Baroque Connections: Bach & Handel – January 21, 2017

Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C major, BWV 1066 Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

Like the Brandenburg Concerti, each of the four orchestral Suites features a different combination of instruments. Although they form a standard group in modern recordings, they were not originally conceived or composed at the same time. Because these works are technically sets of dances, they have carried the misnomer "Suite" in modern programs and recordings. Bach called them "Ouvertüres," a clear indication of their debt to the French style.

All of the orchestral suites open with a slow, stately introduction followed by a fugal allegro. They owe their origin indirectly to the French o*uverture*, developed by Jean Baptiste Lully as an instrumental prelude to the extravagant operas and ballets performed at the French court of Louis XIV. Bach, as well as many other European composers of the period, combined the stately French *ouvertures* with a set of dances. Bach put his own stamp on the *ouverture*, however, by combining the principles of the Baroque dance suite with the use of soloists or solo ensembles as in the concerto.

In 1723, after a series of respectable, but not important, court positions, Bach was appointed as the *Cantor figuralis* of the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, a position he was to hold until his death. In addition to his responsibility for the entire musical program at St. Thomas where he produced weekly cantatas for the liturgical year, rehearsed the musicians, trained the boy choristers and taught Latin, Bach was also expected to put together the weekly concert of secular vocal and instrumental music for the Leipzig *Collegium Musicum*, a German university extra-curricular institution for which students and local musicians got together to perform at public gatherings. At least he got credit for this extra work since during his tenure in the post the institution was called the "*Bachisches Collegium*."

While Bach had probably already composed Suite No.1 while he was at his previous job as Princely *Kapellmeister* at the court of Cöthen (1717-23), the surviving performance material dates from about 1725, the Leipzig period. The four suites were certainly performed at the *Collegium* gatherings.

The Suite No. 1 is scored for two oboes, bassoon, strings and basso continuo. It opens with a stately and imposing introduction, which leads to a lively fugue before returning to the grand opening measures, a structural device dating back to Lully. Like the other Orchestral Suites, No.1 also contains a number of dances not found in the standard Baroque lineup, including: the *Forlane*, a wild Venetian folk dance, the *Bourrée* and *Passepied*. Here, as in the other three, Bach reverts to a somewhat old-fashioned tradition of presenting certain dances in pairs, in this case, four of the dances, the *Gavotte*, *Menuet*, *Bourrée* and *Passepied*.

From *Samson* George Frideric Handel
"Let the Bright Seraphim" 1685-1750

By the time Handel began to compose his first oratorios, he was nearly 50 and a consummate master of all the musical genres of the high Baroque. He had composed dozens of operas and hundreds of instrumental works for large and small ensembles, as well as large choral compositions, including various liturgical pieces for the Anglican Church and the Anthems for the coronation of George II. His technical expertise, combined with a deep sensitivity in portraying human feelings in music, provided him with the tools for creating something truly original.

By 1738, Londoners were bored with opera. With the assistance of the wealthy and highly cultured dilettante Charles Jennens, Handel set on a course of composing dramatic oratorios. The oratorio as a musical presentation of a sacred narrative generally from the Gospels had been around since the early sixteenth century. Handel and Jennens, however, took the oratorio in an entirely new direction,

casting it in the form of an unstaged musical drama mostly of Old Testament stories. Starting with *Saul*, Handel composed 11 such oratorios on sacred themes.

For *Samson* (1743), Handel adapted his libretto from John Milton's *Samson Agonistes.* Although the story of Samson occurs in the Book of Judges, Milton's poem treats only the biblical hero's final act in which he brings down the Philistine temple of Dagon (with the help of Jehovah, of course). "Let the Bright Seraphim" is the final aria, sung by an exultant Israelite soprano accompanied with trumpet obbligato, before the final chorus. In this performance, another trumpet plays the soprano part.

From *Alcina*
"Tornami a vagheggiar"

George Frideric Handel
1685-1759

Composer of over 40 operas and masques, George Frideric Handel inherited an Italian operatic convention that pervaded both the sacred and secular vocal music of the eighteenth century, the *da capo* aria. The aria consists three parts: an opening section (A) followed by a section of new music (B) and a repeat from the beginning (*da capo*) of the A section, usually embellished with turns, trills and other ornamentation improvised by the singer – often to the chagrin of the composer.

Paradoxically, this structure was both rigid and flexible. In the Italian *opera seria* the aria was invariably preceded by recitative or dialogue that moved the plot along, while the aria allowed a character to expatiate on the situation and leave the stage to thunderous applause (from those members of the audience who were actually listening rather than chatting, playing cards, flirting or eating). On the other hand, the aria could express any number of emotional states of mind, and the musical rhetoric would have been immediately recognizable in the tempo, instrumental accompaniment and *ritornello* (the instrumental introduction to the aria). While the A section expressed a character's initial feelings and reaction to a new situation, the B section could either support and intensify the main idea, or express a contrasting idea, reflecting indecision or emotional conflict.

Handel employed the *da capo* aria form throughout his career, in both his operas and later in the oratorios. The overwhelming majority of the arias in Bach's cantatas are also of this type. Nor did this tried and true convention die out with the stylistic developments of the late eighteenth century. Mozart's operas are chock full of them. While generally avoided by vocal composers of the nineteenth century, the convention still isn't worn out, appearing frequently in Broadway musicals and soft rock.

The tremendous success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728 seemed to symbolize the decline in the English love for Italian grand opera. Handel and Nicola Porpora, running competing opera companies, battled it out for the allegiance of the royal family and the nobility, and both ended up broke.

But Handel was a survivor; he adapted to the changing public taste, lightening up the music of his operas, first with *Ariodante* and subsequently in 1735 with *Alcina*. The libretto is based on some 30 stanzas of *Orlando Furioso*, the famous epic poem by the 16th century Italian writer Ludovico Ariosto. With a wicked but lovesick sorceress as a heroine and in spite of an impossible plot, the opera was a success, running for 18 successive nights.

The aria *"Tornami a vagheggiar"* (Return to me to languish) is sung by Morgana, Alcina's sister and ally in her love machinations at the end of Act I.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major, BWV 1048

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

The six Brandenburg Concertos stand at the crossroads in musical history where chamber music and orchestral music went their separate ways. Titled *Concerts à plusieurs instruments* (Concertos for

various instruments), the set was dedicated to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, who employed a modest orchestra that was in all probability too small and inexpert to play them. The Dedication Score, including Bach's obsequious cover letter, has survived and now resides in the *Deutsche Staatsbibliothek* in Berlin. The mint condition of the manuscript indicates that the Margrave's orchestra seldom if ever performed them.

Bach assembled the Concertos between 1718 and 1721, although parts may have been written as early as 1708, borrowed from various orchestral works that Bach had already written over the years as courtly entertainment music on the highest level. Such recycling was standard practice for overworked composers of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Concerto No. 3 is a true ensemble work, as if composed for a group of friends spending a musical evening together. In its original form it interweaves three groups of strings, each one consisting of a violin, a viola and a cello, playing in turn the *concertino* (small group of instruments), and coming together to play the *ripieno* (all together). In other words, all nine musicians share in the solo parts equally. A harpsichord and a *violone* (a large viola da gamba), or double bass, fill out the continuo. In the last movement the *violone* joins the three cellos in unison throughout.

The most unusual aspect of this concerto is the absence of a slow central movement. In its place Bach wrote a one-bar time signature plus two eighth-note chords. Some scholars think that the composer intended for one or two of the soloists to improvise the slow movement, ending with a cadence on the chords he specifically notated. The dedication score in the *Deutsche Staatsbibliothek* in Berlin gives no clue as to Bach's intentions.

The outer movements are essentially the spinning out and free variations on a single theme. The first movement roughly follows an ABA form with an excursion into the minor mode but no really new music for the B section. The third movement is literally a grand chase, full of Bach's characteristic canons, involving all the instruments. It certainly puts the lie to the stereotype that canons are stuffy.

From *Joseph and his Brethren* George Frideric Handel
"Prophetic Raptures Swell my Breast" 1685-1759

For *Joseph and Hiss Brethren* (1744), Handel used a libretto by James Miller which is a fanciful elaboration on the biblical story. The aria "Prophetic Raptures Swell my Breast" is sung by Asenath, the daughter of the High Priest, as she rejoices in the Pharaoh's agreement to let the brothers settle peacefully in Egypt.

From *Rinaldo*: George Frideric Handel
Lascia ch'io pianga mia cruda sorte 1685-1759
(Let Me Weep Over My Cruel Fate)

Handel composed *Rinaldo* in 1711 to one of many librettos based on Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. The aria *Lascia ch'io pianga mia cruda sorte* is from Act II. Handel had used the music twice before, once for an ode and once in an earlier opera.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, BWV 1041 Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

Bach was himself an accomplished violinist. During his late teens he had earned badly needed money as "lackey and violinist" to Duke Johann Ernst, the younger brother of the Duke of Weimar (whose employment Bach entered five years later). We know that during his years in Cöthen, he composed at least four concerti for one violin and two for two violins. After his death however, half his

manuscripts went to his son Wilhelm Friedemann who, perennially short of money, probably sold them. The other half of the manuscripts, including those of the A minor and E major violin concertos and the D minor concerto for 2 violins, ended up in the hands of Carl Philipp Emanuel, who took good care of them.

The Baroque concerto was considerably different from its Classical descendent. The opening *ritornello* (repeated refrain) provided the principal thematic material for the entire movement. The soloist would either introduce additional new musical ideas or provide elaborate counterpoint against the *ritornello*. The A minor Concerto is the more somber of the two surviving solo violin concerti, opening with an extensive and vigorous *ritornello* that maintains suspense by continually suggesting and then delaying its harmonic resolution. When the violin enters with its own melody, it creates the same musical suspense by modulating into new keys before the *ritornello* returns in the tonic (home key).

The meditative slow movement consists of a simple *basso ostinato* phrase that is repeated in different instrumentations and on different pitches, with the soloist completing the theme and weaving arabesques above it. This is the longest of the movements and the emotional heart of the Concerto, containing one poignant phrase after another for the soloist. The finale, the most easygoing and relaxed of the three movements, is a fugue in fast triple time, typical of a gigue, the common final movement of a Baroque dance suite.

***The Water Music*, Suite No. 2 in D major** George Frideric Handel
1685-1759

Despite their familiarity, the Water Music suites, particularly the first one, are fraught with musicological mysteries. The myths and legends surrounding these works are as well known as the music itself. Everyone "knows" that Handel's employer, George, Elector of Hanover and heir to the British throne, was miffed with his *Kapellmeister* for both overstaying a leave of absence in England and for writing laudatory compositions for England's Queen Anne. We also "know" that when George became king of England, Handel arranged a suite to be played on a barge on the Thames as part of a royal regatta in order to get back into the good graces of the angry monarch.

Unfortunately, little of the story seems to be true. Handel did write his first Water Music suite in 1715, a year after George's accession to the British throne, and there is ample evidence that he wrote the suite for the royal river festival. But there is no hard evidence that the composer had ever been out of favor with George as evidenced by a *Te Deum* written for the king in 1714 and a Royal payment to Handel in 1715. Nevertheless, any convincing documentation pro or con the various stories of Handel's relationship with his king has yet to turn up.

The traditional Baroque suite consisted of four to six movements based on typical continental court dances. The Water Music suites, however, incorporate non-dance movements, most marked only with a tempo marking and no title at all.

Suite No 2 consists of five movements, named either as dances or with tempo markings. Unlike the other Water Music suites, No. 2 begins with a sprightly allegro, a fanfare instead of the more common stately processional to the dance suite. This suite contains some of the most popular movements of the Water Music, including the second movement, *Alla Hornpipe*, that sounds nothing like the dances we know from British folk music. And the boisterous Minuet that follows bears little resemblance to the courtly dance.

The Minuet is followed by two short movements, the bucolic *Lentement*, and the final *Bourrée*, another boisterous movement.

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