

# A Note from Sarah Ruhl



*"It's that the world was failing at its one task — remaining a world. Pieces were breaking off. Seasons had become postmodern. We no longer knew where in the calendar we were by the weather... the ice cubes were melting... New things to die of were being added each day. We were angry all the time."*

— Sheila Heti,  
*Pure Colour: A Novel*

*"If grief can be a doorway to love, then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again."*

— Robin Wall Kimmerer,  
*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*

*"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeating refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."*

— Rachel Carson

*"Both fire scientists and firefighters have suggested dropping the word season; the threat, they say, is year-round..."*

— David Wallace-Wells,  
author of *The Uninhabitable Earth*

As we sit in rehearsals in New York City for this opera, the world burns: this is the third day of the wildfires in Los Angeles, creating historical, unfathomable loss. By day, the creative team listens to arias; by night, we check on loved ones and friends who are now — very suddenly — without houses, and who have become (what may have seemed like an abstract term a mere year ago): "climate refugees." This is our new normal.

On one hand, I don't have to remind anyone that the weather is getting more extreme as a result of concrete human policies; we experience these changes on almost a daily basis. On the other hand, I find that we are often numb to these changes: either they feel far away and televised, or they feel so close to home that we are in shock, in survival mode. So for many, it is hard to *feel* anything about the changing weather besides uneasy dread.

Facing a burning world is so disturbing that people often dissociate, trying not to *feel* anything about the earth's trajectory. I wanted, with this opera, to see if audiences and collaborators could feel something about our changing weather, in an artistic space. Music opens us emotionally, and the familiarity of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* reminds me that the seasons themselves used to feel achingly familiar. By contrast, every year the seasons seem to get *less* familiar.



When I was little, I grew up listening to *The Four Seasons* on a cassette tape during long car trips with my family, looking out from the backseat window at the leaves, or the snow. I imagined the drama of the weather; or I saw it, looking out of the car window at a winter storm, often driving from Chicago to Iowa. When I grew up, I learned that Antonio Vivaldi, the "Red Priest," wrote sonnets to accompany his *Four Seasons*. Each poetic line created specific imagery to go with particular moments in the concertos: birdsong, a goatherd sleeping, a drought, a rainstorm, a harvest, a hunt, a storm, a deep freeze.

When the visionary countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo approached me to work on a Baroque pastiche centering the work of Vivaldi, my first

thought was to create a piece around *The Four Seasons*, but with the seasons out of order, reflecting our contemporary situation of disordered and extreme weather. I wanted to write my own haiku to partner with the music, a tribute to Vivaldi's impulses to pair his music with poetry.

During the pandemic, when theaters were shut down, nature became my theater. I wrote one haiku a day to mark the transformations outside my window. I started as a poet, but became a playwright in my twenties; for two decades, I was in the theater almost constantly, working as a playwright indoors, often in the dark. During the quiet of the pandemic, like many other people, I noticed birdsong as if for the first time. Observing the incremental seasonal changes in the natural world became my preoccupation; marking these momentary transformations with haiku became my practice. After the quarantine ended, I felt irresponsible *not* writing about the changes in the weather that were all around me.

As I worked on this libretto, I wondered what Vivaldi might have to teach us about the seasons and harmony, or about the seasons and disharmony. In the Baroque period, the natural world reflected an order in the cosmos, a sort of divine mirror. To me, Vivaldi's music feels oddly Taoist — a celebration of change as the only constant. When I did a deep dive into Vivaldi, it was a revelation to discover that he wove many of the melodies from *The Four Seasons* into other arias and choral pieces. You can clearly hear a melody from the "Winter" movement in *Tito Manlio's* "Se il cor guerriero"; you can hear the "Spring" melodies in the choral piece *Dell'aura al sussurrar*. I also found, to my delight, that his operatic characters often sang about the weather — less about the weather *outside* of them, and more about the weather *inside* of them, as in the aria "Sento in seno," in which the singer "rains tears." I started to think about how artists often feel their own internal emotional weather deeply, and less deeply about the weather *outside* of them.

A note on love in this piece; these characters fall in love quickly, almost in the Greek vernacular of Cupid's arrow piercing the heart suddenly and immediately — just as the weather changes quickly around them. I thought, too, of Shakespeare's romances and the Ovidian speed of love and transformation. We often feel we cannot control love, just as we cannot control the weather. And



even as larger political and existential questions loom, human beings still find a way to love, and to obsess about the romance that is right in front of them. Just as the weather is fluid, so too is sexuality somewhat fluid in this piece; one countertenor role (*The Choreographer*) is played by a mezzo-soprano in this version, without any change to the story. In opera, "pants roles" (women playing men's roles) were common — often a contralto playing the role of an adolescent man. In this piece, the gender of any character can all be changed without a problem, as long as each voice suits the vocal demands of its role. I am passionate about putting love stories onstage that don't make a big deal of which gender loves which gender — in other words, stories in which gender is not the focal point of love.

There is plenty I don't know about opera, having been trained as a playwright and poet who can read music (but plays piano not very well at all). As such, I learned a great deal every day I worked on this piece — and I recommend learning something new the older you get. I learned beautiful and useful words like *melisma*, and I learned about the surprising relationship between improvisational jazz and the freedom with which Baroque singers can ornament their *da capo* sections.

When the brilliant director Zack Winokur came aboard, we started to create a world where dance, poetry, and song could come together to create story in innovative ways. I was interested in how the text for the arias could swing back and forth

between English and Italian, between pure passion (the original Italian) and a sort of close-up on the *da capo* sections (new English translations). My hope was to create room in these juxtapositions, towards which the audience could lean forward to hear in new ways. And I started to hope for an adjustment, for people who make art and people who appreciate art, to start to feel something – really feel something — about the weather outside them, which urgently demands their attention.

I began this piece before I actually saw a weatherman, while he reported on the most recent devastating hurricane in Florida, crying on the news. I started writing it before seeing one weatherman in Iowa quit because he got death threats for mentioning climate change on the air. My inspiration for the character of “The Cosmic Weatherman” was my feeling that we long for godlike omniscience from our weather reporters, when all they can do these days is helplessly report on extreme weather.

It seemed important in a piece about climate change to create a set with the smallest possible carbon footprint, and our brilliant scenic designer Mimi Lien has done just that. Lien and Jack Forman (from the MIT Media Lab) have synthesized unprecedented technology for us to use as theatrical weather — snow that flies upward, mountains of snow that can disappear — using nothing more than soap! Yesterday, one of the singers in the piece, Alexis Peart, remarked that making ancient songs new, and bringing Vivaldi into the present moment, is in itself a kind of recycling.

As our team collaborated, we sought the advice of climate justice activists, who emphasized two points: 1) the important role of storytelling in melting our numbness and 2) the fact that so many of the solutions to climate change are already here, and have been here for a long time; the world just need the political will to change the course of history and move away from its dependence on fossil fuels.



When I was in fourth grade, we studied land masses. I took it upon myself to write a play, my first full-length: a courtroom drama about an isthmus. All the land masses spoke — islands, archipelagos, mountains. The dispute between land masses got heated. And the sun had to come down and settle things in a *deus ex machina*.

I still have the land mass play, handwritten in a flowered binder. It began like this:

*SKY: I watch the earth from above.*

*WATER: I watch the earth while traveling.*

*LAND: I watch the earth on a level.*

*SKY: As I watch there has been a shortage in the water system.*

*LAND: That is very true. The tributary has stopped functioning and there has been confusion ever since.*

This would have been 1985, before discussions about climate change had entered elementary schools. I'm not sure what possessed me. I gave my teacher, Mr. Spangenberg, the play, hopeful that he would produce it in the auditorium. He said no, and it remains my very first unproduced play. Yet, here I am now, writing an opera not with talking land masses but where people dance the weather.

Working with iconic choreographer Pan Tanowitz has been a revelation: she finds ways for her dancers to *dance the weather* and also *the feeling of weather*; to express the Baroque inside our strange contemporary moment. John Cage once said of collaboration in an interview with Merce Cunningham: “It’s less like an object and more like the weather. Because in an object, you can tell where the boundaries are. But in the weather, it’s impossible to say when something begins or ends. We hope that the weather will continue. And we trust that our way of relating dance and music will also continue.”

I echo Cage in this fervent hope — that the weather will continue — and that “our way of relating dance and music will also continue.” There is almost no limit to what we can do with our bodies and our voices without imperiling our ecosystem. We can sing and dance our way forward into joy. I have learned from activist friends in the environmental space that hope is a precondition for action. Let this be a ritual of hope that binds the performers and the audience together. To quote Vivaldi’s choral work *Gloria*:

*Et in terra pax hominibus*  
And on earth,  
Let peace be unto us

– Sarah Ruhl