Southwest Florida Symphony Orchestra
Small Stage Symphonies Concert 2 – Gloria!
Program notes by Dr. David Cole

Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 2

Given the general adulation given to Johann Sebastian Bach and his music in our time, it may come as a surprise that during his lifetime his renown and influence covered only a small area of German-speaking Europe. Bach was best known as an organist rather than a composer, and had a stellar reputation for testing new organs in Protestant churches. If your parish had just installed a new organ, the guy you called in to peek under the hood, kick the tires and put the instrument through its paces was J.S. Bach.

Bach’s life was one of an itinerant musician, which was very typical in the 18th century. He moved according to his employment, hoping that the next post would provide better conditions than the previous one. Between 1703 and 1723, Bach held five different consecutive posts, each with slightly different duties. It is an interesting footnote to history that for his final job in Leipzig (1723 – 1750), he was the third choice for the position after Georg Philip Telemann and Johann Mattheson had turned it down. One of the members of the Leipzig town council was quoted as saying “If the best candidates are unavailable, lesser ones will have to be accepted.”

A composer wishing to be employed by church or court would need to produce music pleasing to his prince. Most composers would send prospective patrons samples of their music – a composer’s résumé or curriculum vita. These works would usually be accompanied by a fawning cover letter, extolling the virtues of the prince and hinting (with varying degrees of subtlety) that the composer’s music could further brighten His Eminence’s already luminously shining regal star.

In 1721, Bach attempted to catch the patronly eye of the Most Honorable Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg-Schwedt. He sent the Margrave a set of six concerti grossi (works for multiple solo instruments and string orchestra) along with an introductory letter that can best be described as obsequious:

“...I have in accordance with Your Highness’s most gracious orders taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which I have adapted to several instruments; begging Your Highness most humbly not to judge their imperfection with the rigor of that discriminating and sensitive taste, which everyone knows Him to have for musical works, but rather to take into benign Consideration the profound respect and the most humble obedience which I thus attempt to show Him.”

Bach’s petition was either ignored or rejected by the Margrave, and no offer of employment was forthcoming. Fortunately for the history of music, either the Margrave or one of his secretaries felt that the music and the accompanying letter were worth preserving. When the manuscripts were rediscovered over a century later, the works were collectively dubbed the “Brandenburg” Concertos.
Of the six concertos, the Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 has perhaps the most unusual solo group: flute, oboe, violin and trumpet, with the trumpet written in a very high range. The bright sounds of all four soloists make this work a brilliant tour-de-force of Baroque orchestral writing. The opening movement follows the *ritornello* principles of the Italian solo concerto, alternating modulatory passages for the soloists with interjections from the full ensemble. The *Andante*, in plaintive D minor, is scored for the flute, oboe and violin soloists with *basso continuo* (the keyboard instrument plus one bass instrument). Each soloist sings their melancholy aria over a walking figure in the bass. The trumpet returns in the finale and brings back the joyous energy of the opening movement. Bach intertwines his soloists in a brilliant web of energetic counterpoint throughout the movement, relishing the various combinations of any and all of the solo instruments.

**J. S. Bach: Jesu, meine Freude**

Bach’s motets date from his years in Leipzig (1723 – 1750) when he served as the music director for the Thomaskirche as well as three other churches in the city. Part of his duties included providing music and musicians for weddings, funerals and other services outside of the regular Sunday liturgy. It was originally thought that *Jesu, meine Freude* was written in 1723 for the funeral of Frau Kees, who was married to Leipzig’s Postmaster General. More recent scholarship has cast doubts upon this claim, but the work was probably written before 1735.

*Jesu, meine Freude* is the longest and most elaborate of Bach’s six (possibly seven) motets, and exhibits a fascinating symmetrical construction. The first and final movements are identical settings of the chorale *Jesu, meine Freude*, and the other movements tend to mirror each other as well, centered around the central 5-voice fugue. The symmetry even extends to the overall construction: there are 209 measures leading up to the fugue; there are 208 which follow it.

The entire work is centered around the key of E minor, which was associated with grief and mourning. Other notable examples of the use of this tonality to portray grief are Mozart’s Violin Sonata, K. 304 (written immediately after the death of his mother in Paris in 1778, and Haydn’s Symphony No. 44, known as the “Trauesymphonie” (Mourning or Funeral Symphony). Tonight’s performance follows the performance tradition of doubling the vocal lines with instruments.

**Felix Mendelssohn: Heilig and Richte mich Gott**

By 1840, the 33-year old Felix Mendelssohn could claim a list of accomplishments that would make a musician twice his age green with envy. Besides his many successful compositions, his popularity in England (he was a special favorite of the young Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert) and his almost single-handed revivals of the music of J.S. Bach and Franz Schubert, Mendelssohn had helped to make Leipzig a cultural gem. Mendelssohn worked indefatigably to raise the standards of all the city’s public musical institutions, creating artistic traditions (such as Leipzig’s famous Gewandhaus Orchestra) that survive to this day.
So when King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia needed someone to spearhead his campaign to turn Berlin into a new Athens, he quite naturally looked to Mendelssohn to work his magic in the Prussian capital as he had done in Leipzig. While ultimately Mendelssohn was unsuccessful in Berlin, he did produce some unique pieces while in residence there, including some incidental music and a number of sacred works for a capella choir, including the two eight-part settings on tonight’s concert.

*Heilig* was part of an 1846 commission from the king, who desired to have new settings of liturgical texts in German for the Berlin Cathedral Choir to sing during services. Mendelssohn responded with a series of ten choral works, of which *Heilig* sets the German translation of the *Sanctus* section of the Roman Catholic Mass. For greater textual clarity, Mendelssohn set the text syllabically (one pitch per syllable) and creates a diaphanous effect at the beginning by starting with only female voices.

*Richte mich Gott*, a setting of Psalm 43, contrasts male and female voices with both the opening D-minor section and subsequent dance-like 3/8 that follows alternating between men and women. The concluding *Allegro moderato* unites all eight parts in a richly harmonized chorale.

**Vivaldi: Concerto for Strings in G major, “Alla rustica”**

Sometimes we associate a particular type of work with a particular composer because of the sheer quantity of their output in that genre and the generally high quality of that music. One can hardly think of a waltz without Johann Strauss II and his family coming to mind, and the same could be said of the march and John Philip Sousa.

Into this category certainly fall Antonio Vivaldi and the Baroque concerto. While the *ritornello* style of the Italian Baroque concerto predates Vivaldi, his hugely prolific and varied catalog of concertos, like Haydn’s 104 symphonies, served as the benchmark across Europe for both solo concertos (one solo instrument and orchestra) and *concerti grossi* (multiple solo instruments and orchestra). His works were widely published and performed, and the talents of his pupils at the *Ospedale del Pietà* in Venice fired his imagination to write concertos for all manner of instruments besides the violin. In Vivaldi’s vast output of over 600 concertos, you’ll find solo instruments as diverse as flute, oboe, mandolin, lute, trumpet, recorder, bassoon, viola d’amore, horn, chalumeaux (forerunner of the clarinet), organ, viole all’inglese (a viola da gamba with additional resonating strings) and even hurdy-gurdy.

Yet Vivaldi also wrote a number of concertos just for string orchestra alone without soloists. The distinction between an orchestral concerto and a *sinfonia* is largely lost to us, and from available evidence, Vivaldi appears to use the two terms interchangeably. The Concerto “alla rustica” appears to date from about the same time that Vivaldi was writing *The Four Seasons*. It is in three movements, with the first being a brilliant *moto perpetuo* for the violins over relatively static harmonies in the rest of the orchestra. The brief *Adagio* consists of nothing more than stately, homophonic harmonies separated by pregnant pauses. The finale may be the source of the “alla rustica” designation, with its folk-like, repetitive dance tune.
Vivaldi: *Gloria in D major*

“Every Sunday in the churches of the four scuole (schools), during Vespers, there are motets for a large chorus and orchestra. These are composed and conducted by the leading Italian maestri and performed from behind screened-off galleries by girls, the oldest of whom is not twenty years of age. I can think of nothing so delectable and touching as this music: the wealth of artistry, the exquisite taste of the songs, the beauty of the choices, and the precision of performance.” – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, after hearing a concert at the Ospedale del Pietà in Venice, 1770

“The girls sing like angels, and play the violin, the flute, the organ, the oboe, the cello, the bassoon, in short there is no instrument large enough to frighten them.” – Charles de Brosses, after hearing a concert at the Ospedale, 1739

Though he was renowned as both a composer and a violin virtuoso throughout Europe, Vivaldi, like Bach, needed a day job to pay the bills. At the age of 25, he was hired by the Ospedale del Pietà in Venice as their violin teacher (*maestro di violino*). The Ospedale was technically an orphanage, but in 18th-century Venice, this meant that the institution also housed the “unanticipated” children of nobility from liaisons outside the bonds of marriage. Under Vivaldi’s direction, the young female performers became among the most celebrated musicians in Europe and their concerts attracted admirers of both music and femininity from all over the continent. The Ospedale’s orchestra grew to sixty members, and Vivaldi rose to the position of *maestro de’ concerti*, which placed him in charge of all of the musical events and instruction for the orphanage.

In addition the numerous concertos and chamber music Vivaldi wrote for the talented young women under his tutelage, Vivaldi’s considerable output of sacred choral music also dates from his tenure at the Ospedale. For a short time, Vivaldi filled the position of *maestro di coro*, which required him to write a certain number of sacred choral works throughout the year for his young musicians.

Vivaldi’s *Gloria* in D major combines elements of the newly emerging instrumental style of Vivaldi and his contemporaries with the older Venetian polychoral style of Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Gabrieli from a century before. Vivaldi takes the text of the *Gloria* (traditionally heard as one continuous movement in Renaissance Mass settings) and divides it into twelve contrasting sections, giving each a unique musical character.

The opening *Gloria in excelsis* contrasts the propulsive vigor of the unison strings with the bold declarations from oboes and trumpets and more lyrical writing for the choir. *Et in Terra Pax* is a solemn procession, as the choral, violin and oboe lines interweave above the pulsing accompaniment, with some surprising turns of harmony throughout. In the *Laudamus te*, Vivaldi writes with the same virtuosity for the two sopranos as he would for two violin soloists; the movement in fact, follows the same *ritornello* principal (sections for the soloists separated by *tutti* passages for the orchestra) that Vivaldi employs in his concertos. *Gratias agimus tibi* is a brief, stately introduction to the fugal *Propter*
*magnum gloriam* that follows. The *Domine Deus* is a seraphic duet for soprano and oboe, written as a lilting *siciliana*. *Domine, Fili unigenite* dances elegantly in praise of the only Son of the Father, while in the *Domine Deus, Agnus Dei* the alto soloist poignantly sings of the Lamb of God, supported by the choir. *Qui tollis peccata mundi* harkens back to the age of Gabrieli and Monteverdi, while *Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris* is in *ritornello* style, with the unison string figure bearing a certain resemblance to the *Confutatis maledictus* section of Mozart's *Requiem*. *Gloria tu solus sanctus* gives Vivaldi the opportunity to unify the entire work with a brief reworking of the material of the opening movement, almost a “cliff notes” version in its brevity. The final grand *Cum Sancto Spiritu* is a resplendent double fugue, repurposed from an earlier work by Giovanni Maria Ruggeri. Its vigorous contrapuntal energy brings the work to a festive conclusion.