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Colour of Music Festival Virtuosi play every season, twice

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Colour of Music Festival music director Marlon Daniel.

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The Colour of Music Black Classical Musicians Festival, now in full swing, includes performances large and small.

On Wednesday, the Colour of Music Festival Virtuosi, led by Marlon Daniel presented a chamber orchestra concert featuring Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" and Piazzolla's "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires," along with short works by three American composers.

The common denominator shared by all but one of the pieces: narrative. These were examples of "program music," compositions inspired by nature or literature or some aspect of the human experience.

The Virtuosi did a fine job bring these pieces alive. They were perhaps hindered by the venue, Charleston Museum's Wilcox Auditorium, which clearly was not intended for subtle musical performances, but the players' earnestness and flare more than compensated for the odd acoustic.

Daniel managed it all very well, and the idea to feature eight different violin soloists was inspired. It gave the musicians a chance to shine and showcased some of the core talent assembled from far and wide by festival organizers.

Brendon Elliott, a 20-year-old Curtis Institute student who played the solo in Vivaldi's "Spring," played with grace and poise, displaying a fine technique and sweet tone. Edward Wellington Hardy, a student at the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, and a student of Daniel Phillips (well known to fans of Spoleto Festival's chamber music series), tackled "Summer" with vigor, control and expressiveness.

The ensemble, capably led by Daniel, provided a solid response to the solo lines and did a great job with the contrasting dynamics, always so important in Baroque music.

Piazzolla's catchy "Seasons," four distinct pieces written in the tango style and arranged in the late 1990s by the Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov to mimic (and quote from) Vivaldi's work, employ scratch tones, string snaps, glissandi and other effects, making the piece an inevitable crowd-pleaser.

The Virtuosi clearly had fun with the music. Violin soloists Josh Henderson and Jessica McJunkins were particularly good at communicating the spirit of the music without compromising technique and intonation.

The concert opened with “Aurorean Air,” an expressive piece by Trevor Weston, who originally wrote it for flute ensemble and adapted it for strings. Weston, a former member of the College of Charleston’s music faculty who now teaches at Drew University in New Jersey, said he was inspired by his love of trains and those early morning New York City subway rides.

The piece beautifully conveyed the experience of riding a train and watching objects pass by through the windows, some quickly, some slowly, depending on proximity. The strings pulsed, often pitting triplet figures against a 4/4 meter, and the progress of the music gave the impression of dawn giving way to day in the bustling city.

“Mother and Child” by William Grant Still, a pathbreaking African-American composer and conductor, opened the second half of the concert. It’s mournful sounds were a little like sighs, or a gentle voice singing a lullaby. The piece included hints of the black spiritual but mostly expressed its melancholy mood with lilting phrases and lush harmonies.

The concert ended with Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s Novelette in D major, a single, propulsive, operatic “allegro molto” that liked the minor key as much as its counterpart and seemed to suggest dramatic action - a chase, perhaps, leading to a fateful encounter - before giving way to a triumphant end in the tonic key.