Notes on the February Program

Funeral rites for 18th-century German dignitaries – both civic and noble – were often lavish and costly affairs, conducted with ostentatious ceremonies and theatrically draped catafalques, interminable eulogies, endless processions of mourners, and elaborate musical compositions. Whereas most of the above could be assembled in due time, the last item required the beleaguered *Kapellmeister* to compose a new extended work, hire copyists to write out the parts from the score, and rehearse the choir, soloists, and orchestra, all in advance of the impending obsequies. Such was the situation for Georg Philipp Telemann, musical director of Hamburg's five largest churches, when Mayor Garlieb Sillem died on 26 December 1732 right in the midst of the Christmas holidays. "His Magnificence, the highly noble, highly and thoroughly learned gentleman...the oldest and p[ro] t[empore] presiding, highly meritorious mayor" was interred ten days later and according to accounts, "the cortege was distinguished and very large. There were 420 pairs of the most eminent businessmen and citizens in attendance, not counting the scholars, clergymen, and mourners, and the funeral music was exceptional."

Telemann's exceptional funeral music had perhaps been prepared ahead of the need, as His Honor the mayor had written most of the text himself – entitled his "swan song" (*Schwanengesang)* for a twenty-movement work of choruses, arias, and chorales. This evening's instrumental *sinfonia* which opens the work is a rather dry-eyed processional in E-flat major for strings, oboes, and trumpets and timpani. Marked "*Lamento, grave e staccato,"* it is a dialogue of solemn phrases from the muted trumpets alternating with a consoling melody in the first violins and oboe. Conspicuously absent are the minor key, dissonant leaps, sighing appoggiaturas, and chromaticism found in other, especially Catholic, elegiac works. Instead, a lyrical melody with French-inflected gestures of the short-long "Lombard" rhythms (also known as the "Scotch snap") floats above the staccato pulsations of the dead march.

Telemann's connections with the Bach family were numerous, including his earlier service as *Konzertmeister,* and later *Kapellmeister,* in Bach's home town of Eisenach, where Johann Christoph Bach, the composer of *Herr, wende dich und sei mir gnädig* was organist of the principal church and harpsichordist to the ducal court. Christoph was the cousin of Sebastian Bach's father, and, according to the description of the Eisenach town council, was a "querulous and stiff-necked person" (*querulant und halsstarriges Subjekt)*. John Eliot Gardiner surmises that he was "a feisty, combative individual, cantankerous and insecure, father to an overcrowded household, prone to constant domestic upheavals, sickness and incipient penury." Otherwise, when Sebastian was orphaned at age ten, he might well have preferred to remain in his native town in the care of this elder relative rather than being shipped off to a brother in provincial Ohrdruf whom he hardly knew. (Either way, he would have been in the care of someone named Johann Christoph Bach, just two of the eleven by that name on the Bach family tree.)

Though too young to have known Eisenach's Christoph except through his music at hand, Sebastian Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel describes his work as "strong in the invention of beautiful ideas as well as in the expression of the meaning of the words. His writing was, so far as the taste of his day permitted, *galant* and singing as well as remarkably polyphonous...." Emanuel also notes that "on the organ and on the clavier he never played in fewer than five real parts." The occasion for which his "sacred dialogue" on death, *Herr, wende dich,* was written is

unknown, but its transition from sorrow to joy bespeaks a funeral or memorial commemoration. It is a miniature drama infusing German polyphony with dramatic rhetoric, similar in approach to comparable sacred dialogues by Heinrich Schütz. Those "five real parts" admired by Emanuel are in evident in the five-part string *symphonia* which opens the work. The lower strings, including divided viola parts, play in chorale-like harmonization while the first violin delineates a melody with sudden leaps and expressive contours.

The soloists in the piece are cast in roles which, though unnamed, are characterized by the text and scoring. The soprano, alto, and tenor play a composite role of weak supplicants preoccupied by the imminence of death: *das Grab ist da* ("The grave is there"). They sing in terse rhetorical phrases from the Psalms and Book of Job accompanied by the organ and cello continuo; true to his reputation for "expression of the meaning of the words," Bach clips off phrases such as "they have run away," or "vanished like a shadow" with sudden pauses (*abruptio,* in rhetorical terms). As the voice of God, the bass soloist is supported by a halo of strings used similarly by J.S. Bach for the words of Christ in his St. Matthew Passion. His words of comfort are delivered in longer melodious phrases, emphasizing that basic tenet of the Lutheran faith, God's grace (*Gnade).*

The penitents descend chromatically, as they pray not to be taken in the middle of life's journey, and ultimately beseech God to incline his ear as they vocally prostrate themselves in the lowest extremity of their respective ranges. The bass responds with a jolly gigue, trading phrases with the strings, and granting the suppliants an extension of their years with the admonishment, "Let my grace suffice." The trio gratefully reply that were they dead, they would be unable to praise the Lord. No longer in his divine character, the bass joins the trio in a concluding hymn of praise, while skittering violins weave around their harmonized chorale.

Programs of music by members of the Bach family frequently take a sort of Darwinian approach, culminating in a work by Johann Sebastian that confirms, as if there were any doubt, that he was musically the most evolved of his relations. Absent his blinding light, however, we can better appreciate the gifts of his accomplished kinsmen, those lesser lights in a family where, according to Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, "a robust mediocrity held sway." If we look to the familial works held in greatest esteem by Sebastian himself, however, we will discover the robust but far-from-mediocre music of his distant cousin Johann Ludwig Bach, a composer ranked as high as Johann Sebastian himself in first half of the eighteenth century.

While the kinship of the two composers was remote (they shared a great-great-grandfather), their two families remained quite close through three generations. Two of Ludwig's sons became friends of Carl Phillip Emanuel while they were students at Leipzig University, and one of whom, Gottlieb Friedrich Bach, was a talented artist who made portraits of Sebastian's family.

Like nearly all of the parochial Bach family musicians before the time of Sebastian's more itinerant and cosmopolitan sons, Johann Ludwig stayed in central-German Thuringia for his entire career, first brought to the court orchestra by Duke Bernhard I of Saxe-Meiningen at age 22 and serving there until his death 28 years later. Elevated to Court Cantor and Master of the Ducal Pages (*Hofcantor* and *Pageninspector),* like Sebastian, he initially was required to teach subjects other than music – catechism, writing, arithmetic, history, and even painting. (However, unlike Sebastian, he was also known for his unusually handsome appearance.) Duke Bernhard

constructed the sumptuous Schloss Elisabethenburg, a baroque palace containing the Holy Trinity Church (now the Johannes Brahms Concert Hall) where tonight's *Trauermusik* was first performed.

After the accession of Bernhard's son, Duke Ernst Ludwig I, Johann Ludwig Bach was promoted once again and (gratefully) relieved of his non-musical duties, becoming *Hofkapellmeister* in 1711. He also rose sufficiently in social rank to marry the daughter of the new palace's architect, Samuel Rust. The new duke was every bit as extravagant as his father, building new castles and churches, waging war against nearby principalities, and writing sacred poetry in the form of two cantata cycles for the church year. These librettos, combining scriptural prose, Lutheran hymns, and poetry in the operatic forms of recitative and aria, were set to music both by Johann Ludwig and Johann Sebastian Bach, when the latter was serving at the ducal court of Weimar. It is also possible that both the duke and Ludwig Bach were familiar with the *Musikaliche Exequien* (Musical Obsequies), the self-designed funeral service by Prince Heinrich II in nearby Gera, compiled from Scripture and writings from the Reformation similarly set to music for double chorus, soloists, and continuo by Heinrich Schütz almost a century earlier.

Like Telemann's mayor, Ernst Ludwig I also began to choose his own funeral text and draft his funeral sermon, as well as a hymn text (chorale) to be set to music when still a young man. Unlike Telemann's situation, however, it's quite likely that Ludwig Bach knew of his impending task long before the need arose; in any event, the performance didn't take place until four months after duke's death on 24 November 1724.

The *Trauermusik* (literally, "music of sadness") was not only intended to bid farewell to his Prince Ernst Ludwig, but also to impress and curry favor with the duke's younger brother Anton Ulrich, co-regent for the underage son of the deceased. It amassed the whole of the household musical resources: two choirs (possibly separated by balconies), each with its own orchestra of strings and continuo, woodwinds and 3 trumpets and timpani added to the second choir. Undoubtedly, Sebastian Bach was familiar with this monumental work, and it's likely that it was the inspiration for his unusual setting of the St. Matthew Passion for two choirs and orchestras two years later.

A great deal is known about the *Trauermusik*, including its Order of Service, summarized here:

1. Bells ring and the princely family enters; two hymns are sung.
2. Psalm 90 read and another hymn sung.
3. *Trauermusik*, Part I.
4. Psalm 84 read, followed by two hymns.
5. Sermon. (Based on Psalm 116, chosen by Ernst Ludwig – sermons could last an hour.)
6. Hymn, followed by *Trauermusik*, Part II.
7. *Curriculum vitae* of the departed – read aloud, about 45 minutes; another hymn.
8. *Trauermusik*, Part III.
9. Memorial speech, announcement.

The design of each Part of the *Trauermusik* is almost architectural. Two choral movements frame Part I, whose interior consists of three recitative/aria pairs (soprano, alto, tenor) and a single preachy recitative for bass without aria. The theme is of fealty to God: *Ich bin dein Knecht* (I am

your servant), a gesture of obeisance from the pen of a lifelong autocrat. Bach juxtaposes the double choirs in antiphonal dialogues with a literal representation ("word-painting" or "madrigalism") of breaking bonds asunder. The bonds (*Bande*) pull and strain against the beat in catchy syncopation, and are broken apart by rests inserted between the syllables of *zur-ris-sen* (broken). This text returns at the end of Part I with a jubilant gigue full of harmonic surprises and orchestral interjections.

Part II, after the sermon, consists of three sets of duet-aria-chorale in succession. The bass soloist, slighted in Part I, now becomes the voice of the departed duke ("I lay myself at thy feet, place myself wholly in thy hands.") in three separate arias to his original poetic texts, while the previously theatrical choir is reduced to congregational hymn-singing. Bach's concern with tone color is heard in the accompaniment to the breezy alto/tenor duet accompanied by alternating the string ensemble with a trio of recorders. The exultant chorus end to Part II is an ingenious juxtaposition of bass aria, harmonized chorale (which migrates between the choirs), and a lively "Hallelujah."

After the interminable obituary was read, Part III picked up where Part II left off, with trumpets and timpani joining the soloistically challenging choral parts. Bach introduces the first fugue subject in the work, but, more like Handel than his cousin, Ludwig soon abandons contrapuntal complexity in favor of emphatic harmonies. Another "Hallelujah" ensues, with choral interchanges comparable to Sebastian's motets. The alto returns to the original theme of servitude and the loosening of bonds and chains, this time amidst a filigree of recorders. The style becomes increasingly less baroque and more *galant*, in a tenor minuet with a jolly bassoon obbligato. In the final peroration, the voice of the duke gives a valedictory message to his assembled subjects: "That Lord who bound me only by a thread of love...even entrusted His power to me here below, so that a people and a land might look on me as a father."

Bruce Lamott is the director of the Philharmonia Chorale.