

Bach's Christmas Oratorio

Saturday, December 1 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Catherine Daniel, mezzo-soprano

Geoffrey Sirett, bass

Elizabeth Koch, flute

Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm, Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with D.T. Baker

BACH-WEBERN

Fuga (Ricercata) à 6 voci (from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079) (8')*

PRIOR

4 Early Movements (13')*

Bach: *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*, BWV 846: Prelude in C Major

Gesualdo: Moro, lasso, al mio duolo

Tallis: If ye love me

Bach: *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*, BWV 885: Fugue in G minor

BACH

Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067 (19')*

Ouverture

Rondeau

Sarabande

Bourrée I and II

Polonaise

Menuet

Badinerie

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BACH

Cantata No. 110: "Wachet auf, ihr Adern und ihr Glieder" (4')*

BACH

Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248 (excerpts) (33')*

3. Recitative: "Nun wird mein liebster Brautigam"

- 4. Aria: "Bereite dich, Zion, mit zärtlichen Trieben"
- 8. Aria: "Großer Herr, o starker König"
- 10. Sinfonia: Hirtenmusik
- 18. Recitative: "So geht den hin, ihr Hirten, geht"
- 19. Aria: "Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh"
- 29. Duet: "Herr, dein Mitleid, dein Erbarmen"

BACH

Orchestral Suite No. 4 in D Major, BWV 1069: Réjouissance

(3')*

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Program notes do not follow exact program order

4 Early Movements

works arranged & orchestrated by **Alexander Prior**

(b. London, 1992)

In May 2016, the ESO performed Mr. Prior's arrangement of the Bach Fugue in G minor which forms part of tonight's suite. This is the World Premiere of these works arranged as a suite by Mr. Prior.

As master of all musical matters for St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig, **Johann Sebastian Bach** would have been teacher to many students. In addition, his musical curiosity bordered on the scientific, and he created several works which thoroughly explored particular aspects of composition (his last work, left incomplete at his death, explored every aspect of fugal writing). He wrote two books titled ***The Well-Tempered Clavier***, each containing a Prelude and a Fugue in each of the 12 major and 12 minor keys of what was called circular temperament, or well-tempered tuning. Written originally for keyboard ("clavier" was kind of a catch-all word for keyboard instruments), tonight's suite begins with the Prelude which opens the entire set from Book I, and concludes with the Fugue in G minor from Book II.

The middle movements of the suite are taken from Renaissance vocal works. **Carlo Gesualdo** (c.1560-1613) was an Italian prince, who took his study of music very seriously in spite of his noble rank, and was a master of both the lute, and the madrigal (a composition for several voice parts in which polyphony is a prominent feature). The madrigal "**Moro, lasso, al mio duolo**" is from Gesualdo's Sixth Book of Madrigals (he published seven during his life), and, as many of his works of this kind do, plays up the potent metaphor of love as death, and ecstasy as agony. Four years after his first marriage, Gesualdo murdered his wife and her lover, and it is felt that the guilt haunted him ever after, which is why his works are rife with this imagery. **Thomas Tallis** (1505-1585) was an Englishman who managed to survive the English Reformation of Henry VIII and remain a Catholic, while still composing music for the royal

court and its church. Tallis' song **"If ye love me"** is in four parts for male voices (two countertenors, tenor, and bass), based on William Tyndale's 1539 translation of the Bible; specifically from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus admonishes his followers to keep His commandments, thus earning Jesus' intercession to the Father on their behalf.

Music of **Johann Sebastian Bach**

(b. Eisenach, Saxony, 1685 / d. Leipzig, 1750)

Fuga (Ricercata) à 6 voci (from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079; arr. Webern)

For all their barrier-breaking explorations of harmony and tonal relationships, the composers of the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern et al) often used conventional, even dated forms with which to work out their revolutionary concepts. Twelve-tone works would be written as Passacaglias or in other fairly rigidly-defined templates from the Baroque and even before; Schoenberg, the father of the twelve-tone school, regarded himself as an adherent of tradition in many respects.

So it's probably no surprise that one of his most famous students, Anton Webern, would choose to arrange an actual Baroque work for modern orchestra. Bach's *The Musical Offering* was written as a tribute to the musically enlightened King Frederick II of Prussia, and is a collection of fugues, canons, and other polyphonic forms, all based on a theme composed by the King. Bach dedicated the work to Frederick, and its high point, musically, is a Ricercar – a six-voice fugue. Webern orchestrated the work (November 1934 through January 1935) in such a way that the music seems to be passed round the small orchestra. A line or phrase begun by one instrument or group is completed by another, giving the work an undulating, constantly shifting sense of motion. "I offer proof that I have understood your former method of arranging Bach compositions," Webern wrote Schoenberg.

Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067

Orchestral Suite No. 4 in D Major, BWV 1069: Réjouissance

"Suites," as they were understood by J.S. Bach, were different than our modern conception. The standard format featured a long first movement – an "ouverture" (based on French models, Bach often gave his suite movements French spellings) – which itself was made up, as often as not, by a slow introduction followed by a fugue, followed by a repeat of the introductory section. These opening movements were often almost as long as all the other movements which followed it combined. And what followed it was a series of French court dances and airs.

It's likely Bach wrote more than the four orchestral suites which we know today, but these four are all that survive. Like many of his purely orchestral works, it is believed that two or three of the suites (nos. 1 & 4, and possibly 3) belong to that singular period in Bach's career when he was freed from church music obligations while employed at the court of the Duke of Anhalt-Cöthen beginning in 1717. The second (and third?) suites are believed to have been written for the collection of amateur and semi-

professional musicians who gathered regularly to make music at a Leipzig coffee house during Bach's time as Music Director at the St. Thomas Church there.

The *Second Suite*, which we will hear in its entirety, features a solo flute as a dominant instrument, and concludes with the famous *Badinerie* – a whirling, virtuosic showcase for the flute. It is the only one of the four extant suites in a minor key, though its overall mood is still light and airy. It has been speculated that the flutist for whom Bach wrote the challenging music was a musician from the court at Dresden. Tonight's concert concludes with the final movement from *Suite No. 4*, the celebratory nature of which can be guessed at its title: *Réjouissance*.

Cantata No. 110: "Wachet auf, ihr Adern und ihr Glieder"

Cantatas, generally, are multi-movement works of moderate length, for voice or voices with instrumental accompaniment, designed to be part of an occasion, not necessarily sacred. Bach's cantatas were composed as part of Lutheran church services, and the hundreds he wrote were tailored to Sundays or other church days in the calendar. All this is important to know, not only to introduce the excerpt from *Cantata No. 110: Unser Mund sei voll Lachens* ("Then our mouth was filled with laughter"), but also in discussing the *Christmas Oratorio* (see below).

This cantata was written for Christmas Day 1725, and in fact, Bach borrowed music from his *Orchestral Suite No. 4* (see above) for some of its music. The use of trumpets and oboes in the orchestration is also similar to the suite, and adds to the joyous nature of the music for the festive season. The aria "Wachet auf, ihr Adern und ihr Glieder" ("Awaken, veins and limbs") is a call for one's person to join with the angels in celebration of Jesus' birth. It is the cantata's penultimate movement, and is scored for a baritone soloist and orchestra.

Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248: excerpts

The *Christmas Oratorio* is not, in fact, an oratorio at all, in the sense of it being a single work which dramatizes in any way a particular subject. It was based, in large part, on music Bach had already written, and was adapted for a text by an unknown librettist for the Christmas season. In its entirety, the *Christmas Oratorio* is in six parts, each part intended to be performed on specific feast days during the Christmas season: Part One for Christmas Day (the birth of Jesus); Part Two for December 26 (the announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds); Part Three for December 27 (the shepherds' worship of the infant); Part Four for New Year's Day (the circumcision/naming of Jesus); Part Five for the first Sunday after New Year's (the journey of the Magi); and Part Six (Epiphany Sunday) for, logically enough, the Epiphany.

Tonight, we will hear excerpts from the first three parts. The recitative and aria, "Nun wird mein liebster Brautigam" and "Bereite dich, Zion, mit zartlichen Trieben" are for alto solo, and use the metaphor of

the coming of Jesus as the arrival of a bridegroom, impatiently awaited for. The baritone aria “Grosser Herr, o starker König” is also from Part One, making reference to the humble manger where the King of Kings did first sleep.

Part Two’s focus on the shepherds to whom the angels made known the birth of Christ begins with the Hirtenmusik, the “shepherds’ pastorale.” Such tender music was often a feature of Christmas music in the Baroque (the famous pastorale from Corelli’s *Christmas Concerto*, for example). Following that is a recitative for baritone, “So geht den hin, ihr Hirten, geht,” as an angel urges the shepherds to seek out the newborn Jesus; and an alto aria, “Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh,” a tender lullaby. The lone excerpt from Part Three is a duet for alto and baritone, a prayer that Christ’s arrival might awaken the faithful to renewed reverence.

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