

Antonio Vivaldi

Born March 4, 1678 – Venice, Italy

Died July 28, 1741 – Vienna, Austria

The Four Seasons

It seems that the further back in history you look, the accomplishments of singular human beings become more and more impressive. For some reason, while we live in a time filled with incredible tools like personal computers and artificial intelligence that allow us to be more efficient than ever before, we pale in comparison to the great human miracles of the distant past.

Music has had many of these remarkable people. Perfect examples include composers like Dimitri Shostakovich who could write a symphony from start to finish over a few days. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was churning out timeless masterpieces while still a teenager. Johann Sebastian Bach, perhaps the greatest musical mind the Western world has ever seen, practically defined what music would become over the next quarter millennium. And then there's Antonio Vivaldi, whose life work inside and out of music was breathtakingly beautiful.

Vivaldi was destined to become a priest. Baptized immediately after birth, he was ordained at age 25. However, due to severe asthma, he would eventually become barred from holding mass. Instead, he would continue his liturgical work at the Ospedale della Pieta, an orphanage and hospital in Venice where Vivaldi would win the post of resident violinist and music teacher. This turn of events would lead to Vivaldi's true legacy and over the next three decades he would compose so much music that his final catalog is still disputed to this day, as many as 1,200 works total.

Most of Vivaldi's music was written for the children under the care of the orphanage as Vivaldi would quickly find himself teaching more than playing the violin. His pieces were not just intended to be great music, however, but pedagogical tools designed for the specific skill levels of individual student musicians under his care. The more skilled the child, the more intricate and complex Vivaldi's new piece would be.

These remarkable pieces by Vivaldi are performed regularly all over the world. Still, there are four that would define Vivaldi's fame throughout the 20th century, becoming staples of what everyday people consider "classical music." They are all violin concertos: *Concerto No. 1 in E major, Op. 8, RV 269 "Spring"*, *Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 8, RV 315 "Summer"*, *Concerto No. 3 in F Major, Op. 8, RV 293 "Autumn"*, and *Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 8, RV 297 "Winter."*

As the subtitles suggest, each concerto creates a soundscape representing one of the seasons within nature. Contrary to popular belief this was a strategy of Vivaldi's own doing, extraordinary, given that non-operatic program music was exceedingly rare before the 19th century. The works are also unique because they are more often performed as a set rather than individual concertos. The combined length of all four pieces equals a similar performance time of a romantic or 20th-century concerto, perfect for today's concert halls.

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860 – Bohemia

Died May 18, 1911 – Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 1 in D major (Titan)

The end of the 19th century was a polarizing time in the music world as an opinion war had broken out between composers as to how to approach the future. Looking back at the turn of the same century, Ludwig van Beethoven was busy changing the game. The personal musical evolution across his 56-year life was enough to change music forever as musicians are still holding themselves to the Beethoven standard today. Beethoven, however, would not live to be surprised by the fact that only half a century later the game would be changed again, and this time musicians wouldn't follow suit so easily.

The true battle began in 1894 when Claude Debussy completed his orchestral tone poem *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, a work so beautiful and so shockingly unique that textbooks would later refer to it as "the beginning of modern music." However, not everyone was convinced as there were plenty who still firmly believed in the structure and harmonic techniques of the Beethoven school. One of those individuals was Gustav Mahler, who would later be cemented as one of the late-romantic era's greatest champions whose work demands the utmost respect from the audience and the performers in today's concert halls.

Mahler's first symphony would be premiered in Budapest in 1889. It is the perfect introduction to Mahler's style and intentions as he would push back against the full turn to modernism for the rest of his career. Mahler would ultimately be remembered as a symphonist and while many of his works are enormous and intimidating, *Symphony No. 1*, known as "Titan," is a tremendously easy piece of music to enjoy.

Symphony No. 1 in D Major was completed in 1888 but would not reach its final form until a decade later. Though now universally performed in four movements, Mahler originally

intended a five-movement orchestral tone poem. Music entitled *Blumine* (flower piece) acted as the work's second movement for its premiere and two performances after, but was officially withdrawn from the piece by Mahler himself in 1894. *Blumine* was not original to the first symphony and had been sourced from incidental music written by Mahler in 1884. It remains rarely performed at all today. Regardless, there are a few recordings readily available that feature *Blumine* as the symphony's second movement.

Symphony No. 1 is referred to as "Titan," a confusing nickname given that this work is one of Mahler's shortest contributions to the genre. This becomes quite meaningful when realizing the majority of Mahler's symphonies take well over an hour to perform. Only Mahler's first and fourth symphonies stay below the 60-minute timeframe. "Titan" refers back to Mahler's original intentions to create a large-tone poem as he would coin the subtitle himself after the piece's first major revision in reference to his inspiration via Jean Paul's 1800 novel of the same name. Although Mahler would only use this subtitle briefly before a third major rework of the symphony, "Titan" remains the nickname of choice and comes with the instant realization that you are about to hear one of the landmark works from the very end of the nineteenth century.

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