

Program Notes for October 11, 2008

Kenneth Cooper

Bach's Great Trios

“Trios are the most difficult of all pieces to construct and require a more skilled master than other harmonic pieces: each of the three voices must have a fine melody, yet all must at the same time support the triad as if they met by accident.”

~ Johann Mattheson (1739)

The consummate mastery that Johann Sebastian Bach brought to the composition of trios needs wider recognition. Among Bach's extant trios are nineteen actual trio-sonatas, fifteen *Sinfonias (Three-Part Inventions)* for keyboard, various suite movements, 41 Preludes and Fugues in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and nearly 200 arias (with obbligato instruments) and organ chorale-preludes. [The trio-sonatas are listed at the end of this article.] Of the nineteen trios, the set specified by Bach “for two manuals and pedal”, clearly intended for organ or pedal-harpsichord, has had a long and lively popularity with organists; these six zesty trios, which demand extraordinary skill and coordination, never fail to move and delight listeners, even though church acoustics often make the individual voices difficult to differentiate. With his instrumental version of the opening to Trio 4 (described below), Bach himself opened the door to performances of these trios *as chamber music* – i.e., by various instruments – thereby recognizing their kinship with the trio-sonata genre, one of the earliest Baroque chamber music traditions.

“Trios must be so created that it is impossible to tell which of the parts is the most important.”

~ Johann Joachim Quantz (1752)

Although *tricinia* (pieces for three instruments or voices) were known throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance (works of Machaut, Landini and Dufay come to mind), the trio-sonata came of age with the invention (c. 1600) of the *basso continuo*, a bass-line played by melodic instruments (cello, gamba, bassoon) and harmonic instruments (harpsichord, organ, lute). From the demands and rewards of this combination arose the charming conceit of writing trios for four instruments, the harmonic instrument “realizing” (filling in) the gap between the bass and the upper voices. When it became clear that those upper voices (primarily violinists showing off their gorgeous new Strads, Guarneris and Amatis) were becoming more audible and more brilliant, the trio-sonata took on a more purposeful form and function – displaying the possibilities of cooperation and competition in four organized movements (slow-fast-slow-fast) and catching the attention of Italian church-goers in order to stimulate, or at least drown out, the collection of money; hence the term *sonata da chiesa* (church sonata) for this genre. It wasn't long before dance movements considered inappropriate for church (such as Minuets, Sarabandes, Courantes, Gavottes and Giges) crept into trio-sonatas, causing purveyors to call the pieces *sonate da camera* (chamber sonatas) and to pretend (at least for publication) that they weren't church-related at all. The performance of trio-sonatas by a dozen or more performers (at least three or four players on each part) was apparently saved for occasions when more musicians were available, more noise was needed and more money needed to be collected.

Almost every composer of the 17th and 18th centuries wrote trio-sonatas – Legrenzi, Stradella, Buxtehude, Purcell and Corelli in the 17th, Vivaldi, Telemann, Handel, Leclair, Hasse, Gluck and even Haydn in the 18th, and of course Bach and his sons. As was mentioned, the traditional movement sequence of the trio-sonata was slow-fast-slow-fast (in the 17th century there were often more and briefer sections), but it will be quickly noticed that the trios in Bach's “organ” set have only three movements, fast-slow-fast. This is due to the infusion into Bach's instrumental style of the energy, excitement, instrumental virtuosity, passionate lyricism and tonal tension generated by the Vivaldian concerto, which ripped through Europe in the 1710's and impacted everything in its path. Because of the concerto's (or Vivaldi's) desire for instant impact, reflecting new use –

public and court entertainment rather than church function - *fast and loud* was deemed a more effective start than *slow and soft*.

Six of Bach's nine concerto-style trios are the focus of attention here. [The A major Flute Sonata, G minor Gamba Sonata and 5-movement G major Violin Sonata are also in this category.] Our program of October 11, 2008 features all six of the *Trios for two Manuals and Pedal*, in Bach's order for the first time, and in Berkshire premieres of their chamber versions, which offer a more natural, more personal and more sensitively colored palette than the organ normally has. According to Bach's first biographer Forkel (1802), Bach originally composed the trios for his oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, to complete his musical education which began with little pieces such as are contained in the Wilhelm Friedemann and Anna Magdalena Bach notebooks and continued with the Inventions, Sinfonias, French Suites and Book I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Forkel goes on to say of the trios that "it is impossible to overestimate their beauty" and dates them in the author's "most mature age", which we now interpret to be c. 1730. Among the musical qualities in those days that made composition so powerful and performance so immediate was the ability, opportunity and willingness of composers, including Bach, to write music for specific singers and players, and when the fit wasn't quite right, to change the music rather than the performers. We haven't done that exactly, but we have devised chamber versions of these six glorious trios that not only match the register and hopefully the character of Bach's work, but also suit the spectacular and versatile artists of the Berkshire Bach Ensemble.

"Bach's trios...still sound good; they will never grow old, but on the contrary, will outlive all revolutions of fashion in music."

~ Anonymous (C. P. E. Bach?): Bach and Handel – A Comparison (1788)

The E-flat Trio (No. 1) is a bouncy, high-spirited work well-suited to winds, although I cannot imagine any combination of instruments that would not deliver it splendidly (I once played it in Carnegie Hall with my teacher, Sylvia Marlowe, on two harpsichords). Three of my longtime friends – three of the finest wind-players I know – seem perfect for this trio: the ever-gracious virtuoso oboist and painter Marsha Heller, the dynamic and mischievous oboist Meg Owens, and the witty, urbane and marvelously elegant bassoonist Stephen Walt. In this work, Meg plays English horn, a tenor oboe which plays a fifth below the "normal" oboe, and which is totally suitable for Bach's middle voice. [The English horn is neither English nor a horn; the name arose because some Englishman, who shall remain nameless, misunderstood the French name of the instrument, *cor anglé* (bent horn), thinking he was hearing *cor anglais* (*English horn*).] It should be mentioned that the middle voices in these trios are deeper in register than was traditional because Bach wrote those parts for keyboard (left hand), which could go lower than a second violin; they didn't approach the bass-line, however, which was played on the pedal board. Bach was especially fond of middle voices, and according to Carl Philipp Emanuel, he "liked best of all playing the viola, with appropriate loudness and softness", apparently referring to Quantz's explanation that the degree of dissonance had dynamic implications – more pungent dissonances required stronger dynamics. Trio 1, like the others, conveys a typical 18th century interest in intelligent conversation, sharp debate, variety of thought and freedom of expression, all of which aid the protagonists in developing a lively dramatic scene in the manner of a garden or drawing-room comedy.

"Bach insisted on fluent melody in all the voices...No voice, not even a middle voice, was allowed to break off before it had entirely said what it had to say."

~ Johann Nicolaus Forkel, recalling communications with Bach's sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann (1802)

The second trio is more serious than the first and suggests an indoor ensemble (strings) rather than an outdoor one (winds). The closeness and intensity of the dialogue is stimulating to experience with another group of friends: the perceptive and introspective Japanese violinist Eiko Tanaka, the warm-toned, genial and generous Bulgarian violist Irena Momchilova and the brilliant and volatile Scottish cellist Alistair MacRae. The mixture of temperaments ensures a many-faceted aspect to this little drama; here the viola plays the middle voice "with appropriate loudness and softness", heightening and relieving tension by controlling the degree and intensity of

dissonance. The gentle, contemplative Largo and gripping choral-style fugue not only command our attention now, but also intrigued Mozart, who arranged and played them for string trio in 1782. (BBS presented the Mozart version at Ozawa Hall in 1998 as played by Mineko Yajima, Thomas Diener and Lucy Bardo as a fitting introduction to Mozart's C minor Mass).

Trio 3 seems to call out for a fresh voice, the profound and sensitive flute virtuoso Judith Mendenhall. Somehow the intimacy of two players playing three voices (as in those great sonatas for violin, flute and gamba with keyboard obbligato) not only brings the partners into a closer, more penetrating conversation, but allows greater freedom of expression to each. The blended thirds and sighing chromatics of the almost Mozartean Andante allows us to see the collaborators in a more relaxed setting, and provides some relief before the final Vivace rekindles the action with its rolling triplets and other acrobatics. Friedemann had his work cut out for him on the organ that day – and must have had a few things to say to his dad about it that night – but at least he didn't have to deal with one particular flute problem: where to breathe.

An intermission is needed to prepare us for the somber and bittersweet Trio 4 in E minor. Bach's original (1723) version of the opening Adagio-Vivace – a Sinfonia introducing Part 2 of his glorious Cantata 76 – is scored for oboe d'amore, viola da gamba and basso continuo, an orchestration which paints for us in no uncertain terms how dark the colors need to be for this piece. Marsha Heller (now playing *oboe d'amore*, the alto oboe pitched midway between the oboe and English horn) is essential for this work, being our definitive designer of dreamy darkness; the bold baron of the bassoon, Stephen Walt, joins her in this stained-glass portrait, as does our ubiquitous usher of the underworld, bassist Peter Weitzner. The expansiveness and relative spaciness of the Andante contrast sharply with the ornamental density of the outer movements. Like many a dark-hued Rembrandt, we learn much – even about light – from this astonishing work.

With its C major fanfares, Trio 5 opens in direct sunlight, asking the normally comfortable, shaded viola to take a prominent role. This piece is fun to play on the harpsichord, especially in collaboration with violist Irena Momchilova, probably because, of all six trios, Trio 5 has the most in common with the Brandenburg Concerti, especially No. 2. Without employing any actual trumpets or other orchestral brilliances, Bach teases us with similar materials and a similar entanglement of figuration over a rhythmically driving bass-line. We must not fail to recognize the profoundly moving three-voice dialogues that constitute the slow movements in these trios. The imitative style allows the characters to intertwine their thoughts, permitting the listener to grasp the relationships of those thoughts to one another - whether the characters agree or disagree, and how they develop their ideas, as in a verbal conversation. These movements (especially the passion-inspired Sicilianas in Trios 1, 5 and 6) are events in themselves, but they also serve to create a deep perspective against which to view the outer movements.

Trio 6 – which Berkshirites with long memories will recall hearing as the overture to our staged Coffee Cantata of 1994 – is an ebullient, sparkling work very much in Vivaldian concerto style, with extended, brilliant virtuoso riffs; it therefore seems to be, as Bach planned it, just the piece to wind up the evening, with everyone playing, lots of noise being made and, if authenticity is alive and well, lots of money being collected.

Bach's Trio-Sonatas (Chronological Listing)

- BWV 1039 Trio-Sonata in G for Two Flutes and Continuo (Bach's original version of the Gamba/Clavier Sonata in G, BWV 1027), c. 1720
- BWV 1027-1029 Three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Clavier Obbligato (in G, D, g), c. 1720
- BWV 1014-1019 Six Sonatas for Violin and Clavier Obbligato (in b, A, E, c, f, G), c. 1720
- BWV 1030, 1032 Sonatas in B minor & A major for Flute and Clavier Obbligato, c. 1723
- BWV 525-530 Six Sonatas "For Two Manuals and Pedal" (in Eb, c, d, e, C, G), c. 1730
- BWV 1037 Trio-Sonata in C for Two Violins and Continuo, c. 1735
- BWV 1079 Trio-Sonata in C minor for Flute, Violin and Continuo (from *A Musical Offering*, 1747)