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Philip Glass modernizes Vivaldi classic

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The people who don't like Philip Glass' distinctive brand of minimalist music — and there is a significant contingent of them — are probably not going to be swayed. But for the rest of us, the opportunity Thursday evening to hear the American premiere of one of the famed composer's latest creations at the Aspen Music Festival was a thrill.

Indeed, these kinds of nights are the reason people come to this prestigious festival — to be in an overflowing hall, feeling the electricity in the air and sharing the excitement of experiencing a new, major work.

The center of attention was Glass' Violin Concerto No. 2, "American Four Seasons," an auspiciously titled work that was commissioned by a consortium of musical organizations, including the Aspen festival.

Obviously inspired by Vivaldi's famous set of concertos "The Four Seasons," it is scored for a baroque-sized chamber orchestra, with an electronic synthesizer in place of the traditional harpsichord, and includes a few musical allusions to the earlier work.

It is important, though, not to get too carried away with comparisons between the two pieces. This new concerto is very much its own work — decidedly contemporary and composed within the well-known Glass aesthetic.

But this is not simply the latest work to roll off the Glass assembly line, the composer knocking off himself, as some critics have alleged.

Yes, he does employ his familiar motifs — iterative, largely unchanging melodic motifs, oscillating bass lines. But this is the achievement of a mature composer, who has judiciously drawn on his standard musical vocabulary, and, at the same time, transcended it, creating a work of broader compositional and emotional complexity.

At the hub of the concerto was violinist Robert McDuffie, who persuaded Glass to compose it and is clearly committed to the result. He performed with extraordinary ease and elan and inspired fervid, polished playing from the mostly student orchestra.

The work was greeted with a sustained standing ovation, and McDuffie and the orchestra responded with a section of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons."

The concert's first half consisted of works for duo violin, which, while handsomely realized, seemed oddly disconnected with the concerto.