

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

Through the Seasons With Glass and Vivaldi

By Allan Kozinn
November 14, 2010



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times
Robert McDuffie played Vivaldi and Philip Glass with the Venice Baroque Orchestra on Wednesday at Carnegie Hall.

When the violinist Robert McDuffie asked Philip Glass to compose a concerto for him, he had a plan that would ensure performances beyond the premiere. What he wanted was a companion piece for Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" that could be performed on its own or with Vivaldi's popular set of programmatic concertos.

Mr. Glass responded with his Violin Concerto No. 2 ("The American Four Seasons," 2009). Unlike Vivaldi, who left no doubt about the season described in each work (he included colorful sonnets in the score), Mr. Glass simply numbered his four movements, and has been cryptic about any correspondence between movements and seasons. But he also gave Mr. McDuffie a bonus: each movement is prefaced with a short unaccompanied piece. These form a set of increasingly ornate vignettes that can be wrested from the concerto and performed on their own.

For the moment Mr. McDuffie is playing the work intact, alongside the Vivaldi, in "The Seasons Project," a 30-city tour with the Venice Baroque Orchestra that landed at Carnegie Hall on Wednesday evening. The idea is not entirely original: Gidon Kremer, Lara St. John and other violinists have paired the Vivaldi with Astor Piazzolla's "Estaciones Porteñas" ("Four Seasons of Buenos Aires," 1964-70). But Mr. McDuffie's program worked beautifully, not least because Mr. Glass's work is packed with allusions to the Vivaldi, refracted through his own stylistic lens.

Collaborating with the Venice ensemble — a superbly polished period-instrument group known for its fresh, zesty Vivaldi recordings — was also a brilliant touch. Mr. McDuffie, as both soloist and conductor, is anything but an early-music purist. His vigorous, often electrifying account of the Vivaldi was steeped in Romantic expressive effects: carefully shaped phrases with ample rubato, dynamic suppleness and grand rallentandos at movement endings. But the Venetians matched his moves closely, and Mr. McDuffie adopted the Baroque practice of embellishing the solo line, elegantly and plentifully, with variations in the repeated sections.

For the Glass the ensemble's string players took up modern instruments, and its keyboardist traded in his harpsichord for a Yamaha synthesizer. But the music's impulses, particularly in the solo line, were tightly connected to those of the Vivaldi. Mr. Glass borrowed Vivaldi's gestures — furiously bowed passages from "Summer" and "Winter," languid melodies from "Spring" — and transformed them into unmistakably Glassian figuration. Other influences crept in too: a rich, double-stopped solo passage in the first movement hinted at Bruch, and other passages brought to mind the Barber concerto, one of Mr. McDuffie's specialties.

It was never entirely clear whether the order of Mr. Glass's "Seasons" matched Vivaldi's. It seemed to, but it hardly mattered. Often it made more sense to hear Mr. Glass's work as a modern commentary on the Vivaldi rather than as a set of meteorological tone paintings.

The San Diego Union-Tribune
SignOnSanDiego - Friday, December 2, 2011
Sunday Arts - Sunday, December 4, 2011

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

McDuffie highlight

Violinist offers committed performance of Glass' new 'American Four Seasons'

Written by

James Chute

11:45 p.m., Dec. 2, 2011

San Diego Symphony

Jacobs Masterworks Series

The San Diego Symphony promoted this weekend's programs at Copley Symphony Hall as "Vivaldi's 'The Four Seasons,'" but the central occasion on these Masterworks concerts was Robert McDuffie performing Philip Glass' new Violin Concerto No. 2, "The American Four Seasons," in its San Diego premiere.

McDuffie, who commissioned the 2009 work and has exclusive rights to it, has toured the pair of concertos around the world.

The "American Four Seasons," given a committed, polished performance by McDuffie, is vintage Glass. It contains virtually all of the composer's well-worn (some might say overworn) trademarks: the seemingly unceasing arpeggios, the thumping bass, the repeated chords, and the rhythmic propulsion that perhaps prompted McDuffie to characterize Glass, in convincing him to write the concerto, as "The American Vivaldi." Thus, it would be appropriate for him to also address "The Seasons."

Hearing the piece, however, and given Glass' refusal to identify which movements are which seasons, you have to wonder if the work has anything at all to do with the seasons, but has more to do with Glass exploring the nature of the relationship between soloist and orchestra and in the process, perhaps stretching into a bit more dissonant territory than is characteristic of much of his work.

Glass has structured the piece so that each movement (played without pause) opens with a "song" for unaccompanied violin, which proved to be the most appealing portions of the concerto. As the music was stripped down to its bare essentials, and expressively nuanced by McDuffie, these "songs" have the strange poignancy and emotional directness that are at the heart of Glass' best music.

Most of the "songs" were seamlessly taken up by the orchestra as the soloist would start on a new musical thread and weave that into the fabric. Glass sees soloist and orchestra as a supportive rather than competitive enterprise and so does McDuffie.

SanDiego.com
Arts & Theatre
Friday

December 2, 2011

Violinist Robert McDuffie solos in Vivaldi's "Four Seasons"

Also featuring new Philip Glass Violin Concerto

By Ken Herman

Violinist Robert McDuffie solos in Vivaldi's "Four Seasons"

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By Kenneth Herman • Fri, Dec 2nd, 2011



Robert McDuffie

Courtesy Photo

Luring the San Diego Symphony audience into Copley Hall with a program devoted to new music is as likely as getting children to the dinner table with a promise of fried liver and Brussels sprouts. On Friday's (Dec. 2) concert, Symphony Music Director Jahja Ling was savvy enough to give his patrons a Happy Meal of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" featuring the popular American violin virtuoso Robert McDuffie.

Opening with this audience favorite proved wise programming, because McDuffie was nothing less than brilliant in the four solo concertos that comprise Vivaldi's ubiquitous opus. He had everything: a powerful, driving sound that carried well in a room notoriously unfriendly to the solo violin; immaculate precision in the furious figuration of the fast movements, and a floating, polished line in the more tranquil sections. His energy and communication never flagged, nor did his finesse of phrasing and articulation.

His stylistic concepts merged precisely with Ling's, and the aptly pared down orchestra (30 strings plus harpsichord) gave us a clean and unified account of 18th-century Italian instrumental style as I have heard this orchestra give. Titles on the overhead screen provided the pictorial cues that Vivaldi (or his publisher) included in the score, e.g. "lightning before a summer storm" and "the chattering cold of winter."

After this quite tenable listener-friendly opening, Ling brought McDuffie back for the Philip Glass 2009 "Violin Concerto No. 2: *American Four Seasons*," a work written expressly for McDuffie and one that intentionally parallels the Vivaldi "Four Seasons" in length and instrumentation, but not at all in style. With the audience in near total contentment after the Vivaldi, Ling's psychology worked: the Copley Hall audience not only ate their vegetables with relish, but applauded fervently for a second helping.

Not that Philip Glass is cutting edge music at this stage of the game, of course, but his trademarked, refined minimalism is not everyone's cup of tea. Those oscillating arpeggios that function so tellingly in a film score often become turgid in the visually neutral setting of a concert hall. I thought this four-movement violin concerto worked well because of the contrasting solo violin segments Glass used to separate each movement and commence the work.

How satisfying to hear McDuffie linger over the composer's Bachian counterpoint or execute delicious double-stop themes in these solo interludes, whose stylistic variety certainly underscored that Glass can spin out a plenitude of ideas beyond mere triadic repetition. McDuffie has lived with this composition and persuasively projected its strengths. Although in a program note the composer purposely declined to attach specific seasonal labels (à la Vivaldi) to the concerto's movements, I thought I recognized a serene, Sibelius-like winterscape in the second movement.

Other movements brandished the dense motoric iterations and passionate layering that thrill Glass fans and exasperate his detractors. Parallel to the harpsichord's role in the Vivaldi concertos, Glass provides a prominent electronic keyboard part for his Violin Concerto, executed with assurance and vivacity by symphony pianist Mary Barranger.

Perhaps feeling a bit of guilt for ignoring the majority of the orchestra—the rest of the strings, as well as all the woodwinds, brass and percussion—Ling brought everyone back for a final offering, two sections of Alexander Glazunov's grand ballet score "The Seasons," Op. 67. Glazunov's sumptuous orchestration of throbbing, arched melodic themes and the accompanying lush, Romantic harmonies sent much of audience away humming blissfully. I was not among them.

Telegraph

Philip Glass's new violin concerto, The American Four Seasons...was dignified and contained, even when the soloist launched into passionate flights of virtuosity, which was quite often.... Glass has a magical way of giving the merest twist to banality and ordinariness, which makes it interesting – the mark of classic art down the ages. As for the solo performance by Robert McDuffie, it was beyond praise, as cool, poised and heroically strong as a piece of Greek statuary.

London Telegraph (April 19, 2010)

STRINGS

FOR PLAYERS OF
VIOLIN, VIOLA, CELLO,
BASS & FIDDLE

Robert McDuffie Provides a Reason to Celebrate America's Four Seasons

Philip Glass: Violin Concerto No. 2 ('The American Four Seasons'), Robert McDuffie, violin; London Philharmonic Orchestra, Marin Alsop, cond. (Orange Mountain Music)

By [Greg Cahill](#) posted December 2010 ☆☆☆☆



The Grammy-nominated violinist and educator Robert McDuffie has said that he plans to tirelessly tour this work—which gets its recorded premiere on this impressive disc—to ensure that it gets heard by a wide audience. And it deserves to be. Composed last year after several years of collaboration between the composer and violinist, this was conceived by McDuffie as a companion piece to Vivaldi's celebrated opus *The Four Seasons*. Poor Vivaldi—his sweet sonorities may wither under the power of this mighty concerto, which as much reflects the drive and rugged individualism of the American character as it does any seasonal changes.

The heart of this four-movement concerto is a series of violin solos—a prelude to the first movement and three songs that precede each of the last three movements. These replace the typical cadenza and are intended to be played as separate concert pieces, as well. In McDuffie's hands, these lyrical solos express a sense of longing, even occasional frailty, which can catch the listener by surprise and contribute to the concerto's overall emotional power.

The orchestral score is stunning, sometimes driven by Glass' trademark arpeggios, sometimes reserved and almost ethereal (especially the second movement), but always blending beautifully with McDuffie's plaintive violin.

The result is a magnificent work, with violinistic flourishes in the brooding final movement, that is all the more majestic for its often understated melodic moments.

REVIEW

Robert McDuffie (violin)
London Philharmonic Orchestra / Marin Alsop
Royal Festival Hall, London 17 April 2010

Philip Glass's Second Violin Concerto, which received its European premiere at this concert, is subtitled 'The American Four Seasons.' It stems from a suggestion by soloist Robert McDuffie that Glass write a companion piece to Vivaldi's famous set. Accordingly it has four movements, each with an unaccompanied opening soliloquy that together can stand as separate pieces, although they do not correspond precisely to any particular season, and it shares Vivaldi's ensemble, albeit with synthesiser instead of harpsichord.

McDuffie produced a persuasive narrative drive through the obsessive repetitions of Glass's music. He was eloquent and genial in the cool melodic musing of the first movement, with a matter-of-factness to his playing as the writing became increasingly demanding. The second movement (summer?), was peaceful and beautiful, with McDuffie proving Glass's repetitive arpeggios to be as persuasive as they are simple. He was powerfully dramatic in the urgent third movement, a vivid personality against the impersonal synthesisations of the keyboard and the restless patterns of the ensemble. The last movement consists almost entirely of rapid, relentless arpeggios against a syncopated background of fruity harmonic progressions. It's virtuosic stuff, and McDuffie dispatched it with a final dramatic flourish. – TIM HOMFRAY

Select Critical Acclaim for The Seasons Project first US Tour featuring Philip Glass'
The American Four Seasons, Violin Concerto No. 2 performed by
Robert McDuffie as violin soloist & leader with the Venice Baroque Orchestra

Chicago Tribune

"McDuffie played the piece with a dashing virtuosity that signaled his pride of ownership. He rode the furious unisons of the first movement...The neo-Bachian double stops of the third song gave him a solid base from which to launch the hard-driving finale. McDuffie tore through its thickets of lightning-quick figuration over cascading strings and pounding synthesizer; the effect was that of a merry-go-round spinning madly out of control. It had the crowd up on its feet, applauding lustily."

- From Review of Performance at Harris Theater for Music and Dance on October 24, 2010.

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

"Having debuted this Violin Concerto No. 2 last December with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, McDuffie is proving a worthy recipient by giving visceral, loving performances of Glass' propulsive music... McDuffie pushed those boundaries with long, wailing laments and fierce, punishing cadenzas...It all built up to the "kick-ass ending" that the violinist had requested Glass write for him, and the Harris audience, not surprisingly, went berserk."

- From Review of Performance at Harris Theater for Music and Dance on October 24, 2010.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

"This is melodic minimalism that doesn't drag on, and it made a good backdrop for McDuffie's virtuosic playing and some gorgeous melodies. Now pensive, now jazzy, it echoed and worked off Vivaldi's music and then went off on its own, for an engaging, beautifully played whole."

- From Review of Performance at Edison Theatre at Washington University (St. Louis) on October 15, 2010.

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

Few premieres receive the kind of instantaneous standing ovation, cheers and prolonged applause that greeted soloist Robert McDuffie following the whirlwind final bars of Philip Glass's Violin Concerto No. 2.

- From Review of Performance at Harris Theater for Music and Dance on October 24, 2010.

The Star THE KANSAS CITY STAR

"...McDuffie, who played Glass' concerto with technical polish and at times with ravishing beauty. The work is written in four movements, with each preceded by a solo."

- From Review of Performance at Johnson County Community College (Overland Park) on October 16, 2010.

ANN ARBOR.COM

"And throughout the concerto [Glass], the solo violin line, loaded with double-stops, frequently shares with the interstitial material a melting lyricism and songfulness...It's [Glass] a perpetuum mobile by the end, with McDuffie playing like a house afire as the synthesizer throws punches and the celli pizz like mad to push the music even more forward. It's gypsy-wild by the finish, and it had the audience on its feet in a flash."

- From Review of Performance at Hill Auditorium on October 27, 2010.

THE DENVER POST

Philip Glass modernizes Vivaldi classic

Kyle MacMillan

Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

7/24/2010

The people who don't like Philip Glass' distinctive brand of minimalist music — and there is a significant contingent of them — are probably not going to be swayed.

But for the rest of us, the opportunity Thursday evening to hear the American premiere of one of the famed composer's latest creations at the Aspen Music Festival was a thrill.

Indeed, these kinds of nights are the reason people come to to this prestigious festival — to be in an overflowing hall, feeling the electricity in the air and sharing the excitement of experiencing a new, major work.

The center of attention was Glass' Violin Concerto No. 2, "American Four Seasons," an auspiciously titled work that was commissioned by a consortium of musical organizations, including the Aspen festival.

Obviously inspired by Vivaldi's famous set of concertos "The Four Seasons," it is scored for a baroque-sized chamber orchestra, with an electronic synthesizer in place of the traditional harpsichord, and includes a few musical allusions to the earlier work.

It is important, though, not to get too carried away with comparisons between the two pieces. This new concerto is very much its own work — decidedly contemporary and composed within the well-known Glass aesthetic.

But this is not simply the latest work to roll off the Glass assembly line, the composer knocking off himself, as some critics have alleged.

Yes, he does employ his familiar motifs — iterative, largely unchanging melodic motifs, oscillating bass lines. But this is the achievement of a mature composer, who has judiciously drawn on his standard musical vocabulary, and, at the same time, transcended it, creating a work of broader compositional and emotional complexity.

At the hub of the concerto was violinist Robert McDuffie, who persuaded Glass to compose it and is clearly committed to the result. He performed with extraordinary ease and elan and inspired fervid, polished playing from the mostly student orchestra.

The work was greeted with a sustained standing ovation, and McDuffie and the orchestra responded with a section of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons."

The concert's first half consisted of works for duo violin, which, while handsomely realized, seemed oddly disconnected with the concerto.



Violinist excels with new Glass

Toronto Symphony Orchestra ★★★★★(out of 4)

With violinist Robert McDuffie. Peter Oundjian, music director. Repeats Saturday. Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St. 416-598-3375 (www.tso.ca)

It's not every day that one gets to hear the live premiere of a major new work by one of the world's most influential composers, 72-year-old American composer Philip Glass.

The first performance of the work – *Violin Concerto No. 2, "The American Four Seasons"* – was so spectacularly played by the new piece's muse, American violinist Robert McDuffie, at Roy Thomson Hall Wednesday night, that the event turned into one of the most exciting musical evenings of the year.

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra, led by its music director Peter Oundjian, was also in top form, helping McDuffie carve and shape Glass's collection of repeated and layered short musical motifs into an expressive work of art.

McDuffie deserves a medal for his stamina. Glass gives the soloist little respite as he alternates between joining with and separating away from the rest of the all-string orchestra (augmented by a synthesizer keyboard). The four movements vacillate between a dark-undertoned mechanistic frenzy and slow, mesmerizing meditation. Each section is joined together by a violin solo that really gave McDuffie a chance to shine.

Both composer and players showed off their very best work, although one would be hard-pressed to find many allusions to Vivaldi's familiar *Four Seasons* in the piece.

Peter Oundjian programmed Beethoven's "*Pastoral*" *Symphony* as a companion, describing it as "the world's first minimalist composition." That was carrying the reasoning too far. The orchestra's reading was full of light and air, making it a powerful counterpoint rather than companion on the bill. Opening the concert was a beautiful piece by American Christopher Theofanidis, *Rainbow Body*, which set a high tone for the rest of the concert.

A concerto with baroque and modern influences



Philip Glass gets a standing ovation, while Beethoven leaves them sitting

Robert Everett-Green
Friday, December 11, 2009

Toronto Symphony Orchestra

- At Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto on Wednesday

You might think that Beethoven would always get a bigger reaction from a symphony crowd than Philip Glass. But it was Glass, not Beethoven, whose music got the only standing ovation at Wednesday's concert by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, after the first performance (with soloist Robert McDuffie) of Glass's *Violin Concerto No. 2, The American Four Seasons*.

It's a major new piece from a composer who didn't use to have much time for concertos, but who has written half a dozen in the past decade. Like the *Concerto for Harpsichord* (2002), the new work is a creative response to the sounds and conventions of baroque music.

From the opening soliloquy, so similar in tone and technique to a solo violin work of the 18th century yet so clearly not of that period, it was evident that Glass had found himself a big playground to explore. The baroque fondness for repetition, motor rhythms and arpeggiation fit so well with his established practice that, at times, it seemed less that he was working from a model than that the model was anticipating him.

The piece is scored for a baroque-sized string orchestra, with an electronic keyboard which, in the early going, took on the supporting role of a harpsichord in a baroque concerto. The keyboard (played by Gregory Oh) came into its own in a percussive duet with violin in the third movement, then led the strings in a section that recalled Glass's writing for his own ensemble.

Each of the four movements was driven by some kind of rhythmic or harmonic patterning (especially in the cellos), though it was the concerto's melodic richness that really carried the piece. The solo part was often passionately, even ornately lyrical, as if Glass's dalliance with the baroque had allowed him to depart from the more usual leanness of his melodic writing. The soaring theme of the second movement was particularly poignant.

The concerto moved between the private world implied by the four solo introductions and the more sociable realm of the movements proper. This stratagem also allowed the air to clear somewhat between seasons. The robust third solo cleverly hinted at a tarantella without actually producing one, and the fourth gave a richly double-stopped base from which to propel the piece into the rollicking final movement. Only the wide-spanned second solo let down the side, sounding too much like a student's string-crossing exercise.

By Glass's own account, this piece came into the world largely because McDuffie kept prodding him to write it. The violinist took possession of his prize with gusto, performing with great commitment and sensitivity, and really rocking out in the final pages. He also paid Glass (who was in the hall) the compliment of playing the first performance with his part memorized. McDuffie (who reprised the concerto with the TSO at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa Thursday) will be on the road with this piece for the next couple of years, in performances that will pair it with Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

TSO music director Peter Oundjian followed the concerto with Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6*, which he conducted with a score. There were some lovely things in this performance, including the first movement's perfectly balanced final chords, Neil Deland's glowing solo on French horn, and the swinging, irresistible final movement. But the first two movements felt rather unsettled, as if the band had not been completely sold on the tempos chosen, and Oundjian's beat was often too inflexible to give the symphony's many beauties space in which to bloom.

The remaining piece was *Rainbow Body*, a high-minded trifle by American composer Christopher Theofanidis, who ran a chant-like theme through a number of costume changes, culminating in a coat of many colours that glittered like the apotheosis of an American feel-good adventure movie. I can think of at least a dozen active Canadian composers who have written better pieces than this.

The TSO repeats this program, without *Rainbow Body*, Saturday night at Roy Thomson Hall.

TSO naturally inspiring

By Richard Todd
December 11, 2009

The Toronto Symphony is one of Canada's most polished and accomplished orchestras. Before the ascent of the Montreal Symphony's star in the early '80s, the TSO was, by common consent, Canada's major orchestra. It's still one of our most important, so its not-quite-annual visits to the National Arts Centre are always much awaited occasions.

Thursday evening, the TSO and its conductor Peter Oundjian appeared on the stage of Southam Hall with a curious program. The orchestra is noted for its relative zeal in promoting Canadian music, but this program was made up of two recent American works and one by a long-dead German composer -- Beethoven. It's hard to complain, though. Each of the offerings was terrific in its own way.

The program had a theme: each of its offerings was nature-related in one way or another. The first was *Rainbow Body* by Christopher Theofanidis (b. 1967). This is a work of varying moods and spare-textured orchestral writing. The composer writes that he was trying to express his admiration for the beauty and grace of the music of Hildegard von Bingen. A wondrously beautiful melody appears several times, though much of the piece is based on fragments of the melody transformed to express the turbulence expressed in much of the score.

Next came Philip Glass's *Violin Concerto no. 2*, subtitled *The American Four Seasons*, which received its world premiere on Wednesday in Toronto. The soloist was the American violinist Robert McDuffie.

Many listeners found Glass's repetitive music tedious in the early years of his celebrity, about 25 years ago, but almost everyone agrees that he has come a long way since then. This concerto, though 43 minutes in length, doesn't wear out its welcome by a single beat.

It is made up of four movements, each preceded by an extended, unaccompanied 'song' for the violin. Glass has not abandoned his underlying technique or repetition, but he has learned to use it in the service of compelling music. It's a virtuoso piece and McDuffie was entirely up to its challenges. He, the orchestra and the score were rewarded with a standing ovation.

Whatever else you've played for an audience, promising Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* will make the concert a success. It was just that symphony that made up the second half of the program. It was no surprise that the performance was richly romantic and robustly textured.