

# **Program Notes by Dr. William Runyan**

Masterpiece Concert 2, October 24, 2015

## **Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major BWV 1047—J.S. Bach**

One of the signal achievements of the music of the Baroque era was inauguration of the concerto. The fundamental principle of the genre is the contrasting of a soloist, a group of soloists, or even two or more groups of musicians with each other during the course of a composition. Almost every significant composer of the time composed them, but none reached the zenith of achievement in the genre as did J. S. Bach in his six Brandenburg Concertos late in the style period. From 1717 until 1723 he was in the employ of Prince Leopold of Cöthen, a small court in eastern Germany. The Brandenburg Concertos stem from this time: the full score in Bach's hand bears the date of 24 March 1721, but it is probable that simply marks the completion of the set; he certainly had been working on them over a period of time. They bear the title "Brandenburg Concertos" owing to their dedication to the Margrave of Brandenburg, Christian Ludwig. Bach had played before him earlier in Berlin and the concertos were the result of an invitation to provide some works for the Margrave. Nothing came of it—no money, no thanks, not even a by your leave. But the Margrave's loss is posterity's gain.

Bach's soaring imagination comes to the fore in the Brandenburg Concertos in many ways, not the least of which is his striking use of a variety of instruments in various combinations. In addition to the normal body of strings that is familiar, we encounter trumpet, recorders, French horns, oboes, flute, violino piccolo, violas, violas da gamba, and harpsichord. The soloists are accompanied by a small orchestra (the *ripieno*), and—like almost all Baroque music--supported by the omnipresent bass instruments and keyboard. Called the *continuo*, this essential group reinforces the harmony, and is the foundation of the musical texture. Its importance in Baroque music one wag once compared to the ". . . presence of the Holy Spirit—subtle, and conspicuous only in Its absence."

As with most Baroque music, prepare for long phrases, literally "spun out," as the faster sections take their time to reach a pause. Melodies tend toward short motives that often "chug" along in a relentless motoric, but charming fashion. Economy of means is an artistic virtue—making the most of little—and Bach was the master of it. The slow movements, while still exhibiting the long phrases of the faster ones, generally fashion their melodies, not out of short incisive motives, but seemingly as long-breathed instrumental "operatic arias." The Italian vocal influence is unmistakable here, and again, it is one of Bach's defining traits.

The second concerto is distinguished for its use of solo trumpet in the small group, along with recorder, oboe, and violin, accompanied by the usual larger group of strings and harpsichord. Owing to the paucity of virtuoso recorder players, the transverse (modern) flute is often substituted for the block flute (recorder). The trumpet faces a challenge, not only in the need to "hold it down" to blend with the softer soloists, but also in the formidable high register in which it famously must play. It's written much higher than most of today's orchestral trumpet parts for the simple reason that only in that manner could eighteenth-century players have a full scale to play melodies—there being no valves on brass instruments in those days to make it possible otherwise. This difficult

part was the chief reason for the long time that the second concerto was not performed after Bach's generation, but skillful modern players, with appropriate equipment, now essay it with success, but still, not without talent and effort.

In the traditional Italian tradition, the orchestra (*ripieno*) announces the main themes, followed by sections featuring the soloists with other themes. Not so here, for Bach typically pushes the envelope by integrating the soloists with the *ripieno*, and blending the themes of both in a winsome *mélange*. After orchestra opens with the main theme, the soloist present theirs, then the chase is on, with both groups alternating and combining in ever changing textures. Soloists, pairs of soloists, and soloists integrated with the orchestra—it's a kaleidoscope of Baroque colors. A unison statement of the main theme by all players rounds it off.

The second movement gives the trumpeter a much deserved rest, and features the remaining three soloists, accompanied, of course, by the *continuo*. *Andante* literally means "to walk," and this delightful stroll is carried along by what is commonly called a "walking bass" that never relents. The delightful interplay by the three soloists is in the charming musical style that soon followed the Baroque. Its progressive style belies the occasional misconception of Bach as stuck in the old style.

The last movement is dominated by the small group of soloists, the large group not entering until well into the movement. Listeners of a certain age will recognize the main theme of the movement as that of the PBS series "The Firing Line" with William F. Buckley, Jr.—who adored Bach. The trumpet boldly announces the tune, which, in fact, is that of a full-fledged fugue, answered by the violin and oboe, and then the flute. The driving, happy lilt is *prima facie* evidence of Bach's consummate skill in using what many consider a "stuffy," academic texture in a light, dancing context. But, then so could Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, for that matter. The music soars, while almost invisible technical machinations are at work. Finally, in the peroration, the trumpet again sings out the familiar theme with which it opened the movement. Obviously, the Margrave missed the boat on these immortal concerti.

***Exsultate, jubilate*, K. 165-- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
"Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio," K. 418 — Mozart**

Mozart was the master of all contemporary musical genres, but opera was his *forte*, and of course, none since has exceeded his remarkable achievement in the marriage of music and drama. It is easy to forget, today, that Italian opera ruled the roost in eighteenth-century European musical life, and so it was natural for young Wolfgang to begin remarkably early composing them. His father, Leopold, was a consummate stage door father, and was assiduous in promoting the genius of his young son. The landishments—and recognition—of Italian musical culture lay just over the Alps from Salzburg, and the early significant trips to Milan and Rome figured prominently in the lives of father and son. The first trip began in 1769 when Wolfgang was thirteen years of age, was an immense success, and included the première of his first *opera seria*. That, in turn, led to a commission for a second opera, and it was thus in Milan for that production (during the third trip there, in 1772) that the young Mozart also composed *Exsultate, jubilate*.

The star of the 1772 opera, *Lucio Silla*, was the accomplished *castrato*, Venanzio Rauzzini, whose vocal prowess was notable, and it was for him that the showpiece, *Exsultate, jubilate*, was written shortly after Christmas, 1772. It is a brief cantata, consisting of three sections with an intervening recitative. Intended to be sung at High Mass on a celebratory feast day, the Latin text celebrates and comments upon the Nativity. Given this, the work has always been referred as a motet. It is a quintessential bravura affair, and ample evidence of the capabilities of the male sopranos, the *castrati*, who took the high parts in contemporary *opera seria*. Today, of course, female sopranos sing this repertoire, there being, understandably, no male volunteers. Notwithstanding its liturgical nature, *Exsultate, jubilate*, like all such contemporary compositions, is in the imposing secular operatic style. It is Mozart's first great work that still enjoys frequent performance, and a clear harbinger of the beloved operatic arias still to come in his maturity.

\* \* \*

Today, in the performance of, let us say, a Bartok string quartet, if a movement by some other composer were added in the middle, the audience would understandably be astounded. But, until the twentieth century the practice of adding an aria by another composer to an opera was not only accepted, but also almost expected. These additional arias were called "insertion" arias, and were chosen by star performers to showcase their virtuosity, or particular skills. To be sure, the practice was subject to rampant abuse, but, on the whole, performers generally chose arias that more or less served the plot in some way, and which seemed to be vaguely appropriate. And that is exactly the case with "Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio." Mozart composed it (and two others) in 1783 for his sister-in-law, Aloisia Weber, who was performing in a production of Pasquale Anfossi's opera, *Il curioso indiscreto*. The text is yet another example of eighteenth-century librettists' obsession—and society at large, no doubt—of "testing" the fidelity of women. As if men never were afflicted by that "curious indiscretion." One will remember that was the basic conceit of Mozart's later masterpiece, *Cosi fan tutte* (often translated as something like "Thus do they all" or "Women are like that"). Well.

In this particular case, in Anfossi's opera, we have the rather outrageous situation where one man persuades a friend to try to win away the love of his bride to try her affection. She succumbs, but has strong second thoughts, and sings this aria wherein she emotes over her predicament between the two men, and finally decides that the seducer should return to his own bride. Ah, the eternal dilemma, but virtue triumphs in the end! Anfossi's opera sank into obscurity, but Mozart's "insertion" aria endured, and has justifiably entered the standard repertoire.

### **Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D. 944—Franz Schubert**

Franz Schubert's short life roughly coincided with that of Beethoven's—both passing away within about a year of each other. But what a difference there is between the life and music of these two giants of early romantic music! Beethoven--world renowned, with fiery temperament, and master of the struggle to hammer out profundities from

modest ideas—strode across the musical landscape of Europe as a conqueror. Schubert, on the other hand, lived quietly within a circle of close friends, rarely capturing the public’s imagination, while turning out an immeasurable wealth of melodies, apparently with little effort. In his brief career Schubert composed orchestral music, dabbled in opera, produced masterpieces of chamber music, and created a significant body of compositions for piano. But his glory, and the world’s musical treasure, lies in his *Lieder* (German songs). It is astounding that he composed over six hundred of them, and they constitute the defining repertory within that genre. No one else—not Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Strauss, nor Mahler—come close to the defining mark of Schubert.

Almost single handedly he created the first masterpieces of German song, and so many, at that. They are constituted of marvelously imaginative piano accompaniments (which are really equal in importance to the vocal solo); innovative harmonies; poetic texts of high artistic quality; and an unprecedented gift for an endless variety of exquisite melodies. And it is an understanding and appreciation of the centrality of song in Schubert’s *oeuvre* that informs our encounter with his instrumental music, including his symphonies.

The “Great C Major” symphony was Schubert’s last completed symphony (variously and confusingly designated number seven, eight, or nine), written in the waning years of his life. Upon its completion Schubert sent it to the Vienna Philharmonic Society, but it did not receive a public performance until Robert Schumann found it and sent it back to Leipzig. There, it was performed in a concert conducted by Mendelssohn in 1838. It is a rather long work for the time of its composition, and makes innovative use of the brass, as one can hear throughout the first movement, with its prominent use of the horns and trombones. Schubert was the first composer—Beethoven’s use notwithstanding—to employ the trombones in a symphony in a varied and imaginative orchestration.

Listening points in this magnificent work include Schubert’s characteristic colorful harmonies (not unlike that of America’s great popular songs of the 1930s), and his inimitable gift for melody. There are those that carp about Schubert’s supposed weakness in developing ideas, simply restating his great tunes in different contexts as a substitute. That is misplaced criticism, for one will enjoy and appreciate the various guises in which his melodies constantly reappear in this symphony—it’s simply what differentiates Schubert, from, say, Beethoven. What to take away from a performance is the magic of his tunes, the romantic colors of his orchestration, and his harmonies. Not for nothing is Schubert often called the “romantic” classic.

--Wm. E. Runyan

© 2015 William E. Runyan