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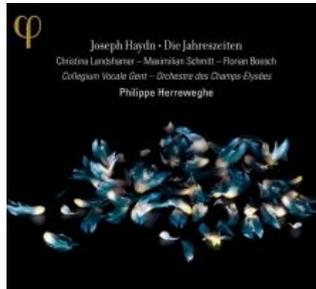
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HAYDN The Seasons

Haydn's glorious celebration of the rural world in which he, a wheelwright's son, grew up has done notably well on disc, with bracing period-instrument recordings from Gardiner (Archiv), Harnoncourt and Jacobs (both Harmonia Mundi), and Colin Davis's lovingly observed, large-scale performance on the LSO Live label. On his own label, Philippe Herreweghe here directs a performance of comparable vividness, one to reinforce my long-held feeling that *The Seasons* is every bit a match for *The Creation* in inventive power. While less bucolically uninhibited than Jacobs, especially, Herreweghe has a sharp ear for the score's manifold colours, and never misses a trick with Haydn's delectable tone-painting: say, in the flitting, gambolling woodwind in Spring's 'Freudenlied', the charming wind sallies in the Autumn trio and chorus 'So lohnet die Natur den Fleiss', or the hushed, bleak introduction to Winter. Each of the woodwind principals emerges as a poet in their own right.

Christina Landshamer, pure and luminous of tone, sings this with an ideal mix of grace and wondering innocence. She is delightful, too, in the song where artful country girl outwits aristocratic lecher, and in her Autumn love duet with the dulcet-voiced young tenor Maximilian Schmitt. His sensitive singing of the cavatina depicting the summer heat (the hushed, muted strings marvellously evocative here) is one of the performance's highlights. Florian Boesch makes a genially relaxed Simon, singing the ploughman's song and shooting aria with unforced relish (though he sounds unhappy in his brief bouts of coloratura). In Winter, Boesch brings a subtle feeling for colour and word-pointing to Haydn's picture of the frozen wastes.

True to form, Herreweghe takes immense care over internal balancing, both of orchestra and chorus. If the Collegium Vocale's timbre is slightly more soft-grained than their rivals', they throw themselves with spirit into the marvellously varied music that Haydn provides for them. The opening chorus of Spring, with its musette drones, has a gentle, graceful lilt (Jacobs and Gardiner are brisker and earthier here). Perhaps Herreweghe is a shade sober in the Ländler-ish evening chorus in Summer and the noble fugue in praise of hard work ('O Fleiss, o edler Fleiss'). But the autumn wine harvest goes with a lusty - and increasingly tipsy - swing, while Herreweghe yields to no one in the cataclysmic summer tempest, the hunting chorus (gloriously raw, raucous natural horns) and the exultant closing fugue. While Jacobs remains, by a whisker, my first choice, Herreweghe and his forces do eloquent justice to the poetry, grandeur and, crucially, the sheer joy of this least solemn, most life-affirming of oratorios.



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