

SOU Chamber Music Concerts ~ Program Notes

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Sunday matinee, November 28, 2004, 3 pm:

Aulos Ensemble with soprano Julianne Baird - "A Baroque Christmas"

Antonio Vivaldi - Concerto in G minor, RV 107

Traditional Carols I

Alessandro Scarlatti - Cantata Pastorale

Traditional Carols II

Michel Corette - 4ème Symphonie de Noël

Johann Sebastian Bach - Arias from the Cantatas "Ich Esse mit Freuden" (BWV 84); "Süsser Trost, mein Jesus kommt" (BWV 151); "Mein Glaubiges Herze" (BWV 68)

Antonio Vivaldi

Concerto in G minor, RV 107

Antonio Vivaldi played the most prominent early role in the rise of the concerto. With over 500 concertos, he became both the most prolific and influential concerto composer in the first half of the 18th century. Building upon the ground-breaking achievements of his great Italian predecessors Archangelo Corelli and Giuseppe Torelli, Vivaldi helped standardize many of the most progressive features of the genre. His solo concertos from 1710-1730 popularized the three-movement (fast-slow-fast) cycle, offered the first widespread use of ritornello form for the fast movements, increased the prominence and independence of the solo part, and further integrated the form by incorporating solo motives into the accompaniment as well. While publishers printed only a fifth of his concertos during his lifetime, Vivaldi's innovations were nonetheless imitated throughout Europe. The 2001 Grove Dictionary mentions that he forced already established composers such as "Albinoni and Dall'Abaco to modify their style in mid-career" and Bach arranged nine of Vivaldi's concertos for organ and clavier.

Tonight's work belongs to a particular type of concerto known as "ensemble concertos" or "ripieno concertos." Vivaldi wrote about sixty of these works, where in lieu of an orchestra, the soloists function as the ensemble accompaniment - and then take turns playing the solos. The first such concertos appeared in the later 17th century and early 18th centuries, and adopted the 4-movement (slow-fast-slow-fast) fugal format of the church sonata. The more modern style begun under Torelli, and which Vivaldi standardized, includes the standard 3-movement format and more homophonic textures. He scored tonight's concerto for flute, oboe, violin, bassoon, and continuo. Vivaldi composed quickly and was a relentless self-borrower, so connections between tonight's slow movement and that of the "Winter" concerto from the Four Seasons may be more than mere coincidence. But few composers changed the course of any important concert genre as dramatically as Vivaldi, whose enormously wide-ranging innovations proved decisive for the modern concerto.

Traditional Carols I

Both English carols which open this segment of the program originated in the Renaissance Era. "When Christ was Born on Earth" may have been written as early as the 15th century. The "Coventry Carol" comes from the following century, and often receives the very sweet and poignant arrangements befitting a lullaby. But like many of our modern fairy tales, its origins reveal a different, harsher vein. The carol appeared in the mystery play "The Pageant of the Shearman and Tailors." It depicts the flight into Egypt and King Herod's massacre of the innocents. This carol was sung by a mother in hiding, desperate to keep her baby quiet so as not to attract any soldier's attention. While the soldiers burst in anyway, that gratefully is not depicted in this lovely ballad.

The delightful “Shepherd, Shake off your drowsy sleep” comes from the Besancon region of France, and demonstrates the fragile creation process of many Christmas carols. As is so often the case, the text and music were composed separately. The text probably stems from the 18th century, according to the New Oxford Book of Carols. The music appeared a century earlier - but originally matched with a different text!

Alessandro Scarlatti **Cantata Pastorale**

Richard Strauss came late to the symphonic poem. He started writing them almost 60 years after Berlioz’ path-breaking “Symphonie Fantastique” and some 40 years after Liszt’s great works. But he then capped the genre, with the last and greatest 19th-century tone poems. The parallels with Alessandro Scarlatti’s mastery of the cantata are remarkable, and his accomplishments even surpassed Strauss. The cantata became the dominant chamber vocal genre throughout the 17th century, surpassed in popularity only by opera. Every major Italian vocal composer wrote cantatas, and though Scarlatti didn’t start composing until late in the 17th century, he topped them all in both quantity (over 600 authentic cantatas) and quality. Scarlatti set the vast majority of those works (over 500) in the format heard tonight, for solo voice (usually soprano) and continuo. And though he wrote most of those works on secular subjects, he also wrote a handful of sacred cantatas. Tonight’s “Cantata Pastorale” falls into that category, celebrating the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Scarlatti helped popularize (but did not invent) some features of the Neapolitan opera style, such as the “Italian Overture” in three movements, *da capo* arias, and accompanied recitative. However, such features remain more typical of 18th-century (late Baroque) music, and Scarlatti wrote tonight’s cantata in 1695. The *da capo* arias (A B A form) constitute the only one of those features to appear in this middle-Baroque work. The small dimensions also reflect middle-baroque style: he writes only a couple phrases for each of the “A” and “B” sections, unlike the later and far more massive arias of Handel (in his operas and oratorios) and Bach (in his cantatas, masses and passions). But Scarlatti was a masterful composer, and the vocal writing remains exquisite. Each of the three arias establishes lyrical balance with opening four-bar phrases, before the typically Baroque motivic work creates some unexpected detours. Scarlatti also helped establish tonal unity for such works, ending in the same key he began. His notoriously complex recitatives, however, already lead away from the tonic key of A Major immediately after the overture. Thus, he sets the first aria (announcing Christ’s birth) in D Major. The second aria (“though of lowly birth, he will forgive our sins”) is in F Major. Only the final aria returns to the tonic, urging musicians with “rustic pipes and song” to serenade the baby Jesus. Fittingly enough, this cantata received its first performance on Christmas Eve 1695.

Traditional Carols II

Like the opening carol of the previous set, “Es ist ein Rose” may also have been written in the 15th century. The diocese of Trier, Germany may have provided both the text and melody. Michael Praetorius wrote the best-known version of this lovely carol in 1609, over a century later.

But the final version of “Greensleeves” provides one of the longest gestation periods of all. While popular legend has it that Henry VIII had a hand in writing the tune, the New Oxford Book of Carols states that the earliest manuscripts of the tune appeared in the 1580s - too late for King Henry. William Dix wrote the lyrics now associated with the tune “What Child is This” - in 1865 - three centuries later than the music. And in yet another demonstration of the ambiguous creation

process, a 17th-century variant of the “Greensleeves” melody provides the music for an entirely different carol (“The old yeare now is fled”).

Another traditional English carol closes this portion of the program - “On Christmas Night the Christians Sing.” The text of what is popularly known as the “Sussex Carol” was first published in 1684. It’s not known who wrote the music, or when. But this piece once again offers evidence of this genre’s perilous creation process, as the same text appears with different music in a 1911 carol collection.

Michel Corrette **4ème Symphonie de Noël**

Nelson Riddle became one of the greatest arrangers of 20th-century popular music. While his own original compositions usually proved less successful, he became the principal arranger for Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, and a host of other great singers from that era. His sophisticated swing and rich harmonic scores proved enormously influential. Michel Corrette fashioned a similar career in 18th-century France. He made a lasting mark not with his own compositions, but as an arranger of opera excerpts and popular tunes. His 25 “Concertos Comiques” became perhaps his best-known works, popular arrangements of excerpts from the performances at the Opera Comique. In a similar vein, the Aulos Ensemble plays excerpts from a 1781 Corrette symphony (4th of the set of six) based on the “most beautiful French and Foreign Noels [Christmas melodies].” A recent CD compliments him as a “composer for the common man.” His career of nearly 75 years provides a detailed and extraordinary resource on 18th-century French light and popular music.

As a teacher, Corrette also wrote a remarkable series of method books on virtually every instrument of the day. He often printed music as examples of particular French and foreign styles, how to play particular passages, and the terms the musicians of that era used. His detailed comments yielded a wealth of information for modern scholars. This disciplined, observant and productive musician has contributed greatly to our understanding of 18th-century styles and performance practices.

Johann Sebastian Bach **Arias from the Cantatas “Ich Esse mit Freuden” (BWV 84); “Süsser Trost, mein Jesus kommt” (BWV 151); “Mein Glaubiges Herze” (BWV 68)**

In the world of the cantata, this concert progresses from peak to peak - from the greatest Italian representative (Scarlatti) to the greatest German cantata composer (Bach). And we find ourselves in a different world. As the cantata provided the principal music of the Lutheran church services, Bach reverses Scarlatti’s approach - the overwhelming majority of his cantatas are sacred. From the time of Martin Luther, church services incorporated chorales, so it’s no surprise that, unlike most Italian cantatas, the chorus participates in some fashion. (Though we don’t hear the choral excerpts from these three cantatas tonight, Bach remained unsurpassed in his sophisticated and often extensive writing for cantata choruses). The German cantata scoring is also richer; in addition to the continuo, Bach scored these works for either string or wind accompaniment. Finally, Bach was perhaps the greatest master of the German love for counterpoint. Each of the arias tonight offers a different obbligato instrumental solo to accompany the singer.

Bach’s cantatas also raise an interesting issue of terminology. He apparently never used the word for his sacred cantatas. The 2001 New Grove Dictionary states that he called them *Kirchenstück* or

Kirchenmusik ("church pieces" or "church music"). The cantata terminology for Bach's work first appeared in the 19th century, by the editors of the Bach-Gesellschaft. During Bach's time, most Germans refrained from the term because of the strong Italian tradition in the genre.

Bach saw himself as a true servant of God. He wrote these arias as part of a religious service and never intended them for concert performance. All three reflect Christian love and devotion, beginning with "Ich esse mit Freuden" from Cantata 84 with obbligato solos for violin and oboe. "I eat with joy my scant bread, and share it with neighbors as well." Bach depicts this joy in a fast and delightful movement, often based on lyrical four and eight-bar phrasing and motivic exchange among the three soloists. He wrote Cantata 151 for the Christmas season, and "Susser Trost, mein Jesu kommt" translates as "Sweet comfort, my Jesus comes, Jesus is born." The rich, extended passages of ornamentation the vocalist shares with the flute closely resemble corresponding passages in another sacred work on a similar topic - Handel's *Messiah*. Like the earlier cantata aria, Bach sets it *da capo* form. Along with his use of recitative, it places Bach at the forefront of progressive 18th-century reforms of the German cantata tradition that did not go uncriticized in the German press. "Too operatic" they complained - but thank goodness for the reformers!

He departs from the *da capo* format for the final aria "Mein Glaubiges Herze" ("my believing heart") from Cantata 68, which also features a solo cello. While Bach offers a similar form - A B A - he writes out the final "A" section to provide an opportunity to motivically develop and vary the material from the first "A." He then offers a closing passage for cello, oboe and violin which further elaborates the opening material. The Grove Dictionary states that his cantatas "reflect an artistic diversity that is striking by comparison with Bach's contemporaries...there are no parallels elsewhere...for the thematic development of the arias and sensitive word-setting in the recitatives." Though perhaps not intended for the concert stage, these arias nonetheless provide a glorious close to this Christmas concert.

Program notes by Ed Wight