

MUSICĀ SĀCRĀ

BACH, BUXTEHUDE & SCARLATTI

Tuesday, October 23, 2018 at 7:30 PM
Cathedral of St. John the Divine—Great Choir

Program Notes by Lawrence Schenbeck

Many Christians revere Latin as the parental tongue of the church; some also recall the old German of Luther's hymns or the stirring English of the King James Version with special fondness. But few of us recoil when hearing modern English in worship. We understand each other best through familiar and current modes of expression, including that special expressive mode, *music*.

Congregants in 17th- and 18th-century Europe felt the same way: they welcomed new musical dialects even as they held onto older ones. Baroque composers sought to preserve the gravity and mystery of unaccompanied polyphony—the great musical legacy of Palestrina, of the Renaissance—but also to enrich it with the fashionable styles and resources of their own age. Thus the sounds of the modern orchestra and of operatic solo singing, much esteemed by its aristocratic patrons, soon became an essential part of church music as well.

Nowhere was this blending of old and new, sacred and secular styles, more pronounced than in Italy, birthplace of opera and of modern instrumental technique. The church music of Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757) provides a fascinating case in point. Son of Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725), he is today better known for the colorful keyboard sonatas he created in Portugal and Spain for his patroness the Infanta (later Queen) Maria Barbara. But as Alessandro's son, he was expected to demonstrate mastery of contemporary Italian vocal music; his father took care to see that he displayed his talent early and often. Exercising a firm fatherly hand in 1705, he ordered the 20-year-old Domenico to leave Naples and travel to Venice, via Rome and Florence. As the elder Scarlatti explained in a letter to his patron Ferdinando de' Medici,

I have forcibly removed [Domenico] from Naples where, though there was scope for his talent, it was not the kind of talent for such a place. I am removing him from Rome as well, because Rome has no shelter for music, which lives here as a beggar. This son of mine is an eagle whose wings are grown; he must not remain idle in the nest.

And so he did not. But after four years in Venice, Domenico returned to Rome and entered the service of exiled Polish Queen Maria Casimira; from 1713 to '19 he also served as *maestro di cappella* at the Basilica Giulia, holding a similar appointment with the Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican. A significant number of Domenico's choral works apparently date from this period, including two *Miserere* settings, a *Magnificat*, and the elaborate *Stabat Mater* performed on the second half of our program. The younger Scarlatti was not destined to remain long in Italy: using connections that went back to early days in Naples, he got himself appointed music-master to the children of that royal family, moving first to Lisbon (in 1719) and then Madrid (in 1728). There he made his fortune and—at long last—his own reputation as a composer.

By happy coincidence the first item on our program, Domenico's *Te Deum*, was written for Lisbon and reportedly given there in 1721. It partakes of the *galant* manner that swept through Europe in the 1720s. Earlier Baroque music often emphasized florid vocal lines arranged into lengthy arias or else encased in massive ensembles. The new style practiced by Vivaldi, Telemann, and Pergolesi used simpler lines and textures, moving more quickly through a text. This *Te Deum* is set for two SATB choirs and continuo (organ and bass line). The two choirs tend to interact in a mildly antiphonal manner, their short statements continually overlapping rather than "echoing" or calling-and-answering. This is actually quite appropriate for this 4th-century text attributed to St. Ambrose, a series of exclamations of belief, praise, and thanksgiving. Scarlatti varies the presentation by inserting moments of slow, somberly harmonized declamation, as at "Sanctus" and "Patrem immensae majestatis." Brief chant-like solo lines at "Dignare" provide additional variety and liturgical flavor. At the end, another somber declamation on "non confundar" concludes Scarlatti's six-minute traversal of the Ambrosian Hymn with one last bow to venerable tradition.

Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707), a talented German of Danish ancestry, became organist at Lübeck in 1668, a position he acquired in part by agreeing to marry the younger daughter of his predecessor Franz Tunder. Besides his official duties at the Marienkirche, he reinstated a famous series of concerts, the *Abendmusik*, on five Sunday afternoons of the year. We know that in 1705 the young J. S. Bach, while engaged as organist at the New Church in Arnstadt, took an extended leave to visit Lübeck and hear Buxtehude's organ playing as well as the December *Abendmusik*.

Although we know little about specific music performed at the *Abendmusik*, we may gain some sense of its vitality and contemporary significance from hearing Buxtehude's "concerto" (his term) *Cantate Domino Canticum Novum*. It is not a concerto in the modern sense, but rather a chamber work in

which three singers and their accompanists perform “in concerted fashion.” Everyone joins in for the extended opening and closing sections, in which similar material—lively, florid vocal lines set in imitation—is presented in an *ABA* structure. Between “Cantate” and “Gloria Patri” (the two *A*’s), the soloists take turns offering *B*’s: shorter, simpler sections of text also derived from Psalm 96.

When we hear what Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) did later with such forms, we get an idea of his individual genius and also the direction Baroque music took in the fifty years that separate him from Buxtehude. Rather than put together “medleys” with many short sections, Bach created longer, more musically unified separate movements. This is true for his vocal music as well as his instrumental works; even a relatively old-fashioned piece like *Singet dem Herrn* reflects that tendency.

But why call *Singet dem Herrn* “old-fashioned”? Only because it is one of a scant half-dozen of Bach’s major vocal works that feature few or no independent instrumental lines. (As ever, we make an exception for continuo parts, which offer support but contribute little that stands apart.) Even so, we could also reasonably label *Singet dem Herrn* a concerto. That’s because, like any concerto in Vivaldi’s *Le quattro stagioni*, Bach’s great motet is made up of three discrete movements in a traditional tempo sequence, *fast-slow-fast*. Furthermore, Bach seems to have been thinking (even more than usual) in instrumental terms as he conceived the work. John Eliot Gardiner was not the first to notice the transfer of idioms in this work, but his eloquent description of Bach’s handiwork remains unmatched. Gardiner begins by citing Mozart’s amazement at this score when he first encountered it in Leipzig in 1789:

“When the singing was finished he cried out, full of joy: ‘Now there is something one can learn from!’” . . . Nothing in Mozart’s previous experience of church music could have prepared him for this, the most secular, dance-impregnated vocal music Bach ever wrote and the most orchestrally conceived of the motets, evoking instruments and percussive effects beyond the drums and harps called for by the psalmist. . . . [F]rom the way he sets the single word “Singet!” in Choir II he shows that he is out to extract percussive edge and frisson from his text. By the final section, “Lobet den Herrn in seinen Taten,” it feels as though Bach has dragooned all the Old Testament temple instruments into the service of praising the Lord, like some latter-day big band leader.

Bach scholar Daniel Melamed has pointed out other exceptional features: in the first movement, the unprecedented use of one choir to accompany a fugal exposition in the other; in the second, the unusual integration of poetic (“aria”) and hymn texts in the same movement; in the outer movements, contrapuntal textures that utilize true fugues rather than points of imitation or fugato.

Of these, the most extraordinary writing comes in the first movement's four-part fugue beginning with "Die Kinder Zion sei'n fröhlich": it is a *long* fugue subject, and it is presented first in choir 1, voices entering in the order S-A-T-B, while choir 2 carries on with accompanimental motives ("Singet!" etc.). After the bass entrance, the voices of both choirs re-enter—together—with the subject in reverse order T-A-S.

In the middle movement, choir 2 presents a four-part chorale (hymn) harmonization. Choir 1 responds, phrase by phrase, with an "aria" set in slightly freer counterpoint; the text source for this latter music remains unknown. Although Bach noted in his autograph that the movement could be repeated, with choirs switching roles and a second strophe of the "aria" sung, the authentic performing parts contain no such second strophe, and repetition of the movement would seem to upset the symmetry of the three movements in performance. Both choirs combine for the third movement's concluding four-voice fugue, which culminates, per Melamed, in "perhaps the best-motivated high soprano B-flat in the entire choral repertory."

Domenico Scarlatti's *Stabat Mater* arguably dates from 1715, when he was at the Basilica Giulia. In any case this elaborate work, scored for SSSAATTBB choir and continuo, rivals his father's own setting in its skillful, endlessly varied manipulation of the ten voices, seldom heard altogether but combined and recombined to produce a series of ravishing effects.

The *Stabat Mater* text dates from the 13th century and is usually ascribed to Jacopone da Todi, a Franciscan monk. In it, a believer contemplates the suffering of Christ's mother as she witnesses his crucifixion. Many musical settings have been created; perhaps the best known are from Palestrina (c.1590), Vivaldi (1712), Pergolesi (1736), Haydn (1767), and Dvořák (1877). Baroque composers showed particular concern for finding a way to break up these ten stanzas of two tercets each in order to create a sequence of moods (called *affects* during the era) that built to a satisfying conclusion. (Jacopone's original poem draws upon an understandably narrow range of feelings.)

Scarlatti's strategy was to begin with relatively severe imitative counterpoint in the manner of the *stile antico* ("old style") typified by Palestrina's restrained 16th-century polyphony. Using delicately winding contrapuntal lines that present acute challenges of balance and interpretation for the singers, the composer constantly varies the timbre, texture, and activity of the text settings, seldom using all ten voices at once but sensitively picking out words or phrases for text-painting (e.g., a descending figure for *Quae moerebat et dolebat*, "Christ above in torment hangs"). Gradually, declamatory

homophony and palpable metric rhythms are introduced more frequently, as in the emphatic duple meter of *Eja mater* or the brisk 4/2 fugue of *Fac me verum tecum flere*. A tipping point is finally reached at *Inflammatus*, which receives extended dramatic treatment straight out of a Handel opera; from this point on we are firmly in the grip of Baroque theatrical aesthetics. The final tercet is divided into two lengthy contrasting sections, to which a third long *Amen* section is tacked on for good measure. “May my soul Thy goodness praise, / Safe in Paradise with Thee,” the text pleads. The music, meanwhile, positively rings with assurance that this will be so.