

Program Notes from Nov. 2002

James Bagwell

PROGRAM NOTES

When we think of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) there tends to be a focus on the so-called mature works, major musical events such as *Messiah*, and the *Mass in B-minor*, which reflect the wisdom and clarity of two well-seasoned and experienced composers. This evening's performance, however, showcases some of the music written by Bach and Handel, as young, but no less brilliant composers.

Cantata 150, entitled *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich* (To Thee Lord, I Lift my Soul) is thought to be the oldest Bach cantata in existence. Written sometime before 1707 when Bach was in his early twenties, this cantata was composed for the church of St. Blasius in Muehlhausen where the young composer held one of his earliest organist positions. The work is based mainly on Psalm 25, alternating with freely conceived poetry reflecting the Biblical texts. Here the young Bach explores some very futuristic harmony, which as always, illuminates the text. Cantata 150 is scored for small orchestra consisting of two violins, bassoon, continuo, and four-part chorus. Sharp ears will recognize the repeated theme in the continuo line from the final chaconne movement; this theme was later used by Johannes Brahms in the last movement in his Fourth Symphony. Cantata 150 appeared in print for the first time in 1884 in the old Bach complete edition to which Brahms was an avid subscriber.

Have Mercy Upon Me O Lord, composed by Handel, is the third in a set of twelve works known collectively as the Chandos Anthems. These anthems were originally commissioned by James Brydges, the Duke of Chandos between 1717-1720, when Handel was in his early thirties and beginning to enjoy success as an opera composer in London. Reflecting the resources at the Duke's estate at Cannons, the anthems were written using three voice parts only, treble, tenor and bass. This particular anthem begins in an introspective mood, but later loses its penitential quality by being overtaken in last movement by a triumphant double fugue. This rarely performed work is truly one of the gems of eighteenth century, and also represents some of Handel's earliest efforts with the English language, which he would later master with great eloquence and skill in his oratorios.

The Coronation Anthems, composed and performed in 1727, were written for the coronation of King George II held at Westminster Abbey. Handel composed four anthems for the October 11 coronation, all with texts derived from both the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. "Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened," the second of the Coronation Anthems is divided into three sections. The first part combines both block chord and some imitative writing. In the second movement, Handel makes effective use of the *suspirato*, or sigh gesture on the word "mercy." The anthem ends with a festive Alleluia, which supersedes the more solemn mood of the preceding movement.

Handel's set of six concertos, opus 3, published in 1703, were a collection of orchestral compositions which he wrote as introductions or entr'actes for use at performances of his operas, oratorios, or anthems. For the Concerto in G major, Handel made use of movements from Chandos Anthem no. 7. A short introduction is followed by a fugue-like allegro, whose interludes feature rapid oboe and violin passages. Instead of a full-length slow movement, there is a brief Adagio for oboe and strings. This concerto ends, atypically, with a fugue based primarily on repeated notes. The G minor Oboe Concerto, published in 1703, opens with a Grave in French Overture style dominated by dotted rhythms. A short Allegro movement followed by a lovely Sarabande; the concerto ends with an Allegro in three, dominated primarily by rapid passage work between the strings and the oboe soloist.