

Tafelmusik

A Bach Tapestry

PROGRAM NOTES

By Ivars Taurins

When art galleries present comprehensive exhibitions focusing on a particular artist, we are given the rare and wonderful opportunity to explore and experience that artist through the variety of their techniques, and the development of their expression. Recent exhibitions at the AGO of Lawren Harris, Emily Carr, Turner, Michelangelo, or Monet have allowed us a vastly different perspective on these artists and their work than could be gained by viewing just one or two iconic works.

If we consider the mind-staggering output by Johann Sebastian Bach of over 200 cantatas in a 40-year period, we quickly realize that we are familiar with only a handful of them. This is in no part due to their quality — on the contrary, the variety of compositional styles, techniques, invention, and effects is a veritable compendium of everything that can be done within that form. But we creatures of habit tend to gravitate again and again to the most familiar, the most “popular” and iconic works of any composer. On the other hand, we can only have the opportunity to experience these works as a whole if we partake in the kind of pilgrimage that John Eliot Gardiner undertook in 2000, performing all of Bach’s cantatas on a year-long tour that took his musicians throughout Europe, Britain, and even further afield to New York.

With all of this in mind, I have attempted in curating this *Bach Tapestry* to present Bach’s mastery and genius as a composer by creating an aural gallery of choral movements from his cantatas — many of them rarely heard in concert — and to complement these choruses by interweaving secular instrumental works. We also explore how Bach reused and refashioned his compositions to create new, equally vibrant works, represented in our Bach “gallery” by selections from his Lutheran Mass in G Major, comprised of his reworkings of earlier cantata movements. In this spirit, we have also taken the liberty to refashion Bach’s famous Italian Concerto, originally written for solo harpsichord, to create a “new” concerto for strings.

I hope that our *Bach Tapestry* will inspire you to further explore for yourselves the remarkable riches to be found in Bach’s oeuvre.



As a young man Bach had transcribed many of Vivaldi’s string concertos for solo keyboard. Many years later he published an “Italian Concerto” for solo harpsichord, very much in the style of those early transcriptions. We complete the circle by reimagining the work as concerto for strings, in the style of Vivaldi, and the spirit of Bach.

REFLECTIONS ON J.S. BACH

The aim and fundamental reason of all music is none other than to be to the glory of God and the recreation of the spirit.

Johann Sebastian Bach

I need Bach at the beginning of the day almost more than I need food and water.

Pablo Casals

The true spirit of the art is what led him to the great and sublime as the highest object of the art. We owe it to this spirit that Bach's works do not merely please and delight, like what is merely agreeable in art, but irresistibly carry us away with them; that they do not merely surprise us for a moment, but produce effects that become stronger the more often we hear the works, and the better we become acquainted with them; that the boundless treasure of ideas heaped up in them, even when we have a thousand times considered them, still leaves us something new, which excites our admiration, and often our astonishment; lastly, that even he who is no connoisseur, who knows no more than the musical alphabet, can hardly refrain from admiration when they are well played to him and when he opens his ear and heart to them without prejudice.

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, first biographer of J.S. Bach, from the chapter in the biography, dated 1802, entitled "The Spirit of Bach"

The great J. Seb. Bach used to say: "it must be possible to do anything." And he would never stand to hear of anything not being feasible. This has always inspired me, with my slight abilities, to accomplish many otherwise difficult things in music, with effort and patience.

Johann Philipp Kirnberger (student of Bach)

Not Brook but Ocean should be his name.

Ludwig van Beethoven ["Bach" in German means "brook"]

In response to hearing Mendelssohn perform Bach:

Again I thought how we are never at an end with Bach, how he seems to grow more profound the oftener he is heard. [...] While we listen, it would seem again as if we could only distantly approach him through the understanding of words. The music itself still serves as the best means to bring his works before our senses and to explain them.

Robert Schumann

[Bach is] one of God's phenomena, clear, but unfathomable.

Carl Friedrich Zelter (teacher of Mendelssohn)

Study Bach: there you will find everything.

Johannes Brahms

I think that if I were required to spend the rest of my life on a desert island, and to listen to or play the music of any one composer during all that time, that composer would almost certainly be Bach. I really can't think of any other music which is so all-encompassing, which moves me so deeply and so consistently, and which, to use a rather imprecise word, is valuable beyond all of its skill and brilliance for something more meaningful than that—its humanity.

Glenn Gould

Bach was a top harmonist geezer, which is why the jazz cats love him.

Nigel Kennedy, violinist

Compared with him, we all remain children.

variously attributed to **Wilhelm Friedemann** and **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach**

Bach is not about beauty, it's about honesty.

Anner Bylsma, cellist