

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is universally regarded as one of the supreme masters of Western music history. His compositions are well known for their technical mastery and emotional complexity. Bach composed in nearly all of the available musical styles and genres of his day except for opera, and that was due only to a lack of opportunity. As one of the defining composers of the Baroque Period, his large-scale vocal works, such as the *B Minor Mass*, the Passions of St. Matthew and St. John, and the *Christmas Oratorio* are often performed and are well-loved. Less familiar are his delightful church cantatas. It is our hope that today's selected program will provide you with the opportunity to experience a few of these splendid but less familiar cantatas.

Born into a musical family at Eisenach, Germany, Bach received a thorough training that included exposure to music of the most important German, French, and Italian composers of his day. He exhibited exceptional skill as an organist and his first professional position was as the organist at St. Boniface's in Arnstadt beginning in 1703. It was during this period that Bach made the 250 mile trip to Lübeck, where he spent three months visiting the great organist and composer, Dietrich Buxtehude.

Eventually, dissatisfied with the conditions at Arnstadt, Bach accepted a position in 1706 at St. Blasius's church in Mühlhausen, where he met and married his first wife, Maria Barbara. Three years later, Bach had the opportunity to accept a position as organist and concertmaster at the ducal court in Weimar. He spent the next nine years playing and composing chiefly keyboard and instrumental music, but also composed a few sacred cantatas. Most of his other 200 surviving cantatas were composed while Bach was at Leipzig (1723-1750), where his duties required that he produce a cantata each week.

Bach began his tenure at Leipzig on June 1, 1723. He was actually the third choice for the position. The City Council's first choice was Georg Phillippe Telemann, but he was not inclined to give up his prestigious position in Hamburg. Christoph Graupner was their second choice, but he was not able to gain release from his position at the court of the Landgraf of Hesse at Darmstadt. Thus, the position fell to Bach. His chief responsibilities at Leipzig were to provide music every Sunday for the St. Thomas church and the St. Nicholas Church, as well as to run the school attached to the St. Thomas church. He was to teach singing and playing of various instruments, and to teach Latin. This latter task he was allowed to delegate to four assistants, which he was happy to do.

In all his sacred works, it is clear that Bach's personal faith includes a persistent longing for God's presence, an abiding trust in God's protection through life's trials, and a fierce determination to abide with Jesus. It is this undercurrent of Bach's own faith, it seems, that allows his music to speak so clearly to listeners of every age and faith.

We know from written records that Bach composed five cycles of cantatas for the liturgical year while in Leipzig but, sadly, many of these are lost. While in Leipzig, Bach refined the previously existing 'chorale cantata,' that is, a cantata in which the first and last movements are based on the first and last stanzas of the hymn text and the inner movements are based on paraphrases of the inner stanzas. This change provides the necessary freedom for expansion on the themes and emotions inherent in the chosen text.

*Barmherziges Herze der ewigen Liebe*, BWV 185, our opening work today, is composed for four voices, oboe d'amore, two violins, viola, bassoon, cello, and organ. It was first performed in Weimar on the 4th Sunday after Trinity, July 14, 1715. Bach repeated it in Leipzig on June 20, 1723. This cantata presents a meditation on compassion and the Golden Rule that draws its inspiration from the Gospel reading for the day, Luke 6: 36-42. In the opening duet for soprano and tenor, Bach uses the oboe d'amore to present the chorale tune, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ," which would have been well-known to the Leipzig congregation. Musically, this creates a unifying link with the final movement of the cantata. The recitatives and remaining arias further amplify the message of refraining from judging others and rather striving to lead the best life possible, following Jesus' example.

*Ihr Menschen, rühmet Gottes Liebe*, BWV 167 was composed for the Nativity of St. John the Baptist and was performed on June 24, 1723. It is written for four voices, trumpet, oboe, oboe da caccia, strings, bassoon, and organ. The duet for soprano and alto with obligato oboe da caccia is the magnificent centerpiece of this cantata. This instrument was invented and developed by the Leipzig maker, Johann Eichentopf and its appearance in this cantata is believed to be the first time that Bach or anyone else used the oboe da caccia as a solo instrument. The cantata concludes with a confident, exuberant chorale.

*Ich steh' mit einem Fuß im Grabe!*, BWV 156, was composed for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany and was first performed on January 23 1729. It is written for oboe, bassoon, strings, and organ. This cantata opens with one of Bach's most well known pieces, a wonderful Sinfonia for solo oboe and pizzicato strings. It is believed that the movement was originally the slow movement from a now lost concerto for either violin or oboe. Bach also used this piece as the slow movement in his Concerto in F major for Harpsichord and Strings, BWV 1056. The next movement, a tenor aria is really a duet with the addition of the chorale tune in the soprano that adds a further depth of meaning. The cantata concludes with a verse of the hymn set in pure chorale style.

*Leichtgesinnte Flattergeister*, BWV 181, was composed for Sexagesima Sunday (sixty days before Easter) and was first performed on February 13, 1724. It is written for trumpet, flute, oboe, strings and organ. Opening with a colorfully pictorial depiction of the unthinking ninnyes who do not heed the Word of God, but who are misled by the Fallen Angel Belial and his horde, its opening angular melody signifies the aimless activity of the thoughtless ones. In 1960, the noted Bach scholar Alfred Dürr, demonstrated that the obligato part for the tenor aria had been lost. On today's program, we are using a 1983 reconstruction of this solo part for solo violin by Reinhold Kubick.

Forty years ago, Joshua Rifkin jolted the musicological world with a thesis that Bach's cantatas, passions, and oratorios were performed when under Bach's direction by a single singer on each part, instead of three or four, as had been believed. This stirred a furious debate at the time and these vigorous discussions continue to this day. However, the evidence for this practice is quite convincing and, thus, it is becoming more widely accepted. So while there is no question that performances of Bach's cantatas and passions

with choirs of 12, 24, or 100 singers are tremendously moving and inspirational, we believe that there is much to be gained from the more intimate approach that is the result of performing these pieces with only one singer or player to a part. Not only does this practice probably mirror the experience of Bach's original audiences, but the resulting musical texture offers greater clarity in the interplay of the voices and instruments and enlivens the music-making among the participants by bringing the music to a more personal and individual level.

Several of the instruments heard on today's program may be unfamiliar to you. The oboe d'amore, featured in Cantata 185, was a uniquely German instrument, despite the fact that in Bach's day it was most often called *hautbois d'amour*. It is not known how this instrument came to be called "d'amore." but it was developed sometime around 1710, most likely in Leipzig, by local players and instrument makers. The oboe d'amore had a relatively short period of popularity in the eighteenth century. Bruce Haynes states that two-thirds of the repertory of the oboe d'amore was composed between 1717-1730, most of the remaining third between 1730 and 1760, and less than 2% after 1760. The instrument was revived in a modern form later in the 19th century, appearing in Verdi's *Aida* and in works of Richard Strauss, Ravel, and others. The oboe d'amore is pitched a minor third lower than the regular oboe, which allows it to play more easily in keys that would otherwise be highly problematic. Its distinctive sound, which is darker and richer than the higher oboe, makes it a wonderful solo instrument.

Even rarer is the "oboe da caccia", also developed in Leipzig early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is in effect, a tenor oboe pitched a fifth lower than the regular oboe. Bach wrote for the oboe da caccia in the St. Matthew and St. John Passions, as well as in several other cantatas.



Copy of Oboe da caccia by Eichentopf made by Sand Dalton

One of our principal goals in presenting our concerts is to bring to our listeners an enhanced musical experience, through our programming of little-heard music in as an historically informed manner as possible, and through the use of appropriate instruments. It is our heartfelt hope that our performances will open an exciting new world of sonorities and sensibilities to you, our listeners and supporters.