Four seasons changed

JOLENTE DE MAEYER / MICHIEL VANDEVELDE / MAX RICHTER

Seasonal recalibration

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As sure as spring follows winter, some choreographer or orchestra spins its own take on Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. 'Four Seasons Changed', conceived by conductor and solo violinist Jolente De Maeyer is a case in point. Her Bryggen String Orchestra very literally performs, even dances, Max Richter's famous 2012 recomposition of the music. Choreographer Michiel Vandevelde infuses it with a dance performed by Amanda Barrio Charmelo. Neither of them seems overly daunted by the familiarity of the score: for one hour, they deliver a visually and auditorily mesmerising experience.

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The prologue, marking the beginning of a birth accompanied by electronic soundtrack composed by Didem Coşkunseven, opens with the lone dancer lying on the floor, enclosed in a circular pool of light. Her eyes are closed; her breath heavy and clearly audible. A reflection spreads out in front of her. The image briefly calls up Narcissus gazing into the pond, but the association rests incomplete.

What holds my attention instead is her grounded physical vulnerability and the exposed labour of breathing in the general stillness. As the music quivers in the air, the dancer's body responds in micro-vibrations and cramps, urged by the sound. When the Bryggen orchestra enters the stage, these movements gradually transform into fleeting attempts at classical positions that never quite stabilise. Balletic positions appear only to disperse shakily.

Dancing musicians

The premise itself is familiar. The dramaturgical arc follows a cyclical trajectory, moving through the four seasons: from spring to winter, from birth to death. However, much like the real seasons, within the habitual loop subtle shifts open to new discoveries. Barrio Charmelo dances between seventeen string musicians that are not hidden in the pit nor arranged in conventional orchestral rows. Freed from the fixity of distinctions between different forms of performance,

they disperse across the stage, fully present as bodily performers as well as musical ones. They walk, circle, step, swirl and, at times, lie down on the stage.

The huge mirror that stretches across the back of the stage doubles the impact on the spectators. This multiplication of bodies, from musician to musician, dancer to musicians, performers to the reflection in the mirror and all of them to us, the audience, never settle into the expected hierarchies. The result is a totality that feeds the work's inquiry into the uneasy coexistence of music and dance: the difficulty of playing a musical score by heart multiplied by the challenge for the dancer to meet the choreography and the live music in one moment, every mistake doubled in the view of the spectators.

How is sound registered when the body can no longer maintain a familiar relationship with the instrument?

Richter's recomposition proves an apt partner for such an undertaking. Having famously discarded much of Vivaldi's original material, he loops, phases, and reframes what remains, generating an eclectic tension between baroque patterning and minimalist logic. In 'Four Seasons Changed', this musical ambiguity finds an adequate corporeal counterpart. The musicians' double concentration—playing complex chamber music lines while navigating the space—produces a palpable strain. This double challenge is one of the work's most compelling aspects. Particularly striking is the moment when the musicians lie on their backs in semi-curled positions, continuing to play with unwavering precision. A question emerges: How is sound registered when the body can no longer maintain a familiar relationship with the instrument; when it must grapple simultaneously with gravity and the musical precision demanded by the score?

Double reality

The reflections in the large, mirroring surface that looms over the back of the stage constitute a central scenic device. This mirror alternately reveals and obscures the actions beneath it. At times, what we see directly contradicts what the reflection shows: bodies melt into silhouettes, proximity turns illusory, shadows and visibility play tricks on our perception. This double reality sometimes feels slightly disorienting, at other times seductive. Whether at times it merely amplifies the stage visually or actively unsettles perception remains unclear; attention drifts, and meaning appears to slip sideways.

Barrio Charmelo performs her part in all of this with striking assurance. After the cracks and cramps, as the seasons shift, her movement vocabulary echoes a range of modern and postmodern figures. Spring draws on Isadora Duncan's organic freedom: a corporeal expansion that follows the logic of breathing. Running, leaping, and jumping, she wears a white, Greek-style dress that moves and flows symbiotically with her body within an aesthetic that borrows from classical beauty. Later, feathers reshape her silhouette from pristine classicism to something animalistic, swan-like at first, then increasingly erratic. In winter, dressed in a majestic red gown, her body folds and throws itself forward rhythmically, again and again, recalling a recent staging by OBV of Pina Bausch's 'Le Sacre de Printemps'.

In this circle of life, death and birth mirror each other.

The emotions are fully exposed. But what initially reads as raw affect may, at times, settle into aestheticized intensity: potent but ultimately risk-averse, freely picking from the tried and tested highlights of dance history. Even the darker turns, such as crawling, hiding, the body submerged beneath costume, remain carefully framed within familiar tones. The body is eloquent, yet safely so, circling around well-known territories of 20th and 21st century corporeal expression. This choreographic assemblage is a distinct artistic choice that gives the performance an easy dynamic that sits well with the changing seasons. Yet, as with Richter's sleek and modernized Vivaldi, one can question whether this re-run of several of dance's most iconic movement repertoires is proof of a genuinely fresh outlook or simply a lazy route through well-worn paths.

By the end of the hour, movements repeat, colours reappear, and bodies circle back to their initial state. The dancer once again lies on the floor, breathing heavily in silence. In this circle of life, death and birth mirror each other. What persists is the changing of the seasons, carried again and again by bodies that must continuously recalibrate themselves.