

Tafelmusik

INTIMATE BACH

Programme Notes

In programming our seasons, we often find ourselves turning to more intimate repertoire for our January concerts, an instinctive desire, perhaps, to warm up cold January evenings and Sunday afternoons with a cozy gathering of musicians and listeners. This season is no exception, as we turn to works written by J.S. Bach for smaller forces, inviting special guest Tyler Duncan to join us in works of both quiet reflection and joyous celebration.

For the instrumental portions of the programme, we have turned to what are thought to be early versions of two of Bach's familiar Orchestral Suites. The musicologist Joshua Rifkin has done extensive study of the surviving sources of the suites, and has concluded that the Second, Third and Fourth suites as we know them are reworkings of earlier works. The Third Suite is scored for trumpets, timpani, oboes, bassoon and strings, written in Leipzig in 1731, but Rifkin believes that the trumpets and timpani were added only in this Leipzig version, and that an earlier original was scored for strings alone. This week we are performing a possible interim version, with winds and strings. The Third Suite is arguably the most popular of Bach's suites, perhaps because of the inclusion of the exquisite Air. The latter is an oasis of beauty and calm between the energetic overture and the boisterous final dances. Mendelssohn championed this suite, and reports in one of his letters that he played the work for Goethe in 1830.

It is clear from studying the surviving manuscript parts for the Second Suite that it existed first in A Minor, a tone lower than the final version in B Minor. The latter is scored for solo flute and strings, but flute is precluded in the A-Minor version because it falls out of the range of the instrument. Rifkin has concluded that the original must have featured a solo violin in place of the flute, and that it may well have been inspired by a similar suite for violin and strings by J.S. Bach's cousin, Johann Bernhard Bach.

The Cantata "Ich habe genug" was written by J.S. Bach for the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, the last of the feasts of the Christmas season, also known as Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, and in the Catholic Church as the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. It is celebrated on or around the 2nd of February; "Ich habe genug" was first performed on that date in 1727. The author of the text is not known, but it is based on the Gospel story of Simeon at the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple 40 days after his birth (St. Luke, chapter 2): "And it was revealed unto him [Simeon]

by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.' ” It is one of the most famous of Bach's cantatas for solo voice, and one that was performed several times during Bach's tenure at Leipzig. Originally written as we are performing it this week, for solo bass voice with obbligato oboe, Bach also left versions for soprano and flute, and for alto and oboe.

We end the concert with two cantata arias featuring baritone, oboes and bassoon. The first is from Cantata 197, written by Bach c.1740 for a wedding service. Several movements, including the aria “*O du angenehmes Paar,*” were adapted from an earlier cantata (BWV 197a) written for Christmas Day in 1728, most of which has unfortunately been lost. In the original version of the aria (“*O du angenehmer Schatz*” [O you delightful treasure]), a solo alto voice was paired with two flutes, bassoon and continuo. In the later reworking, the aria is sung by a baritone, and Bach replaces the flutes with muted violins and adds an oboe part, the oboe and bassoon representing the wedding couple. The author of the text for the wedding version of the cantata is not known.

For the final aria of the concert we turn to Cantata 66, written for the Second Day of Easter in 1724. Like Cantata 197, it is thought to be a reworking of an earlier, in this case entirely lost, cantata: Cantata 66a, a secular work written for the birthday of Prince Leopold in Cöthen in 1718. The author of the Easter text is unknown, but the celebratory nature of the original music was readily suited to the Easter service and would have required but little reworking on Bach's part.