November Program Note

Johann Sebastian Bach has long been regarded as the foundational figure on which all Western art music of the so-called “common practice period” has stood. All of the great composers from this massive period (1700–1900) have seen Bach as this type of epic cornerstone, and indeed, his life’s work does provide an encyclopedic lexicon of compositional praxis, defining and illustrating a sophisticated mastery of “tonality,” the underlying presupposition for Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner.

Although Bach’s work has always been lauded as the epitome of contrapuntal technique, the reception of Bach and his work has followed a rather bizarre trajectory: from relative obscurity in the years following his death, to the underground appreciation of his keyboard works during the classical period by Baron van Swieten, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven; the impressive public re-introduction of the St. Matthew Passion by a young Felix Mendelssohn in 1827, and Bach’s subsequent coronation as a romantic hero-like figure in the 19th century – and as the Godfather of an ethically “pure” music as defined by Schoenberg and his disciples within the Second Viennese School of the early 20th century.

When the musicologists got hold of him in the mid-20th century, his work was seen as the objective output of a mathematical genius, and sophisticated studies of Bach’s unconscious neurological patterns and intentional numerological design were the accepted analytical methodology. By the late ’60s and ’70s, the mainstream academic appreciation of his music mirrored the anti-ecclesiastical thrust of the then current philosophical thought, and thus Bach’s music was objectively consumed, thoroughly divorced from its theological and liturgical underpinnings. Indeed, poor Bach was pitied for his seemingly imprisoned, cloistered existence and as a grudgingly accepting servant of the Lutheran church.

Still today, in the modern academy, Bach’s expert voice leading – as evidenced in his four-part harmonizations of the chorales; his use of invertible counterpoint in the relatively simple two-part inventions; and the epic collection of preludes and fugues written in every key (Das Wohltemperierte Klavier or The Well-Tempered Clavier) form the basis of any music undergraduate’s six-semester sequence of music theory. These studies are mathematical in nature, and are not unlike the problem sets of an engineering student at a technological
institution. Thus, most musicians have had it drummed into their minds that Bach is the beginning of musical science, and that the trajectory of the development of the bread and butter of the concert repertoire begins with Bach, and specifically Bach’s “discovery” of equal temperament, and his mastery and invention of a hierarchically based tonal system.

From the modern performer’s perspective, Bach’s solo suites provide the young string player a requirement for dry technical mastery (albeit with full and constant vibrato) before moving on to the concerto repertoire of Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Sibelius. And the pianist-in-training gains the ability to realize multiple independent parts by practicing the 3-part Inventions, the Preludes and Fugues and, for fun, perhaps the Italian Concerto. Generally, Bach is still passed down as the old stern schoolmaster – the unreachable inaugurator of all things good and pure in music composition and basic instrumental technique in the Western art tradition.

In the late 20th-century, there arose a new paradigm surrounding the work of J. S. Bach which attempted to cast new light on the context of his output, instrumental and vocal. Several watershed 20th century events, specific to Bach, occurred within the greater movement for the quest of historical authenticity specific to the performance practice of “early” music. Bach, in light of these recent discoveries, moves from the throne of the great “inaugurator” to that of the master “culminator.”

In brief, Bach’s own annotated Calov edition of the Bible (although discovered in 1934) became known in Bach circles following World War II. The resulting studies illuminated that Bach was indeed theologically savvy and that his compositional choices were intentionally focused on a sophisticated understanding of hermeneutics and liturgy. All of the musico-rhetorical devices of the late 17th and early 18th century were then put to use in order to interpret the text in exactly the same manner that a preacher would utilize traditional rhetoric to persuade. Thus, motivic shapes bearing specific emotional affect would combine with meaning-laden choices of key, time signature, instrumentation, voice part, number of parts and references to pre-existing tunes (both secular and sacred) to create musical essays rich in text painting, emotionality, and a clear theological message.

Joshua Rifkin, through an intensive analysis of Bach’s original performance materials, came to the practical realization that the majority of Bach’s vocal works were intended to be performed
primarily with one singer to a part, completely turning the concept of massed choral realizations of Bach’s major works on its head. Thus the performance ideal for his vocal music is subjectively based and emotionally rich – the opposite of traditional objective, Apollonian renderings of his music by large choral societies.

And, perhaps most fascinating from a performer’s point of view – Bradley Lehman’s recent deciphering of the “squiggle” on the original cover of Das Wohltemperierte Klavier provided the solution to Bach’s handling of the tuning “wolf” or “comma” that exists in pure tuning systems, thus debunking the myth that Bach created “equal” temperament. Bach’s tuning system, although individual and specific to Bach, was no different in methodology than all of his colleagues and predecessors, all of whom were collectively attempting to provide a solution to a fully useable 12-note keyboard that could realize the entire circle of fifths (for more on this subject see “Bach’s temperament, Occam’s razor, and the Neidhardt factor” by John O’Donnell). What this means is that all of Bach’s key choices are based in an old-fashioned sense of rhetorical tuning and key association. B minor “sounds” serious and studied, while D major reflects jubilation and victory, E flat represents the Trinity, F major represents the Pastoral, and so on.

So in the early 21st-century, when presenting J. S. Bach’s sacred and secular music – we enter this arena with a collective pre-disposition to realize these works within theological surroundings, with an awareness of the performance practice of Bach’s time, and shedding the previously accepted Apollonian shroud of objective recreation by intentionally interpreting and emotionally realizing the Dionysian, pietistic, and eschatological dangers that lurk within this body of repertoire.

Into this realm we place three stunning examples for our program today, the Sinfonia from Cantata No. 42, the Brandenburg Concerto No. 1, and the stunning solo alto cantata BWV170 “Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust.”

Composed for “Quasimodogeniti,” the Sunday after Easter, Cantata No. 42 is a work of monumental proportions from which the opening Sinfonia has become widely known for its forward thinking writing for solo bassoon, in a trio texture with two competing solo oboes. This first Sunday after Easter remains to the current day “Low Sunday” traditionally known for its suddenly absent congregation. But in 1720s Leipzig the Easter season immediately conjures up
the “eschatological” – the dealing with the time period *after* time. In this stunning *Sinfonia* Bach recaps the events of Easter, and although it is possible that this music originated in a now lost *Concerto Grosso*, it is clear that Bach places this music here to spring the Easter story forward. Bach scholar Craig Smith suggests “as one progresses through the movement one senses that the obbligato oboes and bassoon represent the two Marys and Jesus on Easter morning.” Indeed this writing is exciting and wonderful, but also incredibly human in manner in which these expressive wind instruments relate to each other. The choice of the bassoon for such a possibly important “Jesus”-like statement is striking, as the bassoon was traditionally the kicking boy of the Baroque orchestra. That Bach himself was disciplined for a youthful insult towards a fellow student in calling a colleague a “nanny-goat bassoonist” underlines the dramatic and surprising choice for this Easter season cantata. As we will see in Brandenburg I, Bach’s manipulation of orchestral hierarchy for theological gains is present even in this seemingly simple instrumental Sinfonia.

Cantata No. 170, “Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust” (“Delightful rest, beloved pleasure of the soul”) for solo alto, obbligato organ, oboe d’amore and strings is a model of Bachian symmetry and clarity with its three differentiated arias wrapping around two rather intense recitatives. The work recalls several textures from Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, with the opening aria bearing unmistakable resemblance to “Mache dich, mein Herze, rein” and the middle movement, an aria with obbligato organ, completely lacking basso continuo is identical in affect to “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben,” the heart wrenching epicenter of the Matthew Passion for solo flute, soprano and two oboe da caccias.

As a musical sermon, Cantata No. 170 essays the issue of sin and the necessity for humankind to reject and renounce sin in order to achieve inner peace. Painting an idyllic opening statement with the lullaby quality of the first movement, the subject quickly turns to thorny issues in the following recitative and truly turns the world upside down with the continuo-less middle movement with its wild harmonic shifts. The accompanied recitative that precedes the final movement underlines the “correct” human reaction to yearn for death, and thus heaven and grace. The final movement is a triumphant statement on the redemptive power of death. Again, the “end of days” theme and 18th century Lutheran understanding of humanity’s place in history is blatantly clear. As composer John Harbison notes: “There is a sense, both musically and
spiritually, that the boundaries of time and earthly bonds are loosened.”

The six Brandenburg Concertos have held well-earned distinction as “chestnuts” of the classical repertoire. Most music lovers know the themes and tunes from these diverse works, and most would feel safe in basking in the pure beauty of the music alone. But is it possible, and, according to musicologist Michael Marissen, convincingly likely that these six works essay theologically rich material in the exact same manner that Bach applies to his explicitly liturgical output. “A lot of people think of Bach church cantatas as Brandenburg concertos with unnecessary words added to them,” says Marissen. “I took the opposite view, that the Brandenburgs are like church cantatas but without words.”

Marissen’s groundbreaking work on this subject, “The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos” postulates that the recurring theme in New Testament parables that the first shall be last and that mighty shall be brought low is the leitmotif that holds together Bach’s compositional methodology in the concerti. Particularly with reference to the specific disregard for instrumental hierarchical norms in the Baroque period, Bach writes music where “everything goes wrong.” The violin doesn’t get the solo in the ritornello, the trumpet must match the recorder, the lowly functional continuo keyboardist becomes a virtuoso soloist, the “royal” viola da gambist must play second fiddle to the violas; or in the case of the first Brandenburg the hunting horns wreak havoc on what would otherwise be a respectable court ensemble. In a recent interview, Professor Marissen, unusually colloquial, suggests, “the formal stuff is all turned upside down, the most extreme abuse of instruments takes place there, it has old-fashioned and new-fashioned, it has dance, it has so-called abstract music. Everything but the kitchen sink is in there. It’s just totally wild!” Famously known for attempting to take the familiar and make it unfamiliar again, Marissen’s stance on these well-worn works has impacted historically informed interpretations of them, with musicians now removing many “softenings” of textures and other “corrections” to the original source material that has occurred throughout the works’ history. If you hear the “rustic” in this performance, we may have achieved our goals!

It is appropriate on this “mostly” Bach program to feature two other giants of the Baroque: Bach’s friend and admirer Georg Philipp Telemann, (no stranger to Leipzig-style Lutheranism and godfather to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach), and Telemann’s close friend George Frideric
Handel. And it is striking to juxtapose Handel’s clearly Dionysian operatic style side by side with Bach’s theological essays for what is, today, an identical voice part. But perhaps nothing illustrates Bach’s bizarre “anti-conformist” writing in his Brandenburg Concerto than presenting it with what could arguably be the model against which Bach’s work seemed so odd to Marissen: the beautifully arranged and symmetrically refined concerto for two horns, oboe, solo violin and strings by Telemann. As most of Telemann’s Tafelmusik collection displays, this is music of order, beauty, and sophistication. There is no agenda other than the aesthetic. Great music it is, and wonderful to behold, perform and study – but all is in its proper place.

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