

CLASSICAL SERIES



STRINGS ON PARADE WITH JUN IWASAKI

DVOŘÁK, PIAZZOLLA & PHILLIP HERBERT

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 18, AT 7 PM

FRIDAY & SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19 & 20, AT 8 PM

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

JUN IWASAKI, *leader and violin*

PHILIP HERBERT

Elegy: In Memoriam Stephen Lawrence

8 minutes

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires

(Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas) - **25 minutes**

Otoño Porteño (Buenos Aires Autumn)

Invierno Porteño (Buenos Aires Winter)

Primavera Porteña (Buenos Aires Spring)

Verano Porteño (Buenos Aires Summer)

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Serenade for Strings in E major, Op. 22 - **27 minutes**

I. Moderato

II. Tempo di valse

III. Scherzo: Vivace

IV. Larghetto

V. Finale: Allegro vivace

CLASSICAL SERIES
PARTNER



PROGRAM SUMMARY

The emotional power that a string orchestra can conjure is on display from the start of this program with Philip Herbert's profoundly moving *Elegy: In Memoriam* — Stephen Lawrence, a brief, eloquent commemoration of the murder of a Black teenager in a hate crime in the early 1990s that had wide-reaching repercussion in British society. The composer's piece, "a gesture of empathy," invokes the English pastoral tradition and teems with "soulful harmonies" and "gentle dissonances in sonorous chords, under a plaintive melody."

A prolific composer and charismatic performer, Astor Piazzolla became a cultural icon through his creative transformations of the tango. We join the music world's year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of Piazzolla's birth with his sequence of tango pieces evoking the emotions associated with each of the four seasons. *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* is a beloved example of Piazzolla's innovative fusion of the tango idiom with classical models and styles and includes punning references to Vivaldi's famous concerto cycle.

As a young man growing up in Czech culture — which at the time was marginalized from the dominant classical tradition — Antonín Dvořák struggled to find access. When he finally caught the attention of the era's gatekeepers, it unleashed a creative outpouring that included the *Serenade for Strings*. In this piece, we encounter a young composer eager to fit in all of the compositional tricks he has learned beneath the music's seemingly smooth surface.

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PHILIP HERBERT

Elegy: In Memoriam — Stephen Lawrence

Born in 1960 in London.

Composed:
1999

**Estimated
length:**
8 minutes



First performance:

September 7, 2000, at the first annual memorial lecture of the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust

First Nashville Symphony performance:

These are the first Nashville Symphony performances.

As a child, Philip Herbert recalls how exposure to music at home, at school, and in live concerts starting at the age of five awakened his interest. Herbert's parents, whose eclectic tastes embraced gospel, classical, and pop, eagerly fostered his obvious talent, starting with a Christmas gift of a toy piano. He also benefited from what at the time was a robust musical education program in the United Kingdom — his family had moved to the north, settling in Leeds — and Herbert won a scholarship to the Yorkshire College of Music with a focus on piano. From that point forward, says the composer, he realized it was possible to make a career in music.

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Herbert is active as a composer, pianist, conductor, educator, writer, and broadcaster. He has a special passion for increasing access to classical music and ensuring its survival for future generations.

A research trip in the USA in 1998 deepened Herbert's determination to bring the neglected repertoire by Black composers of classical music before the public — such as his *Lost Chords: Unsung Songs* project celebrating composers of the Harlem Renaissance. He also designed the acclaimed *Ballare: To Dance* project exploring the African Diaspora for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in

London. In 2008 he was commissioned by the London-based Philharmonia Orchestra to write the concert-opening fanfare *Incantation: To Seasons of Promise*.

Elegy: In Memoriam — Stephen Lawrence dates from February 1999. It is Herbert's musical response to the media's coverage of the public inquiry into the murder of the Black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, which took place in April 1993. While waiting for a bus in South London, Lawrence was brutally attacked and killed; the handling of the hate crime led to investigations into institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police and legal reforms with sweeping repercussions. As recently as August, the Lawrence tragedy was the topic of a three-part drama miniseries on the British ITV channel.

Elegy received its premiere at the inaugural Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust memorial lecture, which was given by HRH Prince Charles in September 2000. It has been performed on several prominent occasions, including at the first concert at the Southbank Centre by the Chineke! Orchestra, Europe's first majority Black and ethnically diverse orchestra, when it was formed in 2015. The Chineke! Orchestra also recorded *Elegy* on its 2020 album *Spark Catchers*.

Herbert describes the piece as “a gesture of empathy.” He remarks: “There is a need to place a higher value on the strength that comes from diverse peoples living together in Britain. We all have something valuable and very positive to contribute to the larger part of the puzzle of life in Britain today. Stephen Lawrence was deprived of the right to a life where he could use his amazing talents for the good of wider society. Nevertheless, we can press together across our communities to help realize his dreams.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Elegy comprises three interlinked sections and is scored for precisely 18 string players: “one for each year of the life of Stephen Lawrence,” as Herbert explains. The piece, opening in C major, alternates between a prevailing slow and sustained tempo and a more accelerated central section; a reprise of the first section comes to rest with a grieving turn to C minor.

“The music is full of soulful harmonies, with gentle dissonances in sonorous chords,

under a plaintive melody,” writes the composer. These, “characterize the heavy emotions brought to mind by this tragedy.”

Herbert’s commentary on the piece includes an epigraph from Victor Hugo: “Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.” *Elegy*’s chorale-like texture consciously evokes the sound associated with English composers from the so-called “pastoral” tradition such as Ralph Vaughan Williams (as in *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*). American listeners might be reminded of the somber tone of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*.

Herbert remarked on the English connection in an interview: “[*Elegy*] is written in the English string music tradition, as many classical music listeners will not expect a BAME [Black, Asian, and minority ethnic] composer to have written the music. This is to provoke thought about what it takes to be a British citizen, along with the value placed on life, the rights, privileges, and justice that will be accorded to British ethnic minorities in life, in the process of reflecting on this tragedy.”

Scored for string orchestra



ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires (Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas)

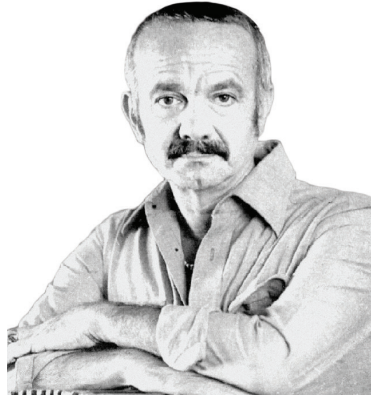
Born on March 11, 1921, in
Mar del Plata, Argentina

Died on July 4, 1992, in
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Composed:

1965-70; version
arranged for string
orchestra by Leonid
Desyatnikov in 1999

**Estimated
length:**
25 minutes



First performance:

Complete cycle premiered
by Piazzolla and his quintet on
May 19, 1970, in Buenos Aires.

First Nashville Symphony performance:

November 19, 2009, conducted
by Giancarlo Guerrero at
Schermerhorn Symphony Center
with Tianwa Yang on violin.

The tango is a globally familiar archetype for couple-based dance, yet it resists simple definition. Diverse influences from Africa, Europe, and South America converge in the *tango*, a word that is possibly of African origin. In the late 19th century, these elements mingled together in the slums and brothels of Buenos Aires. The dance evolved, crossing socioeconomic barriers with its quasi-hypnotic pulse and allure. The tango — sometimes perceived as a stylish allegory of desire — fascinates because it derives its energy from the tension between tight rhythmic control and a sensuous, improvisatory freedom.

The unmistakable rhythmic gestures and overall attitude associated with the tango were shaped in the Argentine capital. Yet Astor Piazzolla, whose grandparents had emigrated from Italy to Argentina, acquired many of his formative impressions of the tango as a youngster in New York, where the family moved when he was only four.

Along with the popular music of Argentina, he grew up listening avidly to Bach and jazz. As an 8 year old, he received a gift from his father of a *bandoneón* (button accordion), whose distinctive sound was already associated with tango bands — Piazzolla would also make it his instrument. (The *bandoneón* was in fact invented by a German but found its way

to Argentina via music-loving immigrants.)

The first music he learned to play on the *bandoneón* was by J.S. Bach, which a neighboring Hungarian pianist taught him. So it seemed natural early on for Piazzolla to create a hybrid style fusing classical and tango elements, sometimes looking back directly to Baroque models for inspiration. You might even say that his compositions possess the flexibility reminiscent of the Baroque era, when Bach continually adapted and rearranged not only his own music but concertos by contemporaries, including Vivaldi, whom he greatly admired. Piazzolla's music similarly lends itself to arrangements for varying types of ensembles and performers.

When the young musician returned to Buenos Aires as a teenager, he began developing a career playing the *bandoneón* with tango groups in nightclubs and cabarets. Piazzolla also studied formal composition and, in his early 30s, won a scholarship to Paris for further work with Nadia Boulanger, the legendary mentor of a vast spectrum of 20th-century composers (from Copland to Philip Glass). Boulanger convinced him not to efface his authentic voice in an effort appear “serious” but rather to draw on his love of the tango as a creative source for his composition, which Piazzolla proceeded to do, adapting

the tango for longer classical forms and even writing a “tango opera.”

Piazzolla called his revolutionary new approach *nuevo tango* (“new tango”). It borrowed elements from jazz and classical music (from the Baroque to 20th-century, especially Stravinsky and Bartók). But his experimental zest was not warmly greeted at first by many aficionados of the tango back home in Argentina. Despite having considerable success on an officially backed tour to the USA, Piazzolla faced denunciations from uncompromising purists — and even, reportedly, death threats — for his challenges to the traditions associated with the tango.

The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires began in June 1965 as incidental music for a play by his writer friend Alberto Rodríguez Muñoz. It was one of a series of pieces that the procrastinating composer had to dash off in great haste. The Spanish name — *Verano porteño* — means “Buenos Aires Summer.” (Piazzolla uses an adjective — literally, “port city” — that is understood to refer to inhabitants of Buenos Aires.) The popularity of this piece inspired to continue for the next five years with the rest of the seasons, which he then published as a suite in homage to Antonio Vivaldi’s uber-famous *Four Seasons* concertos, which appeared in print in 1725.

Each of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* is a three-movement violin concerto accompanied by descriptive sonnets (possibly penned by Vivaldi himself). Astor Piazzolla’s four seasons are each represented by a single tango movement, though these loosely suggest the fast-slow-fast pattern of the earlier concertos. Piazzolla’s pieces can be played separately or in any order preferred, and in an astonishing variety of arrangements to boot.

Piazzolla’s death and makes the Vivaldi connection even stronger — both by spotlighting the solo violin (as in Vivaldi’s concertos) and by seeding Piazzolla’s score, which included some tongue-in-cheek references to Vivaldi’s *Winter*, with even more allusions to *The Four Seasons*.

Spring begins with a densely contrapuntal texture — a prime example of Piazzolla’s classical-tango fusion. A lyrical episode emerges as a songlike mini-slow movement. When the exciting opening music returns, it is spiced with dissonant touches reminiscent of the stabbing string attacks in Bernard Herrmann’s score to Hitchcock’s classic thriller *Psycho*. A similar shape is found in *Summer*, which includes languid excursions in the central episode. The season reaches a frenetic climax — the tango as erotic duel.

Autumn has the soloist imitate percussion effects and again features the knife’s-edge glissando swoops that figure so prominently in Piazzolla’s tango style. A cello cadenza evokes the reflective state of mind so often associated with this season. Another cadenza, this time for the violin, rewrites the cello solo with its own more capricious thoughts. An angry-sounding reprise of the opening brings a quick end.

Winter commences in a somber atmosphere, but a cadenza allows the violin soloist to change the mood, adding passion and leading to an amorous duet with the solo cello. A full-force tango eventually breaks out — almost as a challenge, with Vivaldi’s *Summer* storm briefly raging in the background. (The musical irony here suggests the simultaneity of winter and summer in the South and North Hemispheres, respectively.)

Scored for solo violin and string orchestra

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The one we hear on this program by Leonid Desyatnikov was commissioned after

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Serenade for Strings in E major, Op. 22

Born on September 8, 1841, in the Bohemian village of Nelahozeves, just north of Prague

Died on May 1, 1904, in Prague

Composed:
1875;
revised 1878

Estimated length:
27 minutes



First performance:

December 10, 1876, in Prague, with Adolf Čech leading an ensemble comprising musicians from the city's Czech and German opera companies

First Nashville Symphony performance:

This is the first performance by the Nashville Symphony.

Antonín Dvořák presents a fascinating example of how an ambitious, gifted young artist can enliven classical tradition with fresh perspective — if simply given a chance by the gatekeepers of that tradition. Dvořák came of age within the sprawling, multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire in Bohemia, where he developed a love for the folk music of his Czech heritage while simultaneously trying to absorb the aesthetic of the dominant Austro-German tradition. That also meant studying the German language — and tension would later erupt with his German publisher over the latter's insistence on printing the German form of his first name (Anton) instead of the Czech Antonín; a compromise was reached with the abbreviation “Ant.”

Dvořák grew up in a small village. His obvious talent as a child convinced his innkeeper/butcher father (also a musician) to allow him to pursue a career as an organist, which took young Antonín to Prague. Despite his academic credentials studying organ, Dvořák initially had more success playing viola gigs and, like Piazzolla, he gained practical experience from countless hours entertaining listeners outside the formal setting of a concert hall — he played as part of a dance band that performed in restaurants and for balls. He also found a post playing viola in the

opera orchestra of the precursor of Prague's National Theater.

And he composed, privately at first, methodically taking in everything he could from the examples of Mozart, Beethoven, and the early Romantics. By the summer of 1874, when he was nearly 33, Dvořák decided to apply for a prestigious Austrian State Prize for emerging composers — despite some previous setbacks in the reception of his compositions. The grant money was administered from the imperial capital of Vienna on the recommendation of a jury that included the leading critic of the time, the formidable Eduard Hanslick (who had become a bitter foe of Richard Wagner).

Dvořák's success with the jury — he sent them 15 pieces and was selected to receive a grant — boosted his confidence, significantly. The Serenade for Strings belongs to the vintage year of 1875, when the funds were provided. It inspired a creative flood that also included his Piano Trio No. 1, Piano Quartet No. 1, String Quintet No. 2, Symphony No. 5, and even a grand opera, among other works. The versatility represented by that list is characteristic of this composer's ambitious. (David Hurwitz's affectionate survey of the composer is aptly titled *Romantic Music's Most Versatile Genius*.)

A sort of domino effect followed: Dvořák applied again and won for the following four years, through 1878. Johannes Brahms also became part of the jury and was so impressed that he persuaded his German publisher (the hugely influential Fritz Simrock) to take a risk with the young Czech. Simrock followed his advice, which led to the *Slavonic Dances* in 1878. Their smash success put Dvořák on the international map.

The Serenade for Strings had been a local success in Prague when it premiered and was soon revived under the leadership of a young Leoš Janáček. Dvořák included it in his portfolio of submitted works for the 1877 Austrian State Prize and remained very fond of the Serenade throughout his career. “We have no doubt that with works like this, whose real artistic value cannot be denied in any way, [Dvořák] will also find greater favor everywhere than for example in our conservatoire, which turns its nose up at our domestic composers,” wrote one especially foresighted critic of the premiere.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The sense of exuberant invention that flows from the Serenade’s five movements

is unmistakable: Dvořák took less than two weeks to compose it. But he had paved the way through his patient immersion in the music of the past. You can hear the young Dvořák eager to fit in all of the compositional tricks he has learned beneath the seemingly smooth surface of this music.

Four of the five movements — all but the finale — employ a simple song-like form (ABA), but Dvořák weaves subtler kinds of variety into this pattern. The contrast in character and key between the two themes in the opening, fanfare-like movement makes this general design easy to hear.

In the wistful waltzing second movement, Dvořák enchants with a bittersweet melancholy, only to follow this with a bustling and lively Scherzo. The composer’s signature melodic warmth permeates the work’s emotional heart, the Larghetto.

Crowning the Serenade is the most formally complex of its five movements. The finale brims with invention, propelling forward while incorporating backward glances at the Larghetto and the opening theme.

Scored for string orchestra

— *Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony’s program annotator.*

