

Program Notes from Oct. 2001

Kenneth Cooper

PROGRAM NOTES

When we think of Bach, we might picture him as the provincial German cantor in his Leipzig school or church setting, surrounded by small children, most of them his. We might not realize, though, that, as a young man, Bach travelled quite a bit, primarily within the German provinces and often with his patron, the Duke of Weimar. (We know of at least six trips, including one to the Prague area). There are, however, gaps in our knowledge, and to fill them in, we have allowed ourselves some poetic license. In 1709, we imagine, Bach may have gone to France, Italy and Spain: as Bach's music is definitely under the influence, we think his journey south is at least as plausible as Shakespeare's had been more than a century earlier. (Anyone who has read Erica Jong's *Serenissima*, about Shakespeare's "lost" years, will understand how convincing our suggestion might be). The southern tour was the way, in those days, to see the greatest sights, eat the greatest food, hear the greatest music, take in the greatest artworks, meet the world's most romantic men and women and to "sow one's wild oats" before settling down to the security, responsibility and conventionality of married life.

Arriving in Italy, Bach heard the sensuous string writing of Corelli and Vivaldi played on the latest Strads and Amatis, and produced a balmy, brilliant and bouncy *Trio in C major* (BWV 1038) in response. Experiencing the opera and cantata with luscious Italian voices singing in the most suave *bel canto* manner, he set about composing an extraordinary Italian solo cantata for basso - with a delightful harpsichord part - about a lover's determination to free himself from the hurt of a betrayed love. Bach here devises an ingenious technique: he writes a *Menuetto* for the singer and a *Corrente* for the instruments to be played simultaneously, in order to dramatize the tension between the lover and his temptations.

In Spain, Bach heard flamenco first hand; I myself will contribute Soler's impassioned *Fandango* for solo harpsichord, as amazing and dangerous a representation of the flamenco tradition as exists in Western music. The traditional song and dance tune *La Folia*, with its characteristic repeating bass line (ground bass) - a spark for so many composers from Corelli and Marais to Liszt and Rachmaninoff - will be heard in Vivaldi's rare but spectacular version for four virtuosi (two competing/concerting violins, cello and harpsichord); our two brilliant dancers have specially choreographed this for us in authentic style. (This number was a big hit at Lincoln Center - Tully Hall last year.)

Our concert will be packed with a wide variety of gorgeous music, some that Bach might have heard and some he composed himself in response to the stimulus. Our guests are all internationally known virtuosi. Launching our tour is a newly choreographed ballet, *Fete Marine*, wherein a group of cheerful sailors are marooned on a Mediterranean island among the Cyclops (immense giants) and witness the love between the shepherd Acis and the water-nymph Galatea as well as the killing of Acis by the Cyclops, Polyphemus. The delicious French dances - which we will do with some improvised ornaments - opened worlds of possibility for Bach, who, as we know, made the dance suite one of his specialties. The work will be danced by the two finest exponents of Baroque dance. (To learn how to do this yourself, be not afraid: come to our Baroque Dance Workshop, Sunday, October 7 at 11 AM, also at Consolati).

Finally, our new chamber version of Bach's great *Passacaglia* and *Fugue in C minor*, itself a cornerstone of the German organ repertoire, will tie all the threads together and reveal the work's deep Latin roots. Thus we summarize how exciting and stimulating this Mediterranean journey - whether real or virtual - was for Bach: he went home, got married and had twenty children.