

## Program Notes

Orchestral Suite no. 3 in D, BWV 1068

Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)



Bach's great sacred works and organ compositions have such a high profile today, and are so highly regarded, that it seems impossible to imagine the same composer ever producing the Baroque equivalent of pop music. Surely, one feels, the mighty Bach would reject such demeaning activities, would prefer to write a perfectly structured fugue than anything for the top forty charts. Such is the popular perfectionist image of the man; yet he, like most composers, was a product of his time, and wrote in the same genres as his contemporaries. It was the fashion in the Baroque era to write suites of dances, stylized versions of the ballroom dances of the day. Composers would write bourrées, gavottes and minuets, then assemble them into one extended collection, which the French called suites and the Germans overtures. Bach wrote four such works, now known by the French name of "suite." The original manuscripts have been lost, making it difficult to determine dates of composition, but circumstances suggest that Bach wrote most of the suites in the 1720s, while employed at the court at Cöthen. One reason for that dating is that such suites were quite popular as court music. Additionally, Duke Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen kept a small orchestra suitable for the scoring of the suites. Bach wrote much less instrumental music after moving to Leipzig in 1723, for there his duties were dominated by sacred music, with little time to devote to casual entertainment.

Of the third of the four suites, the full manuscript has disappeared. However, a set of orchestral parts survives from the 1730s, when in addition to his duties at the St. Thomas Church, Bach also occasionally participated in public concerts held through the Collegium Musicum series at Zimmermann's coffee house. Some of the parts are in Bach's own handwriting, others in that of his son Carl Philip Emanuel and of various friends. However, if Bach participated at all in the making of the copies, he likely approved of the entire process, so one can imagine that these copies of the missing original are as he intended the work to be. The suite stands out amongst much of his music by its unusually prominent use of wind instruments, here including three trumpets and two oboes, in addition to the usual strings, harpsichord, and timpani.

Most famous of the various movements is the gentle and reflective second, known to modern audiences by a nickname of twentieth century origin: Air on the G String. Bach never called it by that name, but in his time "air" was a synonym for song, or more broadly speaking,

any song-like melody whether vocal or instrumental. Since, indeed, the violins can play this melody on the G string, the nickname is not inappropriate. Gavottes, bourrées, and giguees were all familiar social dances of the day. Bach would not have expected his audiences to get up and dance for these movements; rather, he intended to reproduce the rhythms and moods of those dances in a concert work.

- I. Overture
- II. Air
- III. Gavotte I & II
- IV. Bourrée
- V. Gigue

Concerto Grosso in g, op. 6, no. 8,  
“Christmas Concerto”

Arcangelo Corelli  
(1653 - 1713)



Whether it is the singing of angels or the singing of “Jingle Bells” that comes to mind, it is, in either case, vocal music that is usually associated with Christmas. Singers can avail themselves of a rich seasonal repertoire, but instrumentalists, other than those useful piano accompanists, all too often are left out in the cold. Yet this was not the case in seventeenth century Italy. In that time and place, a new type of Christmas music began that drew upon a different part of the Christmas story; angels may sing, but shepherds play, and they, too, were

in attendance at the first Christmas. In the late seventeenth century, shepherds of Italy’s Abruzzi region began coming to Rome in the Christmas season, bringing their folk instruments to play lullabies before scenes of the Nativity. They performed on shawms (a sort of early oboe) and bagpipes. Neither instrument is found in modern orchestras, nor even in orchestras of that day, but Italian composers, inspired by this charming pastorale tradition, began to evoke the spirit of these scenes in orchestral works. They used double-reeds in place of shawms, and preserved the spirit of the bagpipe in recurrent droning notes in the cellos and other low-pitched instruments. Even the lullaby mood was recalled in the use of a 6/8 meter representing the rocking of the Child by His mother. These so-called Christmas concerti became quite the vogue, and most Italian composers around 1700 wrote at least one such work. The concerti may be less numerous than vocal works for the Christmas season, but they are no less lovely.

One of the best-known Christmas concerti is by Arcangelo Corelli, born near Ravenna in 1653 to a family of prosperous land-owners. His family’s prestige surely attracted patrons to the young violinist and composer, but before long, he could stand on his own reputation. After his move to

Rome in 1675, he dominated that city's musical community, and was much admired by his contemporaries, one of whom even described him publicly as the "Orpheus of our day." For a man of his reknown, Corelli published very little music; barely one-hundred works came to the press during his life. By his own account, he was afraid of public criticism, but as tonight's work proves, he had little to fear.

It is not certain when Corelli wrote his *Christmas Concerto*. He tended to withhold works from publication for some years before releasing them. However, in the last months before his death in 1713, he was preparing the printing plates for a set of twelve concerti. In his will, written three days before his death, he left his violins and the printing plates to a colleague who oversaw the publication of the pieces as Corelli's opus six the following year. The *Christmas Concerto* is the eighth concerto in the set. Its subtle seasonal mood is reserved for the last of its six movements. In the score, Corelli noted that this movement could be omitted from performance at times other than Christmas, but few performers follow that advice. It seems that the movement's gentle beauty easily overcomes any worries about anticipating the season.

Magnificat in D, BWV 243

Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)

In 1723, the prominent German city of Leipzig was seeking a new Kantor, that is, a composer/conductor/performer, all abilities in one man, to take charge of the community's sacred music needs. They were big shoes to fill, particularly so because the position's previous occupant had been the now-retired Georg Philip Telemann, and city officials were determined to replace him with a name equally illustrious. The only problem was that the illustrious names in question were not interested. The first person to whom the position was offered declined the honor, as did the second person. And so, reluctantly, Leipzig officials turned to their third choice, a court musician in the employ of Duke Leopold of Anhalt-Coethen. "Since the best is not available, he will have to do," they reportedly declared. Thus, much against the will of his future employers, the position of Kantor in Leipzig had fallen to Johann Sebastian Bach. Since the Leipzig authorities were less than impressed with him as an applicant, Bach set out immediately to win their favor as an employee. Although he wrote much magnificent music in these first months, his most impressive effort in his first year in Leipzig surely must be the composition of the Magnificat, written for the Christmas season of 1723.

St. Thomas' was a Lutheran church, as were most German churches except those in the extreme south. In the Reformation of the 1500s, Martin Luther had rejected the use of Latin in religious contexts, in favor of the congregation's native German. Thus, the great majority of Bach's sacred

works were written to German texts, but not the Magnificat. This text from the first book of Luke, Mary's song of praise on receiving the news that she carries the Son of God, was a major canticle of the Catholic church and one of very few to be retained by the Lutherans. Luther himself created a German translation of the verses for use in the Lutheran vespers each Sunday evening, but for special occasions, the Latin original was preserved. Thus, on Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun, the Magnificat was sung in Latin. Therefore, his setting of the Magnificat, first intended for a Christmas performance, is one of Bach's very few works to a Latin text.

There are two versions of Bach's Magnificat: the original in the key of E-flat, as performed in 1723 with German-language Christmas texts interpolated into the work, and the revised in the key of D, as reworked by its creator a few years later without the Christmas texts. It is the revised version that is still used today. The work opens with a fanfare-like mood appropriate to the jubilation of Mary's text, driven forward by trumpets and a forthright chorus. A pair of soprano arias follow with the chorus leaping at the end of the second. The subsequent bass aria speaks of the great honor paid to Mary by God. Next comes an alto/tenor duet of gentle simplicity, offset by the powerfully polyphonic chorus that follows, with much interplay between the vocal parts. A powerfully dramatic tenor aria follows, and all builds gradually to a sequence of intricate choral statements and a finale that reprises the triumphant theme of the opening.

- I. Magnificat (chorus)
- II. Et exultavit (soprano)
- III. Quia respexit (soprano)
- IV. Omnes generations (chorus)
- V. Quia fecit mihi magna (bass)
- VI. Et misericordia (alto/tenor)
- VII. Fecit potentiam (chorus)
  
- VIII. Deposuit potentes de sede (tenor)
- IX. Esurientes (alto)
- X. Suscepit Israel (soprano/alto with chorus)
- XI. Sicut locutus est (chorus)
- XII. Gloria (chorus)

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