

OSM

December 1st and 2nd, 2009

Koopman and Bach

The opening of the program is a family affair: the encounter of two Bach's, father and son. Rather unusual experience, showing the contrast between the styles of two generations of musicians, of the same culture and the same time. Bach junior's work was written in Berlin, in 1740; and his father's work was published in Leipzig, in 1735.

* * *

Johann Sebastian Bach, *The Italian Concerto*, BWV 971

Born in Eisenach, 1685, died in Leipzig, 1750.

Original title : *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto*, published in 1735.

All his life, J.S. Bach transcribed, adapted, copied the works of his contemporaries, as well as his own scores. From the string original to the organ, from the oboe to the harpsichord, from the voice to the instruments, he considered every transposition as a new musical score. From this point of view, he followed medieval tradition; the attribution to the instruments or voices was conditioned by the circumstances, depending on the availability of instruments and musicians.

Bach acquired a deep knowledge of European music, with a strong preference for Italian. As early as 1712-13, he transcribed Vivaldi violin concertos, Marcello oboe concerto, as well as the works of other Italian composers, mostly for keyboard instruments, harpsichord and organ, with emphasis on polyphonic effects and rich ornamentation. Moreover, Bach explored large-scale forms, particularly the concerto and its dramatic potential, with *solo-tutti* dialogue, such as was developed in Italian music.

Although following this conception, the *Concerto after the Italian taste*, BWV 971, is unique. After a number of transcriptions, Bach composed an original solo harpsichord work as if "transcribed" from a string model, which existed only in his imagination. The harpsichord assumes contrasting roles of the soloist and the accompanying instrumental ensemble, imitating the effect of *solo-tutti*, forte and piano, which requires a two-manual instrument. The concerto displays a rich musical imagination, a masterly synthesis of all elements of Italianate musical style, acquired by the transcription of numbers of works of this genre. Bach shows evident pleasure in inventing his own conception of the Italian concerto. It is technically very demanding; nevertheless, the composer published it in 1735 in the *Clavierübung II*, the collection of advanced "exercises" for young musicians.

There is no tempo indication at the beginning of the brilliant first movement, but the Vivaldi model is easy to spot: Bach adopted the *ritornello* form, the *tutti* refrain, opening and ending the movement, and using it as a link between the solo sections. The violinistic devices, adapted to the harpsichord, suggest the virtuoso improvisation; the

accompanying repeated-note figuration supports a highly ornate melody with *rubato*-like syncopations.

The *Andante*, in Italian arioso style, transposes the violin chant to the harpsichord. The impression is of a never-ending melody, continuing to flow in a highly ornamented style, with soft repetitive motives as accompaniment. It is one of the most impressive of Bach's pages, as well as in harpsichord solo version or harpsichord with orchestra.

The sparkling *Presto*, symmetric to the first movement, follows the analogous *ritornello* form, introducing new ideas and episodes exploring the keyboard virtuosity in a highly original style.

At this time of his life, Bach was Cantor of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. For a several years (since 1729), he was also a director of the *Collegium Musicum*, an institution which organized public concerts in the city, presented regularly in the Café Zimmermann. In order to enrich the *Collegium* program of secular music, Bach gathered his instrumental scores, still in manuscript - suites, partitas, ouvertures - and published some of them. The *Italian Concerto* was probably often played in the Café Zimmermann.

According to the Italian practice of the 18th century, the adaptation of Bach's original score, dividing it between the soloist and the orchestra, offers an interesting alternative to the usual interpretation. It restores the role of the harpsichord in a dialogue with the orchestra, emphasizing contrasting effects of piano-forte, leaving more freedom to the soloist. The actual version was conceived by Alexander Schneider (1908-1993), violinist and conductor of Lithuanian origin and a naturalized American. A cosmopolitan musician, he is mostly respected for his achievements with the New York String Orchestra.

* * *

Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, *Concerto for Two harpsichords in F major, Wq 46 (H 410)*

C. P. E. Bach, second son of Johann Sebastian Bach, born in Weimar, 1714; died in Hamburg, 1788. The concerto was composed in 1740 (Berlin).

“We must play from the soul, not like trained birds....Since a musician cannot move us unless he himself is moved, it follows that he must be capable of entering into all the affection which he wishes to arouse in his listeners.” Far away from his father's *Soli Deo Gloria*, Carl Philip Emanuel opens a new era in music, categorized in Germany as *Empfindsamer Stil*, in France as *style galant*, and everywhere else as rococo. The forerunner signs are already present in his early works, among them the concerto featured in this programme, bearing the catalogue code *Wotquenne 46*, composed in Berlin (1740).

Appointed in the service of Friedrich II of Prussia in 1738, the young Emanuel was still recognized as one of the foremost clavier-players in Europe, and soon he established a reputation as composer and teacher. During his 30-year residence in Berlin, he was very

productive; between 1738 and 1768, before succeeding Telemann as *Kapellmeister* at Hamburg, he wrote thirty eight concerti for harpsichord(s), nearly two hundred sonatas for keyboard and a long catalogue of music of all forms and genres, sacred and profane. However, his masterly treatise *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen (1753)*, or *Essay on the Correct Manner of Playing the Clavier*, which exerted a notable influence for generations of keyboard players, placed him in the forefront of critics and musicians of his time.

The *Concerto for Two harpsichords in F major, Wq 46 (H 410)* follows traditional structure in three contrasting movements: Fast-Slow-Fast, but announces the transition between the Italian and classic concerto, transforming the *ritornello* device in sonata form. The composer started his experiments writing keyboard sonatas, which mark an important stage in the history of the form. The Viennese masters, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and later Brahms, expressed their admiration and considered these sonatas as a model. This double concerto follows the path to the new style: there is evident freedom of structure with short thematic elements, rhapsodic, improvisatory flow and a profusion of embellishments, all of them creating a wide emotional range.

Allegro

The orchestra opens the dance with a *ritornello* motif whirling in pointed rhythm, just before the harpsichord solo entrance. C.P. E. Bach uses a string orchestra with the addition of two horns and two flutes, the horns treated as soloists, equal partners of the keyboards. The recapitulation, a variation on the initial theme, features a firework of sound effects with the virtuoso final cadenza.

Largo con sordino

Contrasting strongly with the *Allegro*, the cantabile movement immerses itself in the misty atmosphere, very close to the romantic spirit of nostalgia. In the meditative mood, soloists and the string orchestra play as partners in a rhapsodic dialogue. The wide range of ornaments enrich the fragile sonority of the plucked strings.

Allegro assai

It seems very close to the first movement, although the musical motives are different: energetic tutti, demanding parts of horns treated in a virtuosic manner, as well as harpsichords. It is a sparkling joy, pure musical delight. Everything is in it which will raise the huge popularity of C.P.E. Bach's concerti. Till Beethoven....

* * *

Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No.4*

Born in Kaliště, Bohemia (today Czech Republic), 1860; died in Vienna, Austria, 1911.
First performance: November 25, 1901, Munich, with composer conducting.

« Once upon a time... »

As a fairy-tale, childlike, playful, light. But the fairy-tales are seldom innocent, superficial or lightweight. The *Fourth symphony*, the shortest and most often played of Mahler's orchestral works, behind its apparent simplicity is music of great profundity.

To start with, a Lied, *Das himmlische Leben - Heavenly Life*, composed in 1892, as a part of cycle of songs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn - The Youth's Magic Horn*. This anthology of popular poetry, edited by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, will be a constant source of inspiration to the composer. The song *Das himmlische Leben* became the Finale of the *Fourth Symphony*, carrying all the thematic material of the first three movements, conceived as a synthesis of the whole work, sometimes referred to as the *Symphony of the Heavenly Life*.

Initially, Mahler had drawn up a sort of program, giving **descriptive** titles to the individual movements, as he has already done for the earlier symphonies. Had he realised that the program could raise a misunderstanding or breed a conflict between poetry and music? With a single exception of the song-finale, Mahler avoided any poetic reference in the score, leaving music in its very purity.

However, there are a number of contradictions in this music, reflecting the composer's personality, fluctuating between the childlike spirit, playful, whimsical, and a deep spiritual thinking. Irony, humour and parody emphasize Mahler's meditative gravity. To overcome his tense anxiety and difficulties of the human condition, he found nostalgic paradise in popular legends of childhood.

1. *Bedächtig, nicht eilen* – Thoughtful, unhurried

Flutes and sleigh bells introduce the first movement. Although free, it is regularly constructed, cast in a sonata form with the usual key relationships. At the beginning, the exposition seems very simple, before introducing the variety of thematic material. Mahler pointed out that there were no less than seven themes, whose richness contributes to the increasing complexity of the development section, blurring limits of tonality, introducing rhythmic freedom and sudden harmonic and melodic shifts. Tension increases, while the main motifs are linked together, superposed, transformed in a complex polyphonic writing. The development leads to a fanfare, a calling to order, preparing for the recapitulation. It follows the classical sonata frame, stated in the tonic key, but enriched with a new contrasting theme, closing with a brief, energetic coda. Later on, the audience will discover that most of its thematic material grew out from the Finale.

One may forget that Mahler is a direct heir of the Viennese classics - Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven - but this movement emphasizes the link between them.

2. *In gemächlicher Bewegung, ohne Hast* – Leisurely moving, without haste

In the *Scherzo* form, the movement follows a three-part structure, the central *Trio* section stated twice. It is dominated by the violin solo; tuned a tone higher, it sounds shrill and eerie. The large, unusual intervals produce a grotesque effect, amplified by the horn solo, a parody of dance. The *Trio* sections have the character of the *Ländler*, a German dance, suggesting the sound of bagpipes. In the last *Scherzo* part, a bass drum roll and a tam-tam accentuate the ghostly effect. Mahler left a note in his sketches, explaining: "Freund Hein spielt zum Tanz auf" - *Friend Death is striking up the dance*. In his initial synopsis, the allusion to the *Totentanz* is clear: "Death strikes up the dance for us; she crapes her

fiddle bizarrely and leads us up to heaven.” But the score marks three times “lustig”-*merrily*. May be, after all, it could be taken as a joke...

3. *Ruhevoll, poco adagio* – Peacefully, somewhat slowly

“Divinely gay and deeply sad”. These words Mahler used to describe this music, serene, calm and profound, suggesting a solemn procession. It is composed of a set of double variations on two contrasting themes in alternation: the first one, soft, meditative, features singing cellos, supported by the passacaglia bass, followed in counterpoint by the violins; the second one is an anguished lament played by the oboe. As the variations progress, the increasing intensity and tempo lead to the outburst of the *Allegro molto* climax. This is the only section using the full orchestra forces, brass and timpani playing fortissimo, just before the restful opening tempo returns. The ethereal orchestration concludes the movement with sounds of the other world.

4. *Sehr behaglich* – Very comfortably

The *Wunderhorn* poem features a child’s lively description of heavenly joy, angels dancing with a whole choir of saints looking on them, enjoying the pleasures of the festive table and stating what we already know, that no music on earth can compare with that of the heavenly spheres. The soprano soloist adopts a narrative role, devoid of parody. The composer, serious as a child imagining the Paradise, returns to the simplicity of the opening with the sleigh bells, reminiscent of the innocent time of childhood. In four stanzas separated by interludes, the circle is closed on dark and luminous sides of earthly life, with a promise of the Paradise. As always in fairy-tales...

Dujka Smoje
Honorary professor
Faculté de musique
Université de Montréal

* * *

For the web

Postlude

In one of his letters, Mahler mentioned the link he made between Italian primitive painters and his *Fourth symphony*. No wonder, *The Coronation of the Virgin* and Angels dancing in the golden light seem to represent the visions of the *Heavenly Life*, as depicted in the last song. May be that the composer was thinking of Fra Angelico ?



Fra Angelico, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, 1435.



Fra Angelico, *The Last Judgement, The dance of the Blessed* (c. 1432)

