

Astor Piazzolla: *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* **Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92**

Like many great composers, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) started out as a musical prodigy. But unlike Mozart or Beethoven, his instrument wasn't the piano—he specialized in performing tangos on the *bandoneón*. The Argentinian bandoneón is very similar to an accordion or concertina, but it has a square shape and is played over the knee while seated. Born in Argentina, Piazzolla spent most of his childhood in New York City (Little Italy), raised by Italian immigrant parents, and that is where he began honing his skills with the instrument.

Piazzolla moved back to Argentina (Buenos Aires) in 1937 and hustled as a performer and arranger for a tango band. But it was a concert he attended, by the legendary pianist Arthur Rubinstein, that inspired him to begin composing in a classical style. Piazzolla sought out Rubinstein, and when he finally encountered him at the pianist's apartment, Rubinstein encouraged him to get formal training in theory and composition, also connecting him with the top classical composer in Argentina, Alberto Ginastera. That was the beginning of a journey for Piazzolla, one in which he would learn to deftly combine modern classical composing with the tango, creating a new style known as *tango nuevo* or “new tango.”

Surprisingly, *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* was not originally for solo violin and string orchestra. Piazzolla initially composed the “summer” movement in 1965 for his tango band, and the other three seasons were conceived a few years later for the same ensemble. It wasn't until the late 1990's that renowned violinist Gidon Kremer commissioned his composer friend Leonid Desyatnikov to arrange the work into a virtuosic showpiece for violin and strings akin to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

As a work that exemplifies the *tango nuevo* style, *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* infuses the sexy chic of the tango with Baroque counterpoint and sequence, jazz harmony and syncopation, and the crunchy dissonances of modern composers Bartok and Stravinsky. This energetic music dazzles the listener with its rhythmic drives, tender melodies, bold harmonies and colors, as the violin soloist displays a bravura of double stops, high notes, and lightning-fast passagework.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed his 7th symphony in 1811, a year in which he was in dire need of a physical and emotional recharge. Despite having lost most of his hearing, he had been successfully composing and performing in Vienna. But this productive period ended in the spring of 1809 when Napoleon's army arrived at the city and barraged it with howitzers. The Viennese defenders were outmatched, and with the city in panic, the Austrian soldiers evacuated, surrendering the city. That summer was a truly awful one for Beethoven, living in a city with an enemy army, his friends had already split town, and it was nearly impossible to send out correspondence or get out to the countryside to clear his head.

And in the spring of 1810, Beethoven was dealt another blow when his marriage proposal to Therese Malfatti, a family friend, was turned down. (A substantial

difference in age was likely one of many reasons why he was not an appropriate suitor for her—this was yet another one of Beethoven’s many failed attempts at romance.) His physical health was also suffering, and on doctor’s orders, Beethoven took a much-needed spa vacation during the summer of 1811.

Beethoven returned to Vienna with renewed spirits and began right away on his glorious seventh symphony. The piece starts with some hefty chords as part of a stately introduction, one that makes straightforward use of melody and scales, suggesting an emotional sincerity. The tail end of this introduction flickers out on the repeated pitch “E,” which Beethoven cleverly transforms into a spritely theme for the solo flute. A call and response between flute, oboe and strings ushers in the entire orchestra triumphantly restating the melody, and from this point on, the listener will feel the sounds leaping from the concert stage in this musical celebration.

Traditionally, the second movement of a Beethoven symphony should have a slow tempo, but this movement is marked *Allegretto*, meaning “a bit fast.” This section begins very solemn and dark, but never lingering, like an esteemed funeral procession that has to stay on schedule. Throughout the movement, Beethoven employs a repetitive, simple theme, but with each iteration, adjoining new layers of melody and orchestral color. At two prominent places, these layers build to a commanding climax as the brass and timpani take their positions.

Beethoven treats the listener to fun and games in the third movement, with two tempo indications: *Presto* (“super-fast”), and *Assai meno presto* (“considerably less super-fast.”) There are two contrasting characters in this movement: the initial brisk and witty character, and a second slower, courtlier (“considerably less super-fast”) character.

In the fourth movement, we are once again off to the races. This boastful finale spectacularly features speed and orchestral muscle. On top of that, the listener is given a victorious ending that befits Ludwig van Beethoven’s popular mythology: that of a great artist who persevered despite the hardships that life threw at him.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.