

## **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH — Brandenburg Concertos No. 3 and 5**

When asked about what message we might send to an extraterrestrial civilization, physician and former dean of the Yale and NYU medical schools Lewis Thomas remarked, “I would vote for Bach, all of Bach, streamed out into space, over and over again. We would be bragging of course.” Even after more than two-and-a-half centuries since his death in 1750, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach continues to serve as a high-water mark for many musicians, composers, conductors, and music fans. Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn regarded J.S. Bach as the giant on whose shoulders they stood, and it was his spectacular vision and intricate craftsmanship that inspired them to create masterpieces of their own. And in 1977, the first movement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 was chosen as the first musical piece to be played on the *Voyager Golden Record*, a phonograph record containing a broad sample of Earth’s common sounds, languages, and music sent into outer space with the two Voyager probes. Perhaps someday, an alien civilization will acknowledge our “bragging” by sending along some music by a Bach of their own.

Together, the Brandenburg Concertos comprise a set of six orchestral compositions dedicated by Bach to Prince Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg in the spring of 1721. These works are not “concertos” in the sense we think of them today, with a single soloist accompanied by the orchestra. Instead, they represent an older tradition of “concerted music,” in which a small group of featured players (the *concertino*) converse against a background texture of strings and harpsichord (the *ripieno*). Concerto No. 5 features a *concertino* of flute, violin, and harpsichord against a *ripieno* of strings with the beautiful middle movement scored for just the trio of *concertino* players. The featured role of the harpsichord in this concerto, which moves back and forth between *concertino* and *ripieno* throughout, is almost certainly an indication that the part was written for no less a performer than Bach himself.

By contrast, Concerto No. 3 presses the same small collection of string instruments into service as both *concertino* and *ripieno*, with subsets of the group fluidly transitioning between the roles of soloist and accompanist over the course of the piece. The first movement and last movements are organized around a ritornello, a kind of instrumental refrain that alternates with soloistic episodes in which the musical material is developed through a back and forth between the performers. The second movement is something of a curiosity consisting of a single measure with only two chords in it. Many scholars have suggested that these chords are probably meant to surround a cadenza improvised by the harpsichord or violin player, but modern performance approaches range from simply playing the cadence with minimal ornamentation to inserting full movements from other works to fill the gap.

## **IGOR STRAVINSKY — Concerto in E-flat (“Dumbarton Oaks”)**

Igor Stravinsky is a compositional master of disguise, fully reinventing himself no less than three times over his sixty-year career. So, when encountering one of his compositions, one must first determine *which* Stravinsky is responsible. Stravinsky wrote the *Concerto in E-flat* towards the end of his neo-classical period and pays clear homage to the concision and clarity of Baroque concerted music like the Bach and Corelli included on tonight's program. In fact, Stravinsky discussed Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 as a pervasive and specific influence on the composition: "I played Bach very regularly during the composition of the concerto and I was greatly attracted to the Brandenburg Concertos. Whether or not the first theme of my first movement is a conscious borrowing from the third of the Brandenburg set, however, I do not know. What I can say is that Bach would most certainly have been delighted to loan it to me; to borrow in this way was exactly the sort of thing he liked to do."

Just as with Stravinsky's other "neo-classical" compositions, however, the emphasis is decisively on the "neo." No one listening could mistake this concerto for something penned in the European courts of the 18th century. This is a thoroughly and rigorously modern composition that simply borrows the graceful gestures and contours of a previous era. The piece takes its nickname from the Dumbarton Oaks estate in Washington, D.C. whose owners, Robert and Mildred Bliss, commissioned the piece in honor of their 30th wedding anniversary. Stravinsky visited the estate before he started composing and he claimed to have been influenced in his design of the piece by the perfect layout of the Blisses' elaborate formal gardens. The piece premiered in May 1938 in the music room in the Dumbarton Oaks mansion, conducted by no less than the famed composer and pedagogue Nadia Boulanger, who had first put the couple in touch with Stravinsky.

Despite the effervescence and cool refinement of his music, Stravinsky composed the *Concerto in E-flat* at an incredibly tumultuous and tragic time in the composer's personal life. In the spring of 1938, Katya, Stravinsky's wife of 33 years contracted tuberculosis and the disease quickly spread to his eldest daughter, Ludmila, and to the composer himself. Neither his daughter nor his wife survived the infection past the following year and Stravinsky himself spent more than five months in the hospital. Stravinsky credits the unimaginable difficulty of this period for his desire to take a kind of refuge in the music of his idol, J.S. Bach.

### **ARCANGELO CORELLI — Concerto Grosso**

Arcangelo Corelli's life story is inextricable from the mythos that developed around him. He was born in February 1653 in the Papal States, a cross-section of territory in the central Italian peninsula that was controlled by the Pope and his court. Little is known about his early years, but by the exceptionally young age of seventeen, the Philharmonic Academy in Bologna, where he began his career as a violinist and composer, accepted Corelli as a member. During his Bologna days, various stories describe him traveling to Paris, Munich, and Amsterdam and being forced out of each new location because of the threatening power of his genius. At some point, Corelli

moved from Bologna to Rome where he was a fixture at the papal court and well known among the Roman and ecclesial aristocracy. Just a few years before his death, he was inducted into the Arcadian Academy of Rome. He was buried in the Roman Pantheon. All this despite having published only five collections of sonatas during his lifetime and supposedly refusing to play in the extreme upper register of his instrument, the violin.

Nonetheless, Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel both undertook extensive study of Corelli's music with each of them composing works explicitly referencing his collections of sonatas and concerti. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, however, feature a rotating cast of solo instruments. Arcangelo Corelli's opus six, a collection of twelve *concerti grossi*, all use the same instrumentation with a *ripieno* of string orchestra plus a featured *concertino* of two violins and a cello. Additionally, the vast majority of Corelli's concerti are exemplars of the Italian Baroque practice of *sonatas da chiesa* ("sonatas for the church") in which suites of instrumental music underscore at key moments in celebration of the Roman Catholic mass. The relatively short movements along with alternating between slow and fast tempos provided a variety that enabled musicians to navigate a wide range of different liturgical settings. These concerti form a bridge between the inchoate instrumental traditions of the Italian Renaissance and the flourishing of instrumental virtuosity that characterized the late Baroque.

### **SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT — Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli**

Michael Tippett's nearly seventy-year career as a composer progressed through a series of fits and starts. After graduating from the Royal College of Music (RCM) in 1928 having studied contemporary composition, he took a job conducting choirs and teaching French in a small village in rural Surrey. However, after staging a disappointing concert of his own works in the village of Oxted in 1930, he withdrew all his compositions and re-enrolled at RCM to study 16th- and 17th-century counterpoint. After graduating a second time in 1932, Tippett moved to South London and resumed composing, but by the end of the decade, Tippett again withdrew as he ramped up his political engagement in a number of different organizations and struggled to come to terms with his homosexuality. Tippett re-emerged in 1941 with the completed score for *A Child of Our Time*, his secular oratorio about the events inside Nazi Germany leading up to *Kristallnacht*. Prior to the premiere in March 1944, Tippett served several months in prison for avoiding his conscripted military service during the Second World War. By the early 1950s, Tippett was finally settling into a new teaching position at Morley College and working on his first major opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*.

During this period of new stability, the 1953 Edinburgh Festival commissioned *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli* to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Corelli's birth. Tippett took as his inspiration the "Adagio" movement from the F minor concerto, number two in Corelli's opus six. In this composition, we see the full-flourishing of all Tippett's myriad false

starts and dead ends. The piece is at once traditional and daring, contrapuntal and lyrical, derivative and totally original. Like Stravinsky's neo-classical works, this is music that draws on traditional forms and gestures but pushes them in radical and unmistakably new directions. In a review of the first performance, a critic for *The Times's* complained that the "excessive complexity of the contrapuntal writing" meant that "there was so much going on that the perplexed ear knew not where to turn or fasten itself." One might agree with *The Times's* reviewer's assessment that the music presents too many simultaneous ideas to engage just one at a time but might also question whether that constitutes a flaw in Tippett's design. Rather, the joy of *Fantasia Concertante* comes from the slightly-disorienting swirl of musical phrases that fold and turn in on each other in all kinds of new and surprising ways.