

Baroque Hors d'œuvres with a Bach Main Course : Berkshire Bach Premières Kenneth Cooper's Reconstruction of J. S. Bach's *Vergnügte Pleißen-Stadt* S.216 (1728)

Seth Lachterman
December 6, 2010

Berkshire Bach Society, "The Many Faces of Bach," November 27, 2010: First Congregational Church, Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

- George Frideric Handel, *The Celebrated Water Piece* in D Major (c. 1715)
- Antonio Vivaldi, Violin Concerto in B-flat Major, *La Caccia* (1725)
- Arcangelo Corelli, Concerto Grosso in G Minor, *Fatto per la notte di natale* (1699, published 1714), Op. 6. No. 8
- Johann Sebastian Bach, Cantata S.216 *Vergnügte Pleißen-Stadt* (1728) (reconstructed by Kenneth Cooper)

Soloists:

Allan Dean, trumpet
Ben Harms, timpani
Marjorie Bagley, violin
Alison Hale, flute

Vania Chan, soprano
Kate Maroney, mezzo-soprano
Benjamin Luxon, narrator

Ensemble:

Patrick Wood, violin; Irena Momchilova, viola; Alistair MacRae, cello, Peter Weitzner, bass; Alison Hale, flute; Marsha Heller, oboe; Gerard Reuter, oboe/English horn; Stephen Walt, bassoon.

Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord, director



Frontispiece to the song anthology, "The Singing Muse by the Pleiße" (1736)

In celebration of Berkshire Bach's twentieth season (full disclosure: the author is a charter board member and past president), music director Kenneth Cooper prepared something unique. Mr. Cooper, who is best known for his zesty performances of Bach's chamber music, is also a musicologist of no mean accomplishment. Besides preparing scholarly editions of harpsichord music, he has been, as of late, in the reconstruction business: finishing or recreating works by masters from mere fragments. Last year he reconstructed the violin part to Mozart's *Adagio Quasi Fantasia*, K. 396/385f from an extant five measures in Mozart's hand. He has also reconstructed the original cadenza for Beethoven's B-flat piano concerto. Tonight, we heard a United States première of Mr. Cooper's extensive reconstruction of a wedding cantata by J.S. Bach, listed in the Schmieder's catalogue as No. 216.



Conductor, Harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper who reconstructed J. S. Bach's Cantata S.216

Bach, in his capacity as Leipzig's music director, wrote secular cantatas for a variety of civic and ceremonial occasions. Less than two dozen of these works survive, but many served as material for other secular or sacred pieces. For example, the Christmas Oratorio largely consists of movements from secular cantatas written as encomia for the Elector, Counts, or lesser notables. Such reworking of previous material is termed a "parody,"

though without the connotation of humor we associate with the term today. In 1728 Bach was called upon to write a wedding cantata for Johann Heinrich Wolff (1690-1759), a well-heeled merchant and shop

owner, and Susanna Regina Hempel (1708-1779). While the groom hailed from Leipzig, the bride was from Zittau, a town on the opposite side of the German state, on the extreme eastern border with Saxony. As is characteristic with allegorical German Baroque writing, the cantata personifies the towns' corresponding rivers (the Pleiße for Leipzig, the Neiße for Zittau). This degree of separation between rivers and lovers formed the conceit on which the poet Christoph Friedrich Henrici's libretto is based.

Of the cantata's seven movements (two duets, two arias and three recitatives), only the vocal parts are extant. However, there is more music available on which to reconstruct: the first aria and the final duet are parodies from other Bach secular cantatas (S.204 and S.205 respectively). Thus, Mr. Cooper's job became one of creating from scratch the opening duet, an aria, all recitatives, and revising the instrumentation for each movement. This is all a very daunting task and requires, especially in the first duet, a real grasp of Bach's ritornello structure and textural interplay. Mr. Cooper, in his opening talk, did not reveal which movements were his own inventions or which were Bach's; this was a cagey move to insure an objective reception. It's safe to say that the great majority of listeners were charmed by the whole thing and that Mr. Cooper's reconstructions were extremely Bach-like, idiomatic, and thoroughly entertaining. Soprano Vania Chan and mezzo-soprano Kate Maroney as the two conversing rivers were appropriately mellifluous in tone and phrasing. Ms. Chan's light voice and phrasing were perfect complements to Ms. Maroney's shadowy vocal hue. The cadenza in Ms. Chan's aria was especially vibrant and effective. The two *obbligato* solo parts were graciously performed by flutist Alison Hale and violist Irena Momchilova.

The program's first half, sported as "Summer on the Thames," "Fall in Venice," and "Christmas in Rome," left the cantata as "Spring in Leipzig," a curious notion for a work written for February nuptials. However, the seasonal context for the other works was more consistent: Vivaldi's *La Caccia*, Corelli's "Christmas Concerto" and Handel's "Remarkable Water Piece." While seeming familiar baroque fare, these works were nonetheless surprisingly fresh in arrangement and presentation. Most peculiar was the *Celebrated Water Piece in D Major*, also known as "Mr. Handel's Celebrated Water Piece," HWV 341. This suite was most likely written in 1715 before the grander and well-known *Water Music* that was performed on the Thames in July 1717. The earlier suite features a solo trumpet, strings, and timpani. While ostensibly a precursor of the great Thames piece, most of the music doesn't figure in the later work. In fact, the final March was taken from *Partenope* written in 1730. Thus, the suite actually might be someone else's arrangement of Handel's music. The opening fanfare, indeed, is familiar from the final *Water Music*, but what remains is fresh and unexpected. Allan Dean, one of the great trumpet virtuosos in this country, was brilliant as expected. Ben Harms, timpanist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and co-director of the early music ensemble Calliope, was superb in this oddball Handel work. Violinist Marjorie Bagley, who played throughout the evening's concert, was the featured soloist in Vivaldi's concerto (Op. 8 No. 10), *La Caccia*. Ms. Bagley, who has performed before with Berkshire Bach under Mr. Cooper, gave the concerto an unusually piquant interpretation. Mr. Cooper's continuo, an active, rustling presence, added energy and tension.

Ben Luxon, the erstwhile great English operatic baritone, while no longer a singing performer, has appeared as a narrator in several local concerts. Mr. Luxon has also starred in several productions of Hudson's Walking the Dog Theater (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Under Milk Wood*). The greater Berkshire area is made even greater by Mr. Luxon's presence: his stentorian voice, clarion delivery, and sheer vitality on stage are something worth the price of admission alone. Tonight, Mr. Luxon read Christmas and Advent passages as interpolations to Corelli's Concerto Grosso in G-Minor, *Fatto per la notte di natale*. Some passages preceded the movement, and one came dramatically mid-way. The usual string setting was amplified with winds, a technique that was effective in helping to evoke the drone of musettas in the Sicilian-inflected final *Pastorale*. Ms. Bagley added much excitement and rhythmic drive with her embellishments and figurations. Mixing the creamy warmth of Stephen Walt's bassoon with the punchy articulation from oboists Marsha Heller and Gerard Reuter, Mr. Cooper's thrilling vision of this work is hardly the sleepy Christmas chestnut we expect.

Innovative programming, and yes, “packaging,” is the way classical music can garner new audiences and maintain the interest of seasoned listeners. We see the success of this approach throughout the year in Great Barrington: Close Encounters with Music, Crescendo, and Berkshire Bach are providing South County with the richest musical palette west of Boston and north of New York. Tonight’s concert, replete with a musical intermission hosted by “Herr Zimmermann” (a jocund, versifying Ben Luxon) and goodies from Castle Street Café, attempted to recreate the atmosphere at the famous Leipzig coffee house in which so much of Bach’s music was enjoyed by the community. Two hundred seventy-five years later, thanks to groups like Berkshire Bach, in New England, we can celebrate the vitality and good humor of a heritage we know only from mere ink dots on yellowed, aging paper.



About the author

Seth Lachterman lives in Hillsdale, New York, which abuts the Berkshires in Massachusetts. While dividing his past academic career between music (composition and musicology) and mathematics, he has, over past three decades written original and critical works on the Arts. His essays have appeared in *The Thomas Hardy Association Journal*, *English Literature in Transition*, and poetry in *Raritan*. As a charter member and past president of the Berkshire Bach Society, he provided scholarly program notes for the Society’s concerts for two decades. Simultaneously, he has been a principal at Encore Systems, LLC, a software and technology consulting company. From 2006, is president emeritus of Walking The Dog Theatre of Hudson, New York. Seth writes regularly for *Berkshire Review of The Arts*. When not listening to music, Seth Lachterman reads philosophy with a current interest in Heidegger.