

Mallarmé Chamber Players and The Choral Society of Durham present
HISTORICAL BACH REDUX, Sunday February 5, 2012 3 pm

PROGRAM:

J. S. Bach: Harpsichord Concerto No. 5 in F Minor, BWV 1056

Cantata No. 131 *Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major, BWV 1046

Cantata No. 79 *Gott der Herr, ist Sonn und Schild*

PROGRAM NOTES

Harpsichord Concerto No. 5 in F Minor From 1723 until his death, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) served as “Director of the Choir and Music in Leipzig,” responsible for music at the city’s four main Lutheran churches. In 1729, he became director of Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum, an organization of university students and professional musicians founded in 1701 by Georg Philipp Telemann. The Collegium presented frequent public concerts featuring new works by leading composers and its own members, thus providing a showcase for Bach’s secular compositions, such as secular cantatas, orchestral suites, and concertos. In 1738, Bach made fair copies of the scores and parts for a set of six harpsichord concertos (BWV 1052–1057) for performance by the Collegium. He or one of his sons would have performed as harpsichord soloist.

All six of these concertos, scored for harpsichord and strings, are believed to be arrangements of earlier works for other instruments. Although most of the earlier works are lost, study of the figuration in the harpsichord parts suggests that the solo parts were originally for violin or oboe. The outer movements of the Concerto in F Minor, BWV 1056, evidently were borrowed from a lost violin concerto in G minor. The middle movement was thought to be based on the opening sinfonia of Cantata No. 156 (*Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe*), but musicologists Steven Zohn and Ian Payne have made a convincing case that Bach originally borrowed the theme from the first movement of Telemann’s Concerto in G Major for flute or oboe (which has recently been reconstructed from a heavily damaged score). Borrowing was a common practice of Baroque composers; Zohn and Payne consider this instance of “transformative imitation” to have been intended as a tribute.

The concerto’s outer movements are in *ritornello* form, in which a recurring theme played *tutti* alternates with solo sections. The opening movement (unmarked, but interpreted as *allegro moderato*) is intense and energetic, characterized by syncopation and a recurring triplet figure, which is elaborated upon by the soloist. The central *Largo*, in the relative major key, is essentially an aria for the right hand, accompanied by pizzicato strings and steady eighth notes in the left hand. In adapting the sustained woodwind solo line for the plucked harpsichord, Bach embellished the melody considerably. The vigorous closing *Presto* opens with a 24-bar *ritornello* (featuring an echo effect, as in the first movement), whose ideas are then developed by the harpsichord. The *ritornello* returns only in fragmentary form, providing rhythmic dialogue or contrast with the solo part, until its full restatement at the close of the work.

Cantata No. 131 is the earliest work on today's program, dating from Bach's brief tenure as church organist and city music director at Mühlhausen (1707–08). Mühlhausen was devastated by a fire in May 1707, shortly before Bach arrived, and the cantata may have been composed for a commemorative service of penitence. It was written at the request of Bach's close friend Georg Christian Eilmar, pastor of the Marienkirche in Mühlhausen. Eilmar may have chosen the text, which consists of Psalm 130 in its entirety and verses 2 and 5 of the chorale "*Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut*" ("Lord Jesus Christ, You Highest Good"). The psalm text, while penitential, is above all an expression of hope.

The cantata, in G minor, is scored for tenor and bass soloists, chorus, oboe, violin, two violas, cello and keyboard continuo, and a bassoon, which generally doubles the continuo. The form is symmetrical, with three fugal choruses separated by two solos, each of which uses a chorale verse as a *cantus firmus* background. In the first movement, a somber *Adagio* on the psalm text "*Aus der Tiefen rufe ich, Herr, zu dir*" ("Out of the depths I cry, Lord, to you") is followed by a fugal *Vivace* section at the text "*Herr, höre meine Stimme*" ("Lord, hear my voice"). The text setting is mostly syllabic, except for the key word "*Flehens*" ("pleading"), which is extended and broken up. Following without pause is an arioso for the bass soloist, who continues with the psalm text while the chorus sopranos sing a verse of the chorale. An oboe obbligato follows the contours of the solo line, in which the words "*bestehen*" ("withstand") and "*fürchte*" ("fear") are emphasized, the latter with particularly tortuous melisma.

The cantata's central chorus opens with a firm threefold declaration of hope, "*Ich harre des Herrn*" ("I wait for the Lord"). Following this brief introduction is a fugue on the text "*meine Seele harret, und ich hoffe auf sein Wort*" ("my soul waits, and I hope in his word"). On the drawn-out word "*harret*" ("waits"), Bach's use of suspensions to create dissonance conveys a palpable sense of yearning. In contrast with the slow-moving text setting, oboe and violin obbligatos provide a background texture of sixteenth notes. The chorus closes with a brief *Adagio* section. The lilting tenor aria that follows is the cantata's longest movement, continuing the theme of the soul's waiting (and waiting...) for the Lord. To a graceful continuo accompaniment, the soloist sings two more lines of the psalm, emphasizing the word "*wartet*" ("waits"), while the chorus altos sing another verse of the chorale. Like the second chorus, the final chorus opens with three strong chordal statements, calling upon Israel. Each of the next three psalm phrases receives its own distinct musical treatment, in an *allegro – adagio – allegro* pattern, leading up to a fugue on the text "*Und er wird Israel erlösen aus allen seinen Sünden*" ("And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins"). The long sixteenth-note melisma on the word *erlösen* ("redeem") in the main fugue subject contrasts with the countersubject's rising chromatic scale on "*aus allen seinen Sünden*" ("from all his sins"). The cantata closes with a brief *adagio* restatement of the final phrase, concluding on a hopeful G-major chord.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major Before taking his post in Leipzig, Bach was employed from 1717 to 1723 as kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. In 1719, while on a trip to Berlin to purchase a harpsichord for the prince, Bach met Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg-Schwedt, a prince of the Prussian royal house. An enthusiastic patron of music, the Margrave was impressed with Bach, who

promised to send him some of his compositions. Although Bach's situation in Cöthen was at first satisfactory, events led him to start seeking new employment as early as 1720. In March 1721, he made fair copies of six instrumental works and sent them to the Margrave with a flowery dedication, in the hope of gaining his patronage. There is no evidence that Margrave acknowledged their receipt or ever had them performed. In any event, the beautifully copied and bound manuscript languished in various libraries until 1849, when it was rediscovered by Siegfried Dehn, a music theorist and custodian of the Prussian Royal Library. The works now known as the Brandenburg Concertos were first published in 1850, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Bach's death.

Although Bach collected the works under the title "*Six Concerts Avec Plusieurs Instruments*" ("Six Concertos with Several [or Diverse] Instruments"), they were not composed as a set and have little in common beyond the description supplied by the composer. Concerto No. 1 in F, BWV 1046, is scored for two hunting horns, three oboes, bassoon, *violino piccolo* (piccolo violin), two violins, viola, cello, and continuo with *violone grosso* (double bass). It is based on Bach's Sinfonia in F (BWV 1046a), which was probably composed in 1713 as part of Cantata No. 208, the "Hunt" cantata. In preparing the score for the Margrave, Bach used the sinfonia's three movements as the cantata's first, second, and fourth movements, adding the third movement, the *Polacca* section in the fourth movement, and a solo part for *violino piccolo*. The third movement may have derived from an earlier choral piece. In 1726, Bach reused the first movement in Cantata No. 52, *Falsche Welt*, and third movement and part of the fourth in Cantata No. 207a, *Auf, schmetternde Töne der muntern Trompeten*.

This concerto differs from the rest of the Brandenburgs in having four, rather than three, movements. It is not in typical *concerto grosso* form, but has been described as combining aspects of an orchestral suite (notably, its final dance movement) with those of a solo concerto — musicologist Karl Geiringer called it a "concerto symphony." The first movement is a jaunty yet suave *Allegro*, in which horn calls are prominent and the solo instruments trade phrases. The second movement is a poignant minor-key *Adagio* for solo oboe and *violino piccolo*, accompanied by the rest of the ensemble, less the horns. The movement ends eerily — a seemingly final cadence in D minor is followed by a series of dissonant harmonies leading to the dominant key of A major, an unusual way to prepare for the third movement's return to F. Running sixteenth notes in 6/8 time give the virtuosic third movement a dance-like feel, except when it is unexpectedly interrupted by a two-measure *Adagio*. The horns are again prominent, as is the solo *violino piccolo*. The final movement is a set of dances — a minuet for the full ensemble, alternating with a trio for two oboes and bassoon, a *Polacca* for strings and continuo, and an exuberant second trio for the horns and oboes.

Cantata No. 79 The bulk of Bach's cantatas date from his first five years in Leipzig, when he took on the ambitious task of creating a complete set of cantatas for each liturgical year. Cantata No. 79, in G major, was composed in 1725 for the Festival of the Reformation, commemorating the date (October 31, 1517) on which Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Bach marked the occasion with a splendid and stirring work, scored for oboes, strings, continuo, horns, and timpani, in addition to vocal soloists and chorus. The texts (a psalm verse, two chorales,

and anonymous poetry) make no reference to the prescribed Epistle or Gospel reading for the day, but express praise and allude to the Reformation through reference to God as light and protector and Jesus as his only mediator.

The familiar chorale “*Nun danket alle Gott*” (“Now Thank We All Our God”) forms the centerpiece of the cantata, appearing as the third movement, an unusual position for a chorale. The choir sings a straightforward four-part harmonization, doubled by the oboes and strings and accompanied by obbligato horns playing a fanfare-like figure, underpinned by the insistent beat of the timpani and a marching basso continuo line. Five years later, Bach used the same chorale as the basis for Cantata No. 192, again composed for the Feast of the Reformation, but quite different in character.

The first movement of the cantata begins with a long, grand instrumental *ritornello*, using the same horn and timpani parts that accompany the third-movement chorale. The opening march-like section is followed by a *fugato* for the oboes and violins on a theme that takes off from the timpani’s rhythmic pattern of repeated eighth notes. The reentry of the horns heralds the entrance of the chorus on the text of Psalm 84:11, “*Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*” (“God the Lord is sun and shield”). At the text “*Er wird kein Gutes mangeln lassen den Frommen*” (“He will allow the faithful no want of good things”), the horns drop out, and the chorus joins in development of the *fugato* theme. In the closing section of the movement, the horns return, and the chorus restates the opening text.

The image of God as sun and shield is continued in a dance-like aria for alto soloist with oboe obbligato, which provides contrast between the festive opening movement and the grand chorale setting without breaking the joyous mood. The central chorale is followed by a recitative for bass soloist and continuo asking for God’s mercy on those who have not yet seen his light. Next is a duet for soprano and bass, with violin obbligato and continuo. The two voices sing mainly in parallel, the two violins play in unison, and the minor key underscores the pleading character of the text, “*Gott, ach Gott, verlaß die Deinen nimmermehr!*” (“God, ah God, forsake your people nevermore!”). The final verse of a second chorale, “*Nun laß uns Gott dem Herren*” (“Now Let Us to God, the Lord”), accompanied again by horns and timpani, provides a closing benediction.

NOTES WRITTEN BY SUSAN DAKIN