

Two's company

Composer Roxanna Panufnik has been globetrotting from the safety of a shed at the end of the garden, and the result is four short concertos for Tasmin Little. Jessica Duchon reports

Globalisation has an upside or two where new music is concerned. When Vivaldi composed his cycle of four violin concertos *The Four Seasons* in 1723, he does not seem to have looked much beyond the sounds, climate and atmosphere of northern Italy for inspiration. Even Piazzolla, creating his *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*, chose his native Argentina and its sultry tango to reflect the progressing year. It's a long way, though, from Venice or Buenos Aires to the studio at the bottom of a suburban south-west London garden in Barnes where the composer Roxanna Panufnik has been busy finishing a new seasonal adventure of her own.

Her *Four World Seasons*, created for the violinist Tasmin Little over the past four years, is to receive its first complete performances in March at The Anvil, Basingstoke, and Fairfield Halls, Croydon, where the London Mozart Players' concert will be a vital part of the venue's 50th birthday celebrations.

The work has very little to do with Barnes, and everything to do with Panufnik's fascination for far-flung locations and their traditional music. Mingling her distinctive harmonic style with the characteristic rhythms and melodies that her research has brought her way – aided and abetted by some friendly ethnomusicologists from SOAS – she has created a suite in which each movement depicts a different season in a land that might be strongly associated with it in the public imagination.

The word 'might' is there for a reason: while the idea of *Spring in Japan* conjures up the cherry blossoms for which the country is famous, and *Tibetan Winter* would naturally be glacial and snowy, the work has a surprise Balkan twist with *Autumn in Albania*. And *Indian Summer* is a double play on words, taking the term literally.

Two extraordinary women; one dazzling, colourful new piece of music. Panufnik, daughter of the composer Andrzej Panufnik, is enjoying a flourishing career with commissions in the diary for several years ahead; Little won

a Classic Brit Award last year for her recording of the Elgar violin concerto and is heavily involved in the current Delius anniversary celebrations. They have worked out an excellent *modus vivendi* for their ongoing collaboration. 'It's as if I'm the mummy and you're the daddy,' Panufnik jokes with Little over tea in the composition shed. 'The "mummy" is mostly involved in the gestation and the birthing of the music and the "daddy" is involved in bringing it up and moulding it.'

Little had asked Panufnik to consider writing some pieces for her to perform with the Orchestra of the Swan while she was artistic director of its Spring Sounds Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon; Panufnik in turn mentioned that she was working on some choral pieces based on the seasons. The result: a 'eureka' moment. Little had considered pairing up the Vivaldi and Piazzolla Seasons and realised that a new work with a new vision of the topic could complete a whole programme on the same theme.

'Vivaldi's ghost was very much there in the genesis of the idea,' says Little. 'I wanted a whole programme of seasons, but stylistically contrasting ones. I think that for an audience that could be fascinating; it would give them a feast of different music.'

Why these four countries? There's a big choice, but for Panufnik, a self-confessed world music junkie, the more exotic and wider ranging the better. 'Japan is an obvious one for spring, with its cherry blossom and the song of the Japanese bush warbler,' she affirms. 'Then, when someone made a joke about Indian summer, because it's really autumn – I thought: well, why not? I love India – and summer is a time of riotous colour, warmth and heat.'

Tibetan Winter I chose partly because you do imagine Tibet as a snowy land of mountains – but the clinching thing was that I heard a recording of a nomad from eastern Tibet singing a love song and adored it.

'Autumn was tricky, because the obvious one would be New England – but I was terrified of coming over all Coplandy!' She listened to a range of music from across the Middle East and Afghanistan before a Kosovan friend lent her a CD of an Albanian folk violinist and she knew that her autumn had found her.

Autumn in Albania was the last to be completed. Little says that she has had slightly more involvement in this movement's format and style, partly thanks to the drawn-out nature of the whole work's creation. 'I felt that we needed some lively music for autumn so that it wouldn't be an autumnal love song followed by a slow *Tibetan Winter*,' she says. She suggested a dance, 'something fast that could then go into a love song which leads beautifully into the next movement. By then we were three-quarters of the way through the cycle and from a performer's point of view I'm very aware of how the total shape of the piece can affect people's enjoyment of it. When you plan a meal you need a variety of textures and contrasts so that it's satisfying and balanced, and I felt that some punchy, exciting music at that point would be absolutely ideal.'

'It's important to have that input,' Panufnik adds, 'because Tasmin is up there playing and I'm here in my shed at the end of the garden. It's very useful to have an overview of the whole thing in terms of dramatic pace. With new music you've got to work extra hard to keep people engaged with it and to keep them *wanting* to

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be engaged with it. A lot of new music at the moment is slow, especially the more spiritual music, which is beautiful and has its place. But when it comes to violin and orchestra, you want to show the incredible versatility and extremes of the instrument and what it can do.'

It is a dramatic, almost theatrical piece, she adds, much inspired by Little's playing: 'When I watch Tasmin performing other music, there's a lot of intense emotion and drama that goes into it. Thanks to loads of discussion about it, her feelings and her desires for the piece are very much there – and I even see her facial expressions while I'm writing. It's been great to have an ongoing dialogue throughout.'

Little agrees: 'In addition to plenty of energetic music, she's given me long lines where my sound is the focus. I'm soaring over the top of the orchestra and I think she has brought out my innate desire to make the violin sing in addition to making it the exciting, virtuosic instrument that it is. Often there's a lot of activity in the orchestra below, while I've got a ringing,

singing line right up at the top.'

She gave the world premiere of the first piece, *Spring in Japan*, four years ago; since then the suite has been building up movement by movement. But the first complete performance should cast new light on the music and Panufnik does not doubt that it will give her a fresh perspective on her own work. 'I never produce a finished score until after the premiere,' she says. 'You never quite know what the problems are going to be until it comes to life in performance.'

'Pieces develop while they're being played,' Little says. It has always been that way: 'Take Sibelius. That's an extreme example, but after the first performance of his violin concerto he massively changed it. Britten also changed his violin concerto substantially at that stage. The whole point is that the premiere is amazingly exciting, but it's like giving birth because this isn't the end of the story. This child will change and be changed as well.'

Panufnik is currently associate composer of the London Mozart Players, which proved

fortuitous when Little's diary turned out to be incompatible with the original commissioner of the first pieces, the Orchestra of the Swan. 'It was great that it turned out the LMP was in a position to commission *Autumn in Albania* and give the premiere of the whole suite,' says Panufnik.

The first performance will be in Basingstoke, broadcast live by Radio 3 as part of the Music Nation weekend, with a repeat the next night in Croydon. And the Fairfield Halls, perhaps in party mood for its big anniversary, is going well beyond the call of duty in adopting the spirit of the work. 'Apparently they are planning to serve Albanian and Indian food in their Brasserie that night,' Panufnik declares. 'I can't wait!'

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Roxanna Panufnik's Four World Seasons is performed by Tasmin Little and the London Mozart Players conducted by Gérard Korsten at The Arvil, Basingstoke, on 2 March and the Fairfield Halls, Croydon, on 3 March. More details and booking: www.lmp.org

