

Tafelmusik

DANIEL TAYLOR SINGS BACH & VIVALDI **Programme Notes**

In this week's concerts we explore baroque music from Germany and Italy. The German portion is squarely planted in the 18th century, with works by the two masters of the German high baroque, **Georg Philipp Telemann** and **Johann Sebastian Bach**. Bach hailed from a musical dynasty, and was expected to follow in his forefather's footsteps. Telemann, on the other hand, was born to an upper middle class family of educators and clergy, and received little or no formal musical training. As a child he taught himself to play numerous instruments – at first violin, recorder, zither and keyboard, and eventually also flute, oboe, chalumeau, viola da gamba, double bass and trombone. At age 12 he wrote an opera, but despite the obvious interest and talent, he was actively discouraged from pursuing music. He went to Leipzig to study law, but music increasingly occupied his time. He was organist at the Neue Kirche, became director of the Leipzig Opera, and founded the city's first Collegium Musicum as a vehicle for making music with his fellow students – the same Collegium that Bach was to direct some 30 years later. After leaving Leipzig, he held posts in several cities, ending up in Hamburg as Kantor of the Johanneum and Director of Music at the five principal churches. He was initially unhappy there, as the town councillors disapproved of his interest in opera and in presenting public concerts. He applied for and won the post of Kantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1722. The Hamburg councillors refused to release him, but they did offer him a raise in pay and agreed to loosen the reins in terms of opera and concertizing. Had Hamburg released Telemann, Bach's life would have taken a decidedly different turn, as it was he who was finally given the post at the Thomaskirche – though he was third choice, after both Telemann and Graupner.

Telemann was a remarkably prolific composer, writing over 1,000 church cantatas, 46 Passion settings, at least 18 operas, numerous oratorios, and a wealth of chamber and orchestral music. It is difficult to imagine how he had the time just to write this vast repertoire down, let alone compose it. His worklist includes some 100 concertos, including many for wind instruments. One of the salient features of his instrumental writing is that it is idiomatic – well crafted and very playable – perhaps because of his own

experience as a player of so many instruments. The **Concerto for oboe in C Minor** survives in two sources: a set of parts in an anonymous hand, and a score by Samuel Endler, vice-Kapellmeister at the Darmstadt court under Graupner. Although Telemann never held a post in Darmstadt, his music was very popular at the court, and many of his instrumental manuscripts survive in the library there. This particular concerto is renowned for its unusual first chord.

During his first years in Leipzig, **Bach's** primary focus was the composition of cantatas for the weekly church services. In all, he completed five annual cycles, totalling some 300 works, 200 of which have survived. Although this pales in comparison to Telemann's output – as do comparisons of the numbers of Passion settings and instrumental works – the complexity and mastery of Bach's cantatas are unsurpassed. **Cantata 170** dates from Bach's third cycle, first performed on the sixth Sunday after Trinity (July 28) in 1726, and is one of a handful of sacred cantatas written by Bach for solo voice, without choruses or a closing chorale. The organ is featured in a solo role in the second and third arias. Charlotte Nediger will be playing them on an organ recently built by Toronto organ builder **Thomas Linken**.

To open the Italian half of the programme, we journey back to the early baroque. A delightful **Sinfonia for three violins and continuo** by the Modenese court composer **Marco Uccellini** introduces the exquisite "**Amarilli mia bella**" by **Giulio Caccini**. The latter was included in Caccini's landmark 1602 publication *Le nuove musiche*, the first published volume of solo songs accompanied by basso continuo – a simple bass line played by a lute, harp or keyboard with improvised chordal accompaniment. It was this type of writing, called monody, that was to define the beginning of the baroque era. The purpose was to bring the text and its expression to the forefront: Caccini himself described it as "a kind of music in which one can almost speak in tones, employing in it a certain noble neglect of song." "**Amarilli mia bella**" was the most popular work in the collection: several English composers, for example, made arrangements and transcriptions.

What Caccini did for song, the Roman organist **Girolamo Frescobaldi** did for keyboard music, introducing a florid, improvisatory manner of playing. His few volumes of works for other instruments are more conservative in nature, and include several canzonas for two bass instruments plus chordal continuo. It is an unusual form, for at times the "solo" cellists simply take turns playing continuo with the lute and keyboard, leaving the music without any true melody, but they gradually start tossing melodic ideas back and forth. The overall effect is of a continuo team having a jam session!

Our visit to the 17th century ends with a beautiful air from **Francesco Cavalli's** opera *La Calisto*. The librettist Giovanni Faustini embellishes the tale of Calisto from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by pairing it with a love story between Diana, the goddess of the moon, and Endimione, a beautiful young shepherd and ardent student of astronomy. The role of Endimione was written for a castrato voice, and he is given some of the most beautiful music in the opera. The second act opens as he climbs to the top of Mount Lycaeus to gaze at Diana, who appears as the rising moon. He sings of the moon's beauty ("**Lucidissima face**") and falls asleep. Diana descends to admire him, and he embraces her in his dreams.

We return to the 18th century to end the concert, this time to the Venice of **Antonio Vivaldi**. We are all familiar with Vivaldi as the composer of hundreds of concertos – and this week we enjoy one of the 37 concertos he wrote for **bassoon**, more than any other composer before or since – but most of us are less familiar with Vivaldi the opera composer. He was in fact a prolific composer of opera: in a letter to the Marquis Guido Bentivoglio d'Aragona, Vivaldi claims to have written 94 operas, and although we can only trace 50 of these today, there is no reason to doubt the claim. In any case, either number is impressive!

Bajazet was premiered at the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona during the carnival season of 1735. Bayezid I (Bajazet), nicknamed "The Thunderbolt," was the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1389-1402, when he was captured by the bloodthirsty Turkish warlord Timur Lenk (Tamerlano). The first *tragedia in musica* depicting the struggle between these proud and fierce men was staged in Italy in 1699. Close to 50 more operatic works based on the story appeared over the next century. For his setting Vivaldi chose a libretto by the Venetian Count Agostino Piovene, written in 1711, three years before the resumption of the Turco-Venetian War. Given the timing, it is no surprise that Bajazet is portrayed as a model of bravery and defiance in the face of defeat. Vivaldi's setting is a *pasticcio* opera, that is, an opera made up of arias by different composers, a popular form at the time. Interestingly, Vivaldi chose to compose new music for the roles of Bajazet and his daughter Asteria, but turned to other composers for many of the arias of the villains. For Tamerlano's Act I aria "**Vedeste mai sul prato,**" Vivaldi used an aria from Johann Adolf Hasse's *Siroe re di Persia*. When the opera opens, Bajazet is being held prisoner at the Royal Palace at Brusa. His captor, Tamerlano has fallen in love with Asteria, who in turn loves and is loved by Andronicus, Tamerlano's ally but also trusted by Bajazet. When Tamerlano declares his love to Asteria, he is met with disgust. He warns her that his love,

if scorned, will not protect her from his wrath. In the recit preceding the aria “Vedeste mai sul prato,” he states to Asteria that in her alone “resides the power to make her father’s fate a happy one, and to give joy to a conqueror.”

Asteria agrees to marry Tamerlano, enraging her father, but finally confesses to all her plan to murder Tamerlano on their wedding night with a hidden dagger. The infuriated Tamerlano sends “a thousand armed men” to guard Asteria and Bajazet, and promises “to punish their treachery with a hundred deaths and more.” In the final act Andronicus confesses his love for Asteria to Tamerlano, who vows to put Bajazet to death and to submit Asteria “to the basest slave,” with Andronicus as witness to her humiliation. The “villainous traitor” to whom “**Barbaro traditor**” (newly composed by Vivaldi) is addressed is Andronicus.

The opera ends as Bajazet’s suicide finally elicits pity from Tamerlano, who pardons Asteria and Andronicus.