

The Implementation of Baroque Performance Practices on a Modern Violin
Antonio Vivaldi: *Le Quattro Stagioni*
“Winter” Movement III

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As one of the most prolific instrumental composers of the Baroque Era, Antonio Vivaldi's concertos paved the way for future composers both in movement structure and virtuosic style. As a violinist himself, Vivaldi's concertos require a certain level of expertise and knowledge to accomplish, and modern performers can appreciate the vivid picture his music paints. Some of the most well-known works of Antonio Vivaldi are that of *Le Quattro Stagioni*, or *The Four Seasons*. Vivaldi programs the four concerti in the three movement standard form of a concerto, with short lines of poetry utilizing a vivid form of text painting in the various sections of the movements demonstrating the style of how the section should be played. As each concerto paints a detailed picture of each season, performers are tasked with the responsibility of portraying the lines of poetry as Vivaldi intended. Vivaldi's "Winter" is an incredible example of this, as listeners are able to visualize slipping on the ice, the wind in the air, and even the sounds of ice cracking underneath as depicted in the third movement. As a violinist, Vivaldi wrote these pieces very intentionally and specifically to illustrate distinct pictures with colors and expression, all originally played on his instrument of the time, a Baroque violin. Because of key differences between a modern and Baroque violin and bow, differences in fundamental articulation are prevalent, creating the issue of how to preserve the vivid picture that Vivaldi painted with the abilities of a modern instrument. With violins today, there is more range and ability to perform, especially when regarding the contrast between a modern bow and Baroque bow. Moreover, adhering to the common practice of Baroque writing, few dynamics are indicated in the score. When performing a piece with such vivid imagery, dynamics are essential to paint the picture Vivaldi desired. As instrumentalists approach the third movement of "Winter" on a modern violin, they can utilize the knowledge of the fundamentals of technical Baroque playing such as articulation, bowing, and dynamics, along with a deliberate interpretation of the poetry, to ultimately preserve the integrity and color of the piece. Through employing these techniques, the modern instrument can still create the picture that Vivaldi envisioned, through careful study and intentional decisions based on the knowledge of Baroque foundations.

As an Italian Baroque composer, Antonio Vivaldi utilized the common style of the period, which was largely based on the allure of depicting something real with stark expressive contrast. Composers used rhetorical devices in the music to poetry a story, using musical devices to help listeners envision a narrative. This style was largely inspired by the influences of Archangelo Corelli with the groundbreaking standardization of instrumental music. The articulation, or way that the notes are presented is largely influenced by the style of speech, with a special emphasis on the long and short notes. Baroque performance expert and cellist, David Watkin explains that articulation can be approached by the groupings of notes with connecting factors. In a video demonstrating this technique, he explains that when these groupings are put together, creating a string of notes true Italian Baroque articulation is born.¹ As this technique of articulation is applied to "Winter," the grouping of notes becomes clearer, assisting in creating the first layer of articulation. As Watkin suggests, there is a key note that acts as an arriving point

¹ David Watkin, "All about Articulation in Baroque Music with David Watkin." Published by the Nicola Benedetti Foundation. July 16, 2021. Informational presentation, 0:40-4:30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcBhEk-pq4o&t=255s>.

within a unit of notes, which is used to connect with the next unit.² When considering Example 1, this principle is made clear in mm. 51-53. In the first measure, the arrival note could be considered the A-flat, as it is the third in the F-Minor triad. While the F will be the strongest note regarding phrasing, the A-flat is what solidifies the unit as a group. Therefore, this unit of notes is connected to m. 52, as a minor v chord is outlined, the C completing the triad in the previous measure, acting as the strong beat, then priming our ear to hear the E-flat which truly makes the chord minor. This pattern is repeated as the first figure is repeated an octave higher in m. 53.

EXAMPLE 1: Antonio Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, “Winter” mov. 3, mm.50-53



This same pattern of grouping can be applied throughout this section, and within the movement as well. By targeting specific notes that create the unit, the music is able to be articulated in a way much like speaking syllables in a sentence, with each unit as individual words, building a complete phrased nuanced just like a spoken sentence. Therefore, the ultimate goal of period-style articulation can be achieved by first understanding the overall phrasing and structure through these groups of notes, then going on to apply that principle to the position of the bow and the overall bowing techniques throughout the piece.

On a Baroque violin, the overall style of articulation is a little different, especially due to the curvature of the bow. When performing Baroque music on a modern violin, musicians are presented with a longer, more balanced bow that creates a more even sound overall. In order to preserve this sentence-like articulation, a special effort needs to be made to utilize a modern bow differently. In a research presentation by French musicians Rémi Goasdoué and Blandine Bril about the reconstruction of interpretive tradition, the claim that physical factors such as arm movement can help with this adjustment is presented. Goasdoué and Bril conducted a study with three groups of violinists: specialists in Baroque performance, modern performers with no Baroque experience, and a control group of individuals that had experience in both types of performance. In the study, each individual played the same piece in both a Baroque and modern style on both types of instruments. Through this, they were able to analyze the physiological differences in the techniques. An interesting observation regarding this presentation is that when playing in a Baroque style, whether on a modern or baroque violin, the part of the bow each group played in is relatively similar, staying mainly in the lower half to create the separated

² Watkin, “All about Articulation in Baroque Music with David Watkin.” 0:40-4:30.

brush-like strokes unique to the Baroque style.³ Because Baroque articulation is focused on long and short notes, with strong and weak beats, the Baroque bow is perfect to create this type of sentence structure in the phrases. On a modern instrument, staying in the lower middle to the upper half is the best way to preserve this same effect. Due to the differences in balance on the bow, a modern instrument's sound will project more and sound more uniform throughout. Therefore, in order to achieve the almost natural tapering effect of the grouping of notes with a modern bow, a more intentional stroke must be utilized. With conformity to the Italian Baroque tendencies, the first note of a beat is generally stronger, providing the rest of the notes to taper by themselves. In long slurred passages, gradually releasing the weight of the right hand starting in the mid to lower half may prove to be the most effective practice.

EXAMPLE 2: Antonio Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, “Winter” mov. 3, mm.13-24

The image displays two staves of musical notation in G minor (two flats). The first staff begins at measure 13 and contains six measures of music, each with a slur over a group of sixteenth notes. The second staff begins at measure 19 and contains six measures, also with slurs over sixteenth notes. The notation includes stems, beams, and note heads, with some notes marked with accents or slurs to indicate bowing directions.

As shown in Example 2, the groupings of notes are generally measure by measure, providing a full bow for each. Therefore, careful distribution of the weight of the bow must be applied throughout. Each grouping of sixteenth notes can be separated in two measure sections of the phrase, a down bow slur and an up bow slur. This grouping can be applied starting in mm. 14-15. When approaching grouping or pairs such as these the overall bow stroke needs to reflect the greater phrase throughout, maintaining contact with the string in a light and nuanced way. This excerpt can be seen as two sentences that need to be connected, as discussed above. The connection between ideas is found in m. 20, and provides a prime example of a break in the sentence, much like punctuation. The C is on a strong beat, and therefore can be played slightly longer on a faster down bow, while the F will be on a small and light up bow in the upper half.

Unlike many Baroque composers, Vivaldi annotates several slur markings to provide bowing guidelines. Along with this, the slurs and staccato markings help to demonstrate how sections should be played. While the direction of the bow is important, when regarding bowing, the subject of bow usage and positioning is paramount to create the desired articulation. Obtaining a Baroque sound on a modern instrument is accomplished through the deliberate efforts of the musician with the bow. In an *Early Music* journal article, author Robert Donington summarizes what is needed to produce a Baroque sound on a modern instrument, including

³ Rémi Goasdoué and Blandine Bril. “The Role of Instrument Properties in Music Performance: Variations in Sound and Movements Induced by Baroque-Violin Playing.” Paper Presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Perception and Action (2005) 2-3.

transparency, crispness, and a certain sense of robustness, accomplished by bow weight, speed, and placement.⁴ These three aspects are essential in the production of a good sound, they are what creates the focused sound of Italian Baroque style. While Vivaldi may have provided some instructions with bowings, the understanding of the rhythms presented provide a greater understanding of how they are able to drive the bowing. Vivaldi's concerti are very directional, and build up to a grand finish. "Winter" is no different. The variation in bowing is intentional, as the first several measures have notated slurred figures, much like in Example 2. As previously mentioned, figures such as these would be approached with a lighter and faster stroke, with less hair on the string. These techniques are utilized to create a certain transparency of the sound, while still preserving the tone and the ability to let each note speak clearly. As the movement progresses, smaller figures are notated, and a bow per note seems more common, enabling the performer to take more artistic control of the sections and groups to emphasize notes, and the change in overall color. As the piece progresses towards the end, the notes are significantly faster, notated as thirty-second notes. This changes the color through the intensity and also the bowing techniques.

EXAMPLE 3: Antonio Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, "Winter" mov. 3, mm.120-126

The image displays two staves of musical notation for Antonio Vivaldi's "Winter" movement. The first staff begins at measure 120, marked with a large 'N' and the word 'Solo'. It features a series of slurred, sixteenth-note figures. The second staff begins at measure 124 and continues with similar rhythmic patterns, including slurs and accents, illustrating the complex bowing techniques discussed in the text.

This section demonstrates where the focused and robust Baroque sound that Donington suggests would be appropriate. On a Baroque instrument, this would most likely be played in the middle to upper half, where the contact of the bow would be most balanced and easy to control. However, if this position was to be mirrored on a modern instrument, the sound would come out disjointed and uneven due to the length of the bow, and the extended arm position, but the inability to produce the focused and heavy sound. Therefore, a focused sound positioned near the bridge at the balance point of the modern bow is necessary to create a similar sound. Through understanding the bowing, the desired Baroque articulation is made more clear, and other aspects such as color and dynamics are able to be applied in a tactful and intentional manner.

Because Vivaldi's "Winter" is such a colorful and expressive piece, dynamics are incredibly important in telling the story and depicting Vivaldi's intentions. Like most Baroque music, however, dynamics are not specifically indicated within the music. Along with the notated bowings and contrasting ideas to add dynamic and color contrast, Vivaldi utilizes the technique of repetitive rhythmic patterns within his designated sections. These patterns provide

⁴ Robert Donington, "String Playing in Baroque Music 1." *Early Music* 5, no. 3 (1977): 389-90.

direction in not only dynamics, but also the overall phrasing of the movement. A common feature in these is the use of tiered dynamics. This technique is this rhythmic pattern repeated multiple times, or at a higher interval to create the effect of a written crescendo and build intensity.

EXAMPLE 4: Antonio Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, “Winter” mov. 3, mm. 25-42

The image shows a musical score for a violin part. The first staff begins at measure 25 with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a 'Tutti' dynamic marking. It features a series of eighth-note patterns with slurs and accents. The second staff begins at measure 35, showing a chromatic ascent starting on A-flat, followed by a descending pattern marked with an 'H'. The music concludes with a final flourish.

As seen in m. 30, the notes ascend chromatically, starting on the A-flat. The technique of chromaticism while ascending is a great indicator of a measured crescendo. In m. 35, the top of the crescendo is reached, and as the notes descend, the dynamics also get softer. At H, a new section is introduced with descending patterns. Starting with the strong first beat on a down bow, a tapered decrescendo with each descending motif can be utilized. These same principles can be applied throughout the movement, and holistically when performing Italian Baroque music.

David Watkin ties the interpretation of dynamics back to the written word, asking questions such as, ‘How would we speak this?’ (regarding loud and soft syllables with long and short notes), and ‘how do these swells contribute to the overall direction of the piece?’⁵ With these insights, combined with the visual of a piece, a performer can see the intention of the composer through the shape of the notes and variety in the music.

After considering the fundamentals of Baroque playing, taking into account the articulation of the notes, bowing, and dynamics, the last factor in providing an intentional interpretation of this movement of Vivaldi’s “Winter” is adding the poetry. Vivaldi’s poetry for each section of the movement is what makes these works especially unique. In short descriptive sentences, instructions are given on not only how the section should sound, but a window is opened to understand a little more of how Vivaldi envisioned the piece being performed. However, due to the subjective nature of poetry, there is much room for interpretation. With the first section, the poetry translates to “We carefully walk on the ice. We are afraid we may fall.”⁶ This is an experience that many can relate to, providing the opportunity to depict personal experience through the music. The picture that Vivaldi intends to portray is primarily prevalent through the harmonic patterns of the sections. Taking the first section as an example, this picture

⁵ David Watkin, “Introduction to Baroque Dynamics with David Watkin.” Published by the Nicola Benedetti Foundation. July 16, 2021. Informational presentation, 1:13-3:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IBCv8aVttY&list=PLpKffHOzsdGYd3mMEKbc2W5mtsY6DrMKt&index=3>.

⁶ Antonio Vivaldi, *The Four Seasons: No 4, Winter*. New York: G Schirmer, 2004.

is reflected through the careful, almost unstable melody with the E-naturals and close intervals. In m. 9, the harmonic structure starts increasing, adding to the visual of the uncertainty of treading on ice. This careful movement is highlighted by the slight change and repetition in mm. 13-19. The measures are almost identical, with one important difference. The measures start on an F, but the second note jumps to a C or a D-flat, then descends in a stepwise motion. This slight variation between measures creates a greater sense of caution within the instability because of the intentional difference within each note group.

EXAMPLE 5: Antonio Vivaldi, *Le Quattro Stagioni*, “Winter” mov. 3, mm. 1-24

The musical score for Example 5 consists of four systems of music. The first system starts with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat major), and a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a forte (F) dynamic and is marked 'Allegro'. The music features a melodic line with slurs and accents, and a Roman numeral 'III' above the staff. The second system starts at measure 7, the third at measure 13, and the fourth at measure 19. The music continues with similar melodic patterns and dynamics throughout the 24 measures.

Reflective of text painting, it is clear that descending figures depict falling. In this case, mm. 21-24 can reflect sliding if seen in two measure groups. While the individual interpretation of each section of poetry will be slightly different between performers and even performances, utilizing the knowledge that comes from Baroque articulation helps the performer take the freedoms necessary to paint the intended picture.

In his book, *Baroque Music: A Practical Guide for the Performer*, author Victor Rangel-Ribeiro poses the situation of this freedom, especially regarding *The Four Seasons*. He presents the claim that because this music is so well known, and because of the instructions for each section, there is always a welcome change with the liberties that are taken by performers.⁷ Vivaldi’s poetry is just the backbone, as in harmony with Italian Baroque tradition, virtuosity and freedoms are not only permitted, but expected. While “Winter” may have stricter boundaries due to the specific picture being painted, there are still freedoms that can be taken. Violinist Nicola

⁷ Victor Rangel-Ribeiro, *Baroque Music: A Practical Guide for the Performer* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, (2016), 62-70.

Benedetti commented on her experience performing Italian Baroque music for the first time, stating how the conductor “refused to let [her] play four notes in time.”⁸ While this may be a little extreme, the same principles apply. Baroque instrumental music is not only based on aural tradition, but also broke the ground for musicians to truly express themselves, and Vivaldi is enabling performers to do this through the programmatic music of “Winter.” Because of the vivid pictures that can be painted, the brighter sound of a modern instrument played in a Baroque style may be to the advantage of the individual, or the abilities of a modern bow in length may help prolong a phrase or punctuate a certain point. Ultimately, this is achieved through a careful and intentional study of not only the music, but the techniques and mechanisms of the time period. By doing this, the true meaning of the magnificent works of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* is able to be unearthed, opening a window not only to Vivaldi’s time, but into the piece itself.

A knowledge of Italian Baroque performance techniques are essential to understanding Due to Vivaldi’s detailed poetry in his concerti of *The Four Seasons*, violinists are able to get an additional view of Vivaldi’s intentions for these pieces. In the third movement of “Winter” specifically, a comprehensive puzzle of interpreting Vivaldi’s works is present. While a modern violin has many different characteristics and qualities, when approaching this concerto with the intent of preserving the original style in the best way possible, there are several measures that can be taken to achieve this. Through a greater comprehensive understanding of fundamental Baroque techniques such as articulation, bowing, and dynamics, the pieces of the puzzle become more cohesive. Moreover, through the poetry, the final part of the interpretation is complete. Like all music, every performance is different. Combined with the desire to make the music as historically accurate and conforming as possible, there needs to be the personal aspect, as that is what makes music powerful. As a violin teacher himself, Vivaldi understood this. He may have used the poetry as a true application for his own students to demonstrate not only what they learned in technique and fundamentals, but to apply it to make it their own. Through the simple sonnet structure, he provided the framework to spur the individual interpretation of each scene in the movement. As a master teacher, Vivaldi’s compositions can teach all performers the value of technique and personal interpretation in all forms of music. While most instrumental works do not have words to help paint the picture, through analyzing the basics of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, modern performers are able to apply the same concepts in future repertoire to continue to paint the timeless picture of music.

⁸ Nicola Benedetti. “Freedom in Baroque Music - Discover Baroque Music with Nicola Benedetti.” Published by the Nicola Benedetti Foundation. July 21, 2021. Informational presentation, 0:38-2:42.. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WcOhmS0_R8&list=PLpKffHOzsdGYd3mMFKbc2W5mtsY6DrMKt&index=5.

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