

Tanglewood Debut (2015): Bach's Coffeehouse | Program Notes

A Coffeehouse Jam Session

by Jeannette Sorrell

As Cantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach had a difficult life. In charge of the music for all of the town's principal churches, his duties included composing new cantatas virtually every week, engaging and rehearsing musicians to perform the cantatas (a difficulty due to the shortage of "freelance" musicians), and teaching the boys of the Thomasschule every day.

Such a workload would no doubt have been joyously stimulating to a man of Bach's genius, were it not for the hostile work environment. From 1720 onward, Bach's relationship with the Leipzig Town Council became a constant litany of arguments and criticism. Several years later, forbidden to perform a Passion for Good Friday, Bach noted bitterly that it would have been "just a burden anyway."

Against this backdrop of conflict, it is not surprising that Bach enjoyed letting his hair down in the lively atmosphere of **Zimmerman's Coffeehouse**, a sort of Starbuck's of 18th-century Leipzig. Gottfried Zimmerman, a middle-class entrepreneur, sponsored casual weekly concerts in his coffeehouse in the Catherstrasse. In the summer, the concerts were held outdoors in the "coffee garden." The main attraction of the concerts was the Collegium Musicum, the informal student orchestra of the University of Leipzig. Bach became their director in 1729, and quickly began focusing his compositional energy on the orchestra at the expense of his church work. Perhaps the Collegium was just more fun than his laborious church duties? In any case, he set to work creating concertos that could be played by himself, his sons, and his friends with the Collegium Musicum.

Most of Bach's concertos had already been composed during his previous employment as Capellmeister of the orchestra of the Prince of Cöthen. At Cöthen he had presided over an excellent ensemble of 8-10 musicians, most of whom were true virtuosi. So in 1729, he began recycling and transcribing these concertos so that they could be played by the available musicians in Leipzig.

The Collegium Musicum had been founded years earlier by a lively and popular law student named **G. P. TELEMANN**. But since then, Telemann had gone on to greater things: he had become Music Director for the wealthy city of Hamburg. (He had also been chosen over Bach for the Music Director post in Leipzig. But he declined the offer, and the post eventually went to Bach after it was also declined by Graupner and Fasch.) Bach and Telemann seem to have met when both were in their 20's. Despite the inevitable competition between them, the two were close friends. In 1714, Telemann became godfather to Bach's son Carl Phillip Emmanuel. Bach paid tribute to Telemann by studying and transcribing his music, and by performing it with the Collegium at Zimmerman's.

Though Telemann was four years the elder, he was definitely the more trendy and forward-looking of the two composers. His sense of musical humor, lightness, and use of folk elements greatly endeared him to the public. The fact that Telemann's music is not only lighter but *easier to play* than Bach's would have also contributed to his widespread popularity. Whereas only a dedicated professional could master Bach's works, many talented amateurs could play Telemann for pleasure. In fact, Telemann, who received four times as much space in 18th-century German music encyclopedias as Bach did, was praised for *not composing like Bach*.

Telemann's **Don Quixote Suite** is inspired by Cervantes' 1605 novel, in which the crazed and impoverished Spanish nobleman, Quixote, sets out with his long-suffering servant, Sancho Panza, to revive the glory of medieval knighthood.

The Rise of Coffee in 18th-century Leipzig

1694

Entrepreneur Johann Lehmann opens the first coffee stall in the town marketplace.

⋮

1704

New coffeehouses are thriving, and the Leipzig Town Council reacts by ordering them to stop serving at 9:00pm, and by banning women from entering. This ordinance seems to have been largely ignored.

⋮

1707

A pamphlet appears showing women having a coffee-party, with the sardonic caption, "Even if we're drinking ourselves to death, at least we're doing it in the latest style."

⋮

1711

The eight coffeehouses of Leipzig form a consortium to keep further entrepreneurs from opening more (forshadowing the Starbucks' monopoly?)

⋮

1729

J.S. Bach takes over the concert series at Zimmerman's Coffeehouse, which hosts the most famous of the coffeehouse-orchestras.

His search for adventures includes an attack on some windmills, which he mistakes for fearsome giants. (We have fun with the windiness of this movement.) Don Quixote's sighs for the Princess Dulcinea are intermingled with the quickened pitter-patter of his heart. The movement entitled "Sancho Panza berné" (Sancho Panza tricked) portrays the incident in which the unfortunate servant is caught by rogues and tossed in a blanket, while his master escapes. The finale, with its ironic title of "Don Quixote asleep," is a frenetic, perpetual-motion piece evoking the racing mind of the Spanish madman.

Bach's **Brandenburg Concertos** had been written in the earlier Cöthen period, when he had a professional virtuoso orchestra at his disposal. The Margrave of Brandenburg, to whom Bach dedicated the set of six Brandenburg Concertos, will forever live in infamy because he never had the pieces performed or sent Bach a thank-you note. However, it is actually not surprising that he didn't arrange for a performance; he didn't have an orchestra of the caliber to play such virtuoso concertos. In any case, the concertos were undoubtedly performed by the Collegium Musicum under Bach's direction at Zimmerman's Coffeehouse.

Brandenburg Concerto no. 5 requires from the harpsichordist a level of speed in the scalar passages that far exceeds anything else in the repertoire. One has to train for this piece the same way one trains for an athletic event. Also, the unusual role of the harpsichord in this Concerto--starting off playing basso continuo (*easy*), then playing solo melodies in dialogue with the flute and violin (*moderately difficult*), then getting carried away into virtuoso scales (*very difficult*), and finally leaving the others in the dust as one contemplates the universe in a huge solo cadenza (*mountaintop experience*)-- makes this piece a unique emotional experience each time one plays it.

Bach had a life-long admiration for G.F. Handel, and tried to meet him at least twice. The two composers were born in the same year, only about 80 miles apart. We know that Bach owned copies of at least three works by Handel. Bach's son Carl Philip Emmanuel wrote that Handel was one of the composers his father most admired. However, Bach came from a clan of Lutheran church musicians, whereas Handel grew up listening to the music of the aristocracy, since his father was a court surgeon. Each wore the lifelong stamp of his origins.

Bach made a thorough practice of studying the works of composers he admired. Part of his method for absorbing another composer's style was to transcribe the pieces for other instruments. The composer whose works he most often transcribed was ANTONIO VIVALDI. There is no surviving record of any meeting between Bach and Vivaldi, but Bach's admiration for Vivaldi must have been very great. He arranged at least seven of Vivaldi's violin concertos into keyboard pieces. These arrangements bear the name of J.S. Bach on the manuscripts, with no mention of Vivaldi, and thus they carry BWV numbers in the catalogue of Bach's works. The unsuspecting listener therefore would not realize they are Vivaldi's compositions if not informed.

Vivaldi was considerably more famous than Bach during the first half of his career; as music master at the prestigious Pietà in Venice (a special school for orphaned girls and illegitimate daughters of the nobility, with an extraordinary emphasis on music), Vivaldi attained great honor throughout Europe. Tourists from as far as England flocked to Venice to attend the concerts of the "red-headed priest" and his girls.

The great *Follia* or *folia* tune and dance served as inspiration for Vivaldi as well as several other baroque composers (Corelli, Marias, Geminiani, and C.P.E. Bach.) Scholars believe that the dance originated in Portugal, where young girls would engage in the “folly” or “madness” of a wild dance around the fire. The follia is a triple-meter ground bass, beginning in a haughty sarabande-like rhythm, and traditionally growing faster and faster toward the end. The tune is full of the dramatic tension of courtship and seduction. Vivaldi’s version, which I believe is the finest of them all, was originally a triosonata; I arranged it as a concerto grosso so that all of us could join in the fray.

In his Coffeehouse concerts, Bach showed a warm sense of collegiality and respect for his more successful colleagues, Telemann and Vivaldi. If he felt any envy of their success, we have no sign of it. His generous spirit and the sense of communal gathering at these informal concerts make Zimmermann’s Coffeehouse an inspiring model for music-making today.

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