

# Let's Listen 6

The pieces for these lessons are taken from the collection **100 Popular Classics**, a set of 5 CDs, issued by Castle Communication, Catalogue number MBS CD 517, available from HMV. However, the pieces featured are also available on many other recordings, and may already be in your school.

## Spring from Four Seasons

*Composer: Antonio Vivaldi, 1687 - 1741*

### Background Information for the Teacher

Antonio Vivaldi was one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period, whose brilliant music was often imitated by others. He was born in Italy in 1687. His father was a violinist at St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, and even as a boy, Antonio used to deputize for him in the orchestra. Antonio entered the priesthood, and was known as *'The Red Priest'* because of his long red hair. It is said that he often left the altar to rush away to write down a piece of music! He himself claimed that he suffered from asthma, and said that is why he had to leave the altar!

Antonio got a job as musical director in a girls' convent orphanage in Venice. This allowed him lots of scope to compose and organise weekly concerts. He composed much of his music for the girls in the orphanage, which tells us a lot about the standard of performance among the inmates.

Antonio was often in trouble with the church authorities for neglecting his priestly duties, and for his unconventional living arrangements! Toward the end of his life, his music grew unfashionable and when he died, he was buried in a pauper's grave.

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This article is one of a series that first appeared in INTO InTouch magazine in 2002-2003 written by Mary Ryng

Baroque music refers to a style of music written in the period 1600 – 1750 approximately. Composers tried to create elaborate, highly ornate and expressive music. They used contrasts, such as loud/soft or fast/slow, in their music to achieve striking effects. They often used the brilliant melodic sound of the violin with simple bass accompaniments. Vivaldi, Bach and Handel were the best known of the Baroque composers.

### Introducing the music

Get the class talking about Spring. What happens in Spring? Make a list of sounds associated with Spring, e.g. birds singing, lambs bleating, soft gentle breezes, sudden thunderstorms etc. The pupils could use classroom instruments to play some spring music.

Explain that **Spring** from **Four Seasons** is one of four concertos, each named after one of the four seasons. A concerto is a piece for one or more solo instruments accompanied by a string orchestra and harpsichord. Each concerto depicts a poem, and describes the setting and events of the seasonal verses. It is thought that Vivaldi may have written the poems himself. The **Four Seasons** was a great success when it was first performed, and it is still one of the most popular pieces of 18<sup>th</sup> Century music.

The first movement of **Spring** is called **Allegro**, which means 'quick'. The words of this section are:

Spring has arrived, and joyously the birds  
Now welcome her return with festive song,  
And streamlets, by soft airs caressed, are heard  
To murmur sweetly as they course along.

Casting their inky mantle over heaven,  
Thunderstorms, her chosen heralds, roar.  
When they have died away to silence, then  
The birds take up their charming songs once more.

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### **What to listen for**

The music opens with the violins playing a happy spring like tune. Then a high, solo violin depicts the birds twittering, while long gentle chords depict the breeze blowing. Gentle rumbling on the cello suggest thunder threatening, and this scares the birds, who twitter in an agitated fashion. The thunderstorm increases. Then, quite suddenly, the storm is over, and the music finishes with the happy spring theme again.

### **Listening and Responding to the music**

- **Spring** is suitable for all classes in the primary school. What will vary according to the class level is the response required of the children, and the amount of background information given to them. Depending on the age of the class, the teacher can tell all, some, or none of the details in the background section, as an introduction to the music.
- Ask the children if they hear the music that depicts the birds singing. As this is so vivid, even very young children will be able to identify it.
- Older children could follow the poem as the music unfolds, as in the listening points above.
- Older children could also listen for the contrasts, which are a feature of Baroque music. The obvious contrasts here are in dynamics and mood. Dynamics refers to loud and soft – there are obvious contrasts between the loud and soft sections. There are also vivid contrasts in mood of the happy bird song, and the ominous frightened panicky twittering of the birds when the thunder is threatening.
- This is a good piece of music to introduce the violin. Use an instrument chart, or photocopy pictures.

### **Integration Activities**

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the age and interests of your class.

- Art – Make a large scale collage to depict the story of the music
- SESE / Geography – Find Italy and Venice on a map

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- Language – Find words to describe the Spring. As the children suggest words, write them on the blackboard. Then use these words as a wordbank for creative writing projects, e.g. a poem on Spring, or a descriptive paragraph outlining the sudden thunderstorm.
- Language – Older classes may like to collect poetry on a Spring theme.

The rest of the poem entitled **Spring**, on which this piece of music is based is as follows:

And now, upon the flower-strewn grass subsiding,  
With leafy branches rustling overhead,  
The goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog beside him.

By festive sound of rustic bagpipes led,  
Nymphs and shepherds dance beneath the shining  
Canopy of spring with sprightly tread.

- If you can get a recording of the **Four Seasons**, listen to the other two movements of Spring, which depicts the above verses.
- Research skills – use the Internet to find out more about Vivaldi and his music.
- Above all, enjoy the music.