

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

# Evening at Bach's Coffeehouse

Oct 26 - 28

## **Georg-Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)**

### ***Don Quixote Suite***

Duration: ca. 17 minutes

If any composer gets credit for earning his keep, Telemann can't be ignored. A craftsman in the true sense, he churned out music with tenacity, and lots of it. The Telemann library tops 3,000 works, including church cantatas, orchestral suites, masses, passions, operas, and oodles of chamber pieces.

Like Bach, he was paid to crank out music, both sacred and secular, for a paycheck. One of Telemann's talents was his ability to absorb international styles – German, Italian, French, Polish – allowing him to meet the demands of his benefactors. If he sounds a bit dated today, in his time Telemann was cutting edge and contemporary, moving away from Baroque counterpoint, for instance, to the more progressive *galant* style with its lighter rococo ornamentation. He helped pave the way for what would be considered new musical trends of the time.

However, for all his prodigious skills, Telemann is not known for any single masterpiece; most all of his music is pleasant and melodious without being especially distinctive. His music is rarely heard on orchestra programs, so it's no surprise that TFO is performing the *Don Quixote Suite* and *Grillen-Symphonie* for the first time.

Like many composers of his day, Telemann was intrigued by Cervantes influential novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, and devised a program suite that depicts episodes in Don Quixote's life. It opens with an overture in the French style, rhythmic and punctuated by a fugal section. The episodes continue with the *Awakening of Quixote*, *Attack on the Windmills*, *Sighs of Love for the Princess Dulcinee*, *Sancho Panza Mocked*, *Rosinante's Galloping*, and *Galloping of Sancho's Donkey*. The suite ends quietly as Quixote falls asleep.

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## **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

### ***Brandenburg Concerto No. 3***

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

When Johann Sebastian Bach died in 1750, he was little known outside his native Germany, and many of his more than 1,225 surviving works fell into obscurity. Unlike his contemporaries, Handel and Telemann, who enjoyed continental fame, Bach mastered his art in relative quiet and was considered a purveyor of old-fashioned music.

Today, it seems inconceivable that Bach would be ignored for nearly a century. By the mid-1800s, evidence continued to surface that would form one of the greatest bodies of work by any artist. From the breathtaking spirit of his masses, passions and sacred works to the contrapuntal puzzles of his fantasies and fugues, Bach achieved a level of consistency that defies lumping his life's work into early,

middle and late periods. A seriousness of purpose underlines everything he composed – he lived for the “glory of God and refreshment of the soul” – spanning the grandiose creations for chorus and orchestra to the simplest utterance for a single instrument.

An exception can be made with the collection of six *Brandenburg Concertos*, which are neither serious nor specifically inspired by a higher power. Contrary to what some may believe, they were not dashed off as a complete set for the Margrave of Brandenburg, but composed over a decade, and Bach felt free to borrow from them in writing later works, such as the cantatas.

The *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major* embodies a richness of color, texture, and tempo that form a harmonic tapestry only Bach could invent. The work is a marvel of craftsmanship in the use of strings, dazzling in their sinuous and slippery sonorities. The original scoring for strings alone – no woodwinds or brass – includes three violins, three violas, three cellos, bass, and harpsichord. As you listen to the energetic opening movement, note how the ensemble plays simultaneous roles as both virtuosic soloist, called *concertino*, and accompanist by the group, called *ripieno*, tossing the ball back and forth.

Although in three movements, the adagio in the middle is but a half-minute whisper using only two chords, the second held by a fermata – a pause of indefinite length. Suddenly, the third movement bursts onto the scene and carries listeners off on a delirious rhythmic venture that ends almost as soon as it began.

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### **Georg-Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)**

#### ***Grillen-Symphonie***

Duration: ca. 8 minutes

Telemann composed his first opera when he was 12 and the marks of a musical proficiency and fluency unmatched in his time. He could write for most any occasion, on any deadline, for both professionals and amateurs. He can be credited for the growth of music appreciation societies in Germany and the developing role of the musician as respected member of the working class.

Telemann cut his paycheck by addressing the musical needs of the church and court, but not everything he created was contractual, much less serious-minded. Much of his work can be lighthearted, including the *Grillen-Symphonie*, an 8-minute work written sometime between 1730 and 1765 in the *galant* style of the time. The German word *grillen* translates loosely into “crickets,” hence the *Cricket Symphony*, but the word also alludes to something whimsical or trifling, which aptly describes this amusing score.

Cast in the key of G major, the piece usually includes flute or piccolo, oboe, an early version of the clarinet called a chalumeau (a modern clarinet will be played tonight), violins, viola, and a pair of basses – hardly the symphony as we know it today. The music simmers with Italian, English, Scottish and Polish styles, and unfolds in three transparent movements marked *rather lively*, *toying*, and *presto* – the final section being an energetic Polish folk dance that Telemann handles with a master’s stroke.

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### **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

#### ***Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major***

Duration: ca. 21 minutes

Bach was blessed with a natural gift that stands alone in the history of music, whether he was writing for solo cello or large choir, whether a secular or sacred work. His mastery of counterpoint, endless reservoir of melody and mathematical precision formed an oeuvre that remain unsurpassed in their craftsmanship and beauty. Listeners need only bend an ear to the four *Orchestral Suites* to hear vivid evidence of an aesthetic and analytical mind.

A bit of mystery surrounds the *Suite No. 1*, in part because an autographed manuscript has never been found. It was believed to be the composer's first secular work when he served as cantor of St. Thomas in Leipzig, but the church paid Bach for sacred works only. This led some scholars to believe the work was partly composed earlier, when Bach lived in Cothen, and completed later for some unknown event or ceremony.

Like all the suites, it opens with a stately overture. This expansive introduction begins and ends in a measured French style that contrasts a percolating middle section in the more energetic Italian style. The journey continues with a varied series of dances based on French overture and Italian concerto styles: a Courante (running dance), Gavotte (French folk dance), Forlane (fast Venetian dance), Minuet (short-step dance for two), Bouree (French folk dance), and Passepied (dance step).

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### **Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

#### ***La Folia***

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

Vivaldi taught violin at the Pieta Convent for orphaned girls, all the while composing for his chosen instrument, the violin. By 1711, he compiled a collection of 12 concertos for one or more violins, and titled it *L'Estro Armonico (Harmonic Inspiration)*. After its publication outside of Italy, Vivaldi's reputation spread, and he was regarded as a pivotal figure both in the development of the violin and in the *concerto grosso*, where a small group of soloists play against a larger ensemble.

Vivaldi was a contemporary of Bach, and, like his German counterpart, evolved as a composer of seemingly inexhaustible inspiration. Bach also found plenty of inspiration in Vivaldi, judging from the handful of compositions borrowed, almost note-for-note, from the violinist from Venice.

As for Vivaldi's sheer output, listeners can find countless samplings in his 230 violin concertos alone, and more than 250 works for other instruments. The rap on Vivaldi, however, is that he composed one concerto 500 times; some of his detractors go a step further, saying he composed 500 concertos using the same mold. But close listening to the variety of his concertos, sacred works, and chamber pieces reveals something else: a wellspring of dynamic shades, nervous energy, colors and endless fountains of melody.

Certainly, *The Four Seasons* remains his trademark, a musical postcard of spring, summer, autumn and winter. Less well known but a good introduction to Vivaldi's world is *La Folia*, which means "madness," and originally composed as a trio sonata. Many composers wrote their own versions of *La Folia*, but Vivaldi's is by far the most convincing treatment of an old Spanish dance and a set of 19 complex variations that depict a pagan rite of young girls running around a fire. The music begins slowly, builds nervous energy, and shifts back and forth between hushed tensions, percussive string sounds, and virtuosity. After Variation 6, the music slows as if to rest, tackles acrobatic leaps in Variation 9, and follows with could be hints of *The Four Seasons*. The cello takes center stage in Variations 13 and 15, and

Vivaldi's uses the final three sections reach a feverish climax. Tonight's performance of *La Folia* was arranged by Jeannette Sorrell, director of Apollo's Fire, from the original for three instruments. "I arranged it as a *concerto grosso*," she wrote in her own notes for the piece, "so that all of us could join in the fray."

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***