

Tafelmusik

Bach in Leipzig

PROGRAMME NOTES

By Alison Mackay

At two o'clock in the afternoon of May 22, 1723, J.S. Bach stepped down from a horse-drawn carriage into the lively city which would become his home for the remaining 27 years of his life. He arrived in Leipzig with a blended family: four children from his first marriage to Maria Barbara Bach, who had died two years earlier; Maria Barbara's older sister, Fridelina; his second wife, Anna Magdalena, who was sixteen years his junior; and their newborn daughter, Christiana Sophia Henrietta.

The family's new residence was a comfortable multi-story apartment with heated living rooms, an office, a cellar with ample storage for beer, an indoor privy, a laundry room, and internal access to the St. Thomas Choir School where Bach soon began his duties as the newly appointed Cantor.

His responsibilities included several hours of classroom instruction in music four days a week, many private lessons, and the preparation and rehearsal of music for worship in the four principal churches of the city. In creating his own musical repertoire for Leipzig, he planned major new works for Sundays, special church holidays, and municipal celebrations – about 60 a year. By the time he had been in the city for four years, he had completed the *St. John Passion*, *St. Matthew Passion*, Magnificat, and several annual cycles of church cantatas.

The 18th-century German church cantata was a musical sermon, complementing the actual hour of preaching which was the central part of Lutheran worship. Bach's Leipzig cantatas were settings of sacred poems, biblical verses and hymn texts which reinforced the theme for the day. A complex opening chorus was usually followed by recitatives and arias featuring solo singers and virtuosic instrumental parts. The cantata normally ended with a simple four-part setting of a hymn, called a chorale.

In many ways, our concert is a celebration of Bach's love for the German chorale tunes which were his musical inheritance, and of the beauty and complexity with which he wove them into his Leipzig cantatas. The tunes were part of everyday life. They were sung in church and at home in daily family devotions, and they were played by civic musicians as watchtower music to mark the passing of the hours.

In Leipzig there was a concert of tower music every morning at 10 o'clock, which was considered the middle of the day, indeed dinner time, by a society that began work at first light. Our Leipzig day begins at this hour with a performance of "*Lobe den Herren*" as it might have been played by the municipal fiddlers and wind players from the tower of City Hall. The town employed a core group of eight salaried instrumentalists who were also available for performing in Bach's major works on a variety of occasions.

The virtuosity of several members of this ensemble, such as the oboist Johann Caspar Gleditsch and trumpeter Gottfried Reiche, must have been inspiring for Bach when he composed his more complex treatments of tunes like "*Lobe den Herren*." The other settings of the chorale in our concert – a grand chorus with trumpets and drums, a simple setting for choir and instruments, and a complex violin solo woven around the tune, which we perform instrumentally with solo oboe in the second half of the concert, are all from Cantata 137.

The use of alternating trumpets to introduce the hymn “*Valet will ich dir geben*” reflects a particular love of antiphonal music in Leipzig, where chorale tunes could be heard sounding back and forth from tower to tower across the town. The original early 17th-century version of the chorale in five voice parts by Melchior Teschner was a setting of a poem by Valerius Herberger written after a devastating epidemic of the plague. The tune will also be heard as a solo with oboe d’amore, as a wandering melody in an organ fantasia, and in a weightier choral version from the *St. John Passion*.

During the middle years of the 18th century, Leipzig was an elegant, cultured city, about the same size and population (c. 30,000) as Toronto’s Annex neighbourhood. It had a famous university from which many prominent jurists, medical doctors and theologians graduated, and Bach’s decision to settle in the city may have been influenced by academic opportunities for his growing family which he himself had missed.

By the 1730’s Leipzig had nine banks, 20 factories for textiles and tobacco, many shops selling musical instruments and books and, like our own city, many coffee shops. It was also the home of the most important trade fair in Europe, held three times a year at New Year, Easter and Michaelmas. Visitors from all over Europe made it a destination for buying and selling clothing, jewellery, furs, paper and books.

It is not surprising that such a sophisticated and cosmopolitan city was home to celebrities and distinguished visitors, and Bach composed many brilliant cantatas for celebrations in their honour. In highlighting the festive nature of these events, he often featured trumpets and drums in exuberant choral movements. Cantata 207, which borrows heavily from the First Brandenburg Concerto, was commissioned by the students of a popular young lecturer at the university, Gottlieb Korte, on the occasion of his promotion to the Professorship of Roman Law in December of 1726. The music from Cantata 30a which opens the second half of the concert was composed in honour of Johann Christian von Hennicke, a local favourite of the Saxon royal court, on the occasion of his acquisition of a manor in the nearby village of Wiederau.

The music which follows has been assembled to represent the activities of one of Bach’s most important ensembles. In late March of 1729 he became the director of the Collegium Musicum, a society of university students who were joined by municipal musicians, members of the Bach family and visiting musical friends to give regular public concerts at Zimmerman’s Coffee House. This establishment, which owned a set of instruments made available for the concerts, contained a hall big enough for a large group of performers and an audience of 150.

Bach turned his attention at this time to the composition of sonatas and other instrumental works which have been rather recklessly mined to create a new suite of movements in G Major. The resulting procession of short pieces is one which Bach would never have assembled himself, but which might have appealed to his whimsy in giving each member of the orchestra a turn in the spotlight.

The concert ends on a more reflective note as we consider the importance of the itinerant Jewish community in 18th-century Leipzig. Forbidden permanent residence in the city, Jewish merchants were encouraged to attend the trade fairs. They were charged a hefty head tax as they entered the city gates, and a higher than normal excise tax upon leaving, thus making a huge contribution to the Leipzig economy. Max Freudenthal, an early 20th-century rabbi and scholar who compiled the detailed archival tax records of all Jewish visitors to the fairs in Bach’s time, has given us a fascinating portrait of commercial travel from Constantinople, Venice and Siberia as merchants and their cooks, musicians and rabbis swelled the population of the city three times a year. The various communities established temporary prayer houses at the north end of the city, where Sabbath preparations must have included the melodies of many styles of cantillation. We are grateful to David Roth for giving us a taste of the Song of Songs as it may have been heard on the Sabbath that fell within the Festival of

Passover.

Illness and death were constant threats to all, and were particularly feared by Jews in Leipzig because they were refused Jewish burial in the town. Bach's own preoccupation with the end of life in his sacred music reflected terrible tragedies which he himself had experienced. Seventeen of his students fell ill and died while in residence at the St. Thomas School, and the baby who had come on the family journey to Leipzig in 1723 was the first of seven children Bach had to bury in the Leipzig cemetery.

The funeral motet which ends the concert exists in two versions, one for portable instruments playable outside in a funeral procession, and the one we have chosen, intended for indoor performance. As we come to the end of our progress through the "four ages" of Leipzig and consider the range of music which was created by Bach for all the arenas of his life in the city, no greater contrast could be found than that between the exuberance of the opening chorus of Cantata 137, "*Lobe den Herren*" and the serenity of this funeral motet. Yet both works are expressions of ecstasy and are illustrations of Moses Mendelssohn's beautiful words with which William Webster ends his narration: "An experience of the sublime, which comes from the work of a great genius, illuminates us, it changes us and warms us with its radiance."

The script for Bach in Leipzig includes material adapted from Johann Kuhnau The Musical Charlatan, translated by John R. Russell (Camden House, 1997) and Moses Mendelssohn Philosophical Writings, translated by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

We are grateful to Brian Stewart for making available a collection of his photographs of buildings associated with Bach's Leipzig, including the towers of the old Town Hall and St. Thomas Church, and to Cantor Gershon Silins for his assistance in preparing the Hebrew cantillation.



Alison Mackay, who has played violone and double bass with Tafelmusik since 1979, is active in the creation of multi-disciplinary programming for the orchestra. *The Galileo Project*, a celebration of baroque music and astronomy that premiered in Banff and Toronto in January 2009, was performed in Mexico and the U.S. this season, and will travel to Asia in the fall. The International Astronomical Union recently named an asteroid after Tafelmusik in recognition of this project. *Four Seasons: A Cycle of the Sun* toured in Canada, the U.S. and China, and was the inspiration for the documentary film *The Four Seasons Mosaic*. In 2006 her children's tale *Baroque Adventure: The Quest for Arundo Donax*, released on the Analekta label, was awarded the Juno Award for Children's Recording of the Year. Alison has convened several city-wide arts festivals, including *Metamorphosis* (2007) and *Sacred Spaces, Sacred Circles*, a celebration of architecture and the arts in the varied worship spaces of Toronto (2008).