

The Four Seasons of the McKenzie River

February 15, 2018

Program Notes

by Tom Strini ©2018

"I am especially delighted with tonight's presentation of Vivaldi's well-known The Four Seasons that culminates a year-long process to collect imagery of our glorious McKenzie River. In partnership with McKenzie River Trust and Travel Lane County, the community (including some of you in the audience!) submitted more than 600 photos and videos, and I am thrilled to see the selections projected on stage tonight. My hope is that the imagery heightens our awareness to the sounds of nature Vivaldi so strikingly places in his concertos.

Another highlight tonight is Tumblebird Contrails by Gabriella Smith, a former classmate of mine from the Curtis Institute of Music. This piece was inspired by her hikes along the Pacific Coast Trail—listen for sounds you may recognize from the Oregon Coast, like crashing waves, ocean breezes, and seagulls."

— Francesco Lecce-Chong

GABRIELLA SMITH (b. 1992)

Tumblebird Contrails (2014)

Scored for three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings. This is the first Eugene Symphony performance and performance time is approximately 12 minutes.

What do we hear during the 12 minutes of Tumblebird Contrails? A ship's horn? The roar of surf? The cries of shorebirds? Sea breezes setting leaves aquiver? A whale's song?

We hear all of that and none of it. Musical instruments, through both traditional and extended techniques, generate every sound in this musical Rorschach test. Our minds sculpt meanings from Gabriella Smith's fog of carefully chosen, precisely notated fragments, gestures, and washes of sound.

Smith, 26, did not set out to find musical inspiration when she embarked on a three-day backpacking trip in Point Reyes, California, a few years ago. But inspiration found her.

People worry about "not getting it." Give up all of that and let it wash over you. — Gabriella Smith

"Nature, backpacking and music are all huge parts of my life," the Berkeley native said, in a phone interview from Marseilles, France, where she is at work on her Princeton doctoral dissertation. "In that particular moment, sitting in the sand at the edge of the ocean, I think I knew that this piece would come out of it. That moment seemed so perfect."

Her goal, she said, was not to recreate the intoxicating sounds of that environment, but to capture the feeling of being lost in that moment. That's why she composed music, rather than make an HD surround-sound recording of seaside sounds.

This is immersion music; you don't listen to it as you would listen to Mozart.

"People worry about not 'getting it,'" she said. "I advise them to give up trying. Give up all of that, and let it wash over you."

To compose it, she had to "get over it," too, in a way.

As an even younger composer, she was obsessed with traditional forms—the sonata, for example—and explored them fully.

"I decided to simply let Tumblebird Contrails grow organically, from nothing to a climax," she

said. “It grows to a big place and dies down, then grows to a bigger place and dies down.”

Aristotle would have recognized that classic dramatic arc; the piece does have structure. And it reflects notable historical influences, one of them literary: The fantastical poetical ending of Jack Kerouac’s novel, *Big Sur*. The musical influences: Debussy, Ravel, Bach, the Minimalists, Björk.

“I’m influenced by so many styles,” Smith said. “They all sort of mash together.”

“Gabriella’s music is all about the way she conceives and understands sound,” said Music Director & Conductor Francesco Lecce-Chong, who conducted two of her early works when they were students at the Curtis Institute. “Tumblebird Contrails fits so well with The Four Seasons. They both surround you with nature.”

ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

The Four Seasons Violin Concerto Cycle, for soloist, strings and continuo (c. 1721) 1. Spring 2. Summer 3. Autumn 4. Winter

In addition to the solo violin, this work is scored for harpsichord and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in January 2007 under the direction of Giancarlo Guerrero with Kathryn Lucktenberg as soloist. Performance time is approximately 11 minutes for Spring, 10 minutes for Summer, nine minutes for Autumn, and seven minutes for Winter.

In these concerti, composed in Mantua around 1721, Vivaldi mimics Spring and Summer thunderstorms, barking dogs, rustic bagpipes, the call of the cuckoo, buzzing insects, Autumn harvest revelry, the chase and hunters’ gunfire, and stamping feet amid a frigid Winter. More subtly, he evokes soft breezes, rising heat, numbing cold, slipping on ice. Vivaldi provided sonnets—possibly his own—as cheat sheets for listeners.

The Four Seasons launched a revolution that led to Romantic program music and continues to this day—with Gabriella Smith’s Tumblebird Contrails, for example. No one prior to Vivaldi—and few since—conjured scenes so specifically and vividly.

“Vivaldi figured out how to express hot and cold in music,” said Lecce-Chong. “How crazy is that?”

“Some of the sonnets and movements don’t have plots,” said Rachel Barton Pine, tonight’s violin soloist, in a phone interview from her Chicago home. “Shivering, icy blast, chattering teeth, stamping feet—they’re just four things about Winter. The last

movement of Autumn tells a story—the hunt, the chase, the wounded prey holding onto hope until it dies. The first movement of summer is a lament, a farmer worrying about his crops. When I play it, I definitely think ‘worried farmer.’”

Barton Pine has performed these concerti with period-instrument groups and conducted at the same time, as Vivaldi would have. She will soon record the Vivaldi set with a period orchestra, complete with her own narration.

In The Four Seasons, Vivaldi mimics thunderstorms, rustic bagpipes, and buzzing insects.

In Eugene, she will simply play, as imagery of the local McKenzie River, contributed by many area photographers as part of a year-long project, are projected along with the music.

She’s fine working with conductors (that is, Lecce-Chong) and with orchestras that stick with their “modern”—that is, later 19th-century—bows. Baroque bows are generally shorter, straighter and springier than the modern Tourte bow.

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Sir Edward Elgar, the very model of a well-dressed English gentleman cyclist. He named his bike, a 1900 Sunbeam model, Mr. Phoebus.

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“But I always play it with a Baroque bow in hand,” she said. “And I will ask the orchestra to imitate that sound as closely as possible. I’m interested in the affect and the rhetoric of the music, which relate to the subtleties of articulation of the bow.”

Another Baroque practice will display her own creativity.

“I extemporize all the ornaments,” she said. This practice requires hard-won knowledge of Baroque performance style. The payoff: each Rachel Barton Pine performance of *The Four Seasons* is unique. Combined with imagery of the McKenzie River, tonight that should prove especially true.

EDWARD ELGAR (1857–1934)

In the South (Alassio), Opus 50 (1903–1904)

Scored for three flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings. This is the first Eugene Symphony performance, and performance time is approximately 20 minutes.

In the winter of 1903–1904, Edward Elgar and his family settled into the town of Alassio, on the Italian Riviera. The vacation, like Gabriella Smith’s hike, spawned an orchestral work.

In 1907, Elgar recalled his inspiration in an interview with the *Chicago Sunday Examiner*: “Then in a flash, it all came to me—the conflict of the armies on that very spot long ago, where I now stood—the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd—and then, all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time, I had composed the overture—the rest was merely writing it down.”

And yet, the 20-minute *In the South* doesn’t sound very Italian. Or southern.

“This is Elgar trying to be Richard Strauss on the technical level,” Lecce-Chong said, “with the cross rhythms, the active inside voices, the second violins playing higher than the first—all so Strauss.”

Lecce-Chong distinguished Elgar from both Smith and Vivaldi. Smith absorbed the external world of the California coast; Vivaldi described the Italian countryside over the passage of time; and Elgar goes for the feelings that well up when nature inspires us.

“That town in Italy was the one place he could relax,” Lecce-Chong said. “Elgar never expresses abandon—except in this piece. There is an incredible joy and release of energy. He just piles on the themes.”

With *In the South*, Elgar goes for the feelings that well up when nature inspires us.

“We think of Elgar and we think of *Pomp and Circumstance* and *Enigma Variations*—small forms. In the *South* shows his mastery of large forces and large forms. Yet you never feel lost. You’re comfortable. You’re on vacation.”

The principal violist gets the work’s hit tune, in the middle section. At his publisher’s urging, Elgar extracted a solo viola and piano version and went on to arrange it for other small ensembles. He wedded it to a poem by Shelley, in the song “*In Moonlight*.”

He titled all the instrumental versions “*Canto Popolare*”—“folk song” in Italian. But even that tune fails to sound Italian. Eventually, Elgar admitted inventing both the melody and that his folk-song claim was baloney. Italian locale and Germanic ambitions notwithstanding, *In the South* sounds like Elgar. That is, it rightly sounds like an Englishman on vacation. 🌿

Historical sources:

Corilon Violin Shop newsletter article on period bows; Wikipedia articles on Baroque violin, Vivaldi, The Four Seasons, and J.J. Froberger; Micheline Walker’s blog on Le chant des Oyseaulx; Essays in Musical Analysis Vol. 4: Illustrative Music, by Donald Francis Tovey, Oxford University Press, 1936.

Sources: Andrew Farach-Colton, “Elgar the Outsider,” Gramophone Online; Wikipedia articles on “Canto Popolare,” Elgar, In the South; English Pastoral Music, From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955, University of Illinois Press, 2017.