the seasons with uncanny detail, with the soloist providing formidable virtuoso sequences that embroider the picture further. Whereas Piazzolla's set is less descriptive of weather but more evocative of how the weather makes us feel -- like dancing, for example. In each of Piazzolla's seasons, the tango element was a driving force, regardless of the temperature outside. The violin soloist was Lara St. John, whose passionate and riveting performance made the temperature rise, regardless of the season.

The Baroque touches, like the use of the "passacaglia" (a repeated bass line), notes played without vibrato, sudden volume changes, cadenzas finessed with a half-second pause before the last note, were the affectations that were sprinkled throughout much of the music performed. In his "Winter" section, Piazzolla referenced the famous "Canon in D" by Johannes Pachelbel, perhaps to take the icy edge off the frigid season. For Golijov's tragic memorial to Piazzolla, the ensemble abandoned their chairs and stood up to play -- a Baroque tradition and one that most European early music groups now employ. Bossi's "Intermezzos" (probably written around 1900) took the classic European dance suite format of minuets, musettes and more to suggest 18th century convention, but with some modern twists. His "Serenatina" section was an especially bittersweet melody accompanied by pizzicato strings that echoed part of Vivaldi's "Summer," and featured an enchanting violin solo, played by Hakan Şensoy. The "Burlesca" that followed was a commedia dell'arte romp that also had one eye looking into another century.

One of the dramatic highlights of the concert was the ensemble's interpretation of Piazzolla's "Autumn" -- in which the season's electrical charges alter the air pressure as the leaves turn and the clouds gather -- with the juxtaposition of a violent, chromatic and atonal solo for the

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violin that followed a moody, elegiac cello solo played by Şafak Sökmen. The percussive surge of the tango rhythms surrounding them produced a vicious, itchy atmosphere. Then Bossi's "Copri fuoco," which followed, echoed the scratchy eeriness of the impending seasonal shift.

A seasoned performance

St. John did her own cross-referencing in reverse by using Piazzolla's smoldering slurs in the Vivaldi, making soul-twins out of the two composers' works; however, Piazzolla, in the "Summer" section, directly quoted Vivaldi at the end -- the famous lightning-speed scales for the soloist -- amidst the dirty slides and nudging buzzes on the bridge of the violin. St. John's loose, almost improvisatory approach to both works (which were played from memory), not only pulled the 18th and the 20th centuries closer together, but all the seasons into a whirlwind of meteorological phenomena.

Later, Vivaldi's "Winter" evoked the strident and stringent onslaught of ice and sleet, rain and snow, plunging us into winter's dark doldrums and bringing to mind how the omnipresent water element pervades every aspect of our planet's existence. Bossi's lonely and premature death on the ocean, between continents, in the middle of a brutal winter, further reminds us of how we cannot harness or control fate. Regardless of what season we are in, the power of the brilliance of Vivaldi, Piazzolla, Golijov, Bossi and thousands of other inspired composers live long after we are gone.

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