

Brilliant Baroque – March 19, 2017

Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

Much of Bach's orchestral music has been lost, but what remains represents gems of creativity. The six Brandenburg Concerti, each one composed for a different combination of instruments, forged an entirely new direction for the Italian concerto grosso. Like the Brandenburg Concerti, each of the four orchestral suites features a different instrumental roster. Although they are often grouped 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. In his autographs Bach called these works "Ouvertüren," a clear indication of their debt to the French style.

All open with a slow, stately introduction followed by a fugal allegro. They owe their origin indirectly to the French *ouverture*, 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 *ouverture* with a set of dances utilizing soloists or solo ensembles as in the concerto.

Suite No. 3 was probably composed in 1730/31 for the Leipzig *Collegium Musicum*, a German university extra-curricular institution for which students and local musicians performed at public gatherings. In addition to his responsibility for the entire musical program at St. Thomas Church, 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 weekly concerts of secular vocal and instrumental music. At least he got credit for this extra work since during his tenure in the post the institution was called the "Bachisches Collegium."

Bach's *Collegium* held its concerts in Zimmermann's Coffee House, a high-class bourgeois establishment spacious enough to accommodate a large ensemble and paying customers. Apparently, Zimmermann did not charge for these concerts, assuming that enough money was coming in from refreshments.

One notable feature of this piece is Bach's refusal to be limited by the four-square phrasing of the original dances. While he always retains the original repeat pattern, his phrase length is often irregular or asymmetrical, a factor that creates musical tension and certainly avoids boredom. The *Ouverture* opens with a stately and imposing introduction, of which Goethe said: "The opening is so pompous and dignified that one can envision an assemblage of dignitaries descending a grand flight of steps." It is noteworthy for the length of its opening theme, which piles on phrase after phrase, delaying a cadence on the tonic D major for a full minute (even at a pretty fast clip). It leads to a lively fugue before returning to the grand opening measures. The second movement, *Air*, is one of Bach's best-known compositions, thanks to the German violinist August Wilhelmj (1845-1908), who made the ill-judged arrangement known as "Air on the G String." The third movement Gavotte has a forceful rhythmic drive, interrupted in the middle by a more flowing Second Gavotte, after which the opening returns. The short *Bouree* is bouncy and fast and the final *Gigue* – traditionally the final dance in a suite of this period – while exuberant, returns to a stately mood.

Selections from *The Water Music*

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, whose childlessness set him up to succeed her. 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 is substantiated. 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 boss at this point in his career has yet to turn up.

Then there's the problem with the musical content itself. The *First Water Music Suite* is traditionally played in ten sections, eight in F major, two in the relative D minor. Nevertheless, there is some question about whether these ten numbers were all actually played at the premiere or whether Handel later added two sections from an earlier concerto composed the same year. Since there is no manuscript of the full score and the earliest publication of the entire set was in 1788, it is impossible to know the original content and order of the suites. Handel's frequent recycling often makes it difficult to determine the original date of many of his works. Many conductors arrange their own suite from Handel's three.

The traditional Baroque suite consisted of four to six movements based on a standard menu of court dances. The *Water Music* Suites, however, incorporate non-dance movements, most of which bear only tempo marking and no title at all. The instrumentation varies from movement to movement, but usually employs oboes, bassoons and horns ó typical instruments for outdoor performances ó in addition to strings and continuo (which were probably later addition for indoor performances).

Suite from *Le triomphe de l'amour*

Jean-Baptiste Lully
1632-1687

Jean-Baptiste Lully, the inventor of French opera and chief composer in the court of Louis XIV, was born Giovanni Battista Lulli and was the son of a miller. He arrived in France as a *garçon de chambre* to help Mlle. de Montpensier practice her Italian language skills.

Six years later, Lully (with his name suitably francified and proficient in several instruments) danced at the court of the young King Louis XIV, who a few weeks later appointed him as "composer of instrumental music for the king and composer of *ballets de cour* (court ballets). These extravagant productions, with elaborate costumes, complex stage machinery and instrumental and vocal interludes along with the dance numbers, were among the most important entertainments at the French court in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Lully enjoyed a lengthy career in Louis's court, cut short in one of the more interesting demises in the musical world. While conducting a *Te Deum* to celebrate the recovery of the dauphin from some illness or other, he smashed his toe with his baton (at that time a hefty staff) and subsequently died of gangrene.

Le Triomphe de l'Amour, premiered in 1681, consisted of twenty *entrées* (entrances) that reveal aspects of love triumphant. Venus presides over the ceremony in which gods, goddesses and other personages from Greek mythology pay homage to her son.

The most radical element of the first performance of *Le Triomphe de l'Amour* was the appearance of professional female dancers in the public performances at the *Palais Royale*. Traditionally, all danced roles in the public performances of ballets had been taken by men, and the production had to be delayed in part because of the reluctance of the court ladies to participate.

Oboe Concerto in E-flat major

Giuseppe Sammartini
1695-1750

Born in Milan, composer and oboist Giuseppe Sammartini was one of eight children of a French oboist and an Italian mother. Together with his brother Giovanni he started his career as oboist in the Ducal theater. He was prolific composer and played a fundamental role in the formation of the Classical style.

Sammartini spent most of his professional life in London (where he was erroneously advertised as St. Martini of Milan). He performed in many Handel operas and orchestral works and had an active career as a solo virtuoso oboist. He became music master for Augusta, wife of Frederick, Prince of Wales (Son of George II and father of George III).

Sammartini composed many works for the oboe for his own use. The manuscript of the Oboe Concerto in E-flat is undated and is still in the Italian baroque four movements, slow-fast-slow-fast. Its technical challenges are prodigious, especially considering that his instrument lacked nearly all of the features of the modern oboe ó like keys designed to improve ease of playing and pitch accuracy. Although his fingering was certainly dexterous, his intonation probably left something to be desired by modern standards.

The concerto itself is not a model of originality; the composer was more concerned with showing off his instrument than in forging innovative stylistic pathways. Sammartini's symphonies are more transitional than this concerto. The slow first movement resembles an operatic duet between orchestra and soloist, with the oboe finishing orchestral phrases. It serves as a slow introduction to the concerto and is the most forward-looking in style. But the second movement epitomizes the high Baroque, not surprisingly Handel, in which an orchestral ritornello alternates with solo passages. The third and fourth movements, however, recall Vivaldi. The fourth and longest movement is the *pièce de resistance*, requiring by far the most virtuosic playing.

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