

AARON GRAD

Strange Seasons (2017)

My obsession with the theorbo began in 2002, at a production of Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Coming from a background as a jazz guitarist, I knew next to nothing about early music, but I drooled over that deeply resonant lute with the ungainly neck poking out of the orchestra pit. I recognized the theorbo as the ideal vehicle for accompanying singers, a form of music-making that transcends any time period or genre, and one that has always been close to my heart.

A decade later, not long after I moved to Seattle, I began a quixotic undertaking: to design and build an electric theorbo that would combine the best of the original instrument (including the tuning of its fourteen strings) with the sonic palette and versatility of the electric guitar. At that time I also composed *Old-Fashioned Love Songs*, an evening-length song cycle with countertenor that I performed in 2014.

In that debut project, the electric theorbo acted as a colorful accompanist, in the spirit of a true theorbo. As I began plotting another major composition, I tacked the other direction and thought about how to *defy* the theorbo's traditional role, taking full advantage of the electromagnetic pickups routed through tone-altering effects pedals and punchy amplification. It struck me that I should write a concerto—the ultimate showcase for star power—and I realized that I could make the spotlight even brighter by handing off my instrument to a world-class virtuoso: Seattle's own John Lenti, my friend and theorbo idol.

Taking a page from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, I wrote descriptive sonnets that would shape the musical flow of my four movements. I even consulted with longtime TV meteorologist Jeff Renner to give my impressions of Seattle weather a scientific grounding. The result is *Strange Seasons*, the first-ever concerto for electric theorbo and a love letter to my adopted home city.

The cycle begins in autumn with *Pineapple Express*, representing that fearsome type of storm that blows in from Hawaii to shatter the calm of late summer. Winter brings the persistent feeling of *Gray, Gray, Gray, Emerald Blues*, punctuated by a sense of restless agitation and the need for escape. Spring is a study of rapid change, centering on the *Sun Breaks* that pierce through fast-moving clouds. Summer is pure *Paradise*, a time for outdoor adventures, lively city streets, and the benevolent glow of Mount Rainier in the distance.

I am deeply grateful to Alex Weimann and Gus Denhard for taking a chance on this dream project, and I am honored to become the first living composer to be premiered by the Seattle Baroque Orchestra. I must also thank John Lenti and Linda Melsted for their invaluable input and artistry. *Strange Seasons* is dedicated to my wife, Jen, and to our son, who is due to make his own world premiere two weeks before this concerto.

-Aaron Grad

--

Aaron Grad (b. 1980) merges his rock and jazz roots with his classical training to create music that *The Washington Post* has described as “inventive and notably attractive.” A native of Alexandria, Virginia, Aaron holds a bachelor’s degree in jazz guitar from New York University and a master’s degree in composition from the Peabody Conservatory, where he studied with Christopher Theofanidis. He has performed many of his own major works, including *The Father Book* for guitar and electronics and *Old-Fashioned Love Songs* for electric theorbo and countertenor. He is also active as an arranger, with performances by the San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra and North Carolina Symphony. Alongside his own musical activities, Aaron channels his enthusiasm for audience outreach into the program notes he writes for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, New World Symphony, Seattle Symphony and many other ensembles. He lives in the Madrona neighborhood of Seattle with his wife, Jen, and their stumpy-tailed cat, Codetta.

--

STRANGE SEASONS

Words and music by Aaron Grad

Autumn: Pineapple Express

At first, when Autumn enters, all is calm.
The skies above Seattle sparkle blue;
The slanting sun extends the summer’s balm.
But west, the coy Pacific stirs anew,
Where breezes rake the warm Hawaiian sands—
A tropical commotion set aquiver.
Amassing strength, the unrelenting bands
Of moisture feed an atmospheric river
That surges toward the maritime northwest.
It greets the solid ground with lashing rains
And howling winds: a Pineapple Express!
The deluge fades to showers. What remains
Are swollen streams, and toppled trees, and dread:
The sun is gone, and dark days lie ahead.

Winter: Gray, Gray, Gray, Emerald Blues

Entombed in lightless days, all damp and dull,
Our winter sights turn ghoulish green. The ferns

And conifers and moss and algae color
Every view, and so Seattle earns
Its name: the Emerald City. Nerves get frayed,
Corroded, driving desperate souls to seek
Relief—perhaps a day in the Cascades,
To touch the snow that crowns the mountain peaks,
A cleansing white to flush our addled minds!
For if we stay unmoving, we ourselves
Could end up crusted in that verdant slime.
The days are short, the sun is overwhelmed.
Where are you, Spring? Come soon, and help us lose
These Gray, Gray, Gray, Emerald Blues.

Spring: Sun Breaks

Through roiled, wind-whipped clouds, a golden ray
Illuminates a needle-swath of sky,
Until the seam reseals and drifts away.
And so arrives flirtatious Spring. She hides
Behind a modest shroud, but brisk winds open
Gaps of naked, brilliant blue. Each one makes
Buds and blossoms bold: to stretch, to hope,
To revel in those momentary Sun Breaks!
They pass too soon, replaced by spotty showers
And that thick Seattle gloom. So fickle
Are the days—now dark, now clear—each hour
Some surprise, as heavens wheeze and trickle.
The angled sunlight slices through a squall!
A rainbow arcs! Sweet Spring indulges all.

Summer: Paradise

When sunshine lingers late into the night,
And picture-perfect views redecorate
The cityscape, and waterways invite
The salmon home, and every newborn day
Awakes with boundless possibility,
Then summer has arrived! Let it entice
A world of visitors who come to see
Seattle manifest as Paradise—
There are enough secluded trails to climb
And lakeside waves to splash and fish to toss
And ships to cruise and coffee beans to grind!
The Mountain greets us, glowing white, embossed

With glaciers born in seasons long since passed.
Thus time beats on—so precious, and so fast.

© 2017 Aaron Grad.