

## Bach the Cosmopolitan

Bach never traveled outside the German-speaking world and only once ventured more than 150 miles from his native Thuringia and nearby Leipzig. Nonetheless, despite his traditional training as a provincial Lutheran church musician, he was exposed to musical forms and styles from across Europe -- he visited the Saxon court in Dresden frequently, where he encountered a melting pot of Italian opera, dancing-masters from Louis XIV's court in Versailles, Austrian-trained Catholic church musicians, and virtuoso singers and players from far and wide. And the Saxon court possessed an enormous library of compositions by great masters from all over.

In 1713, while Bach was employed as court organist in Weimar, his patron and friend Prince Johann Ernst brought a large assortment of published music home following a visit to Amsterdam, including a volume of twelve "concertos" by Vivaldi called *L'Estro Armonico* (Harmonic Inspiration). This may well have been Bach's introduction to the concerto form in its modern sense, with one or more solo instrumental parts supported by a concerted ensemble. Clearly intrigued by this new style, he immediately set about making it his own, arranging at least six of them for keyboards, some for organ solo, and #10 for four harpsichords and strings. The original is for four violins in B minor, and has become one of Vivaldi's most often-performed pieces. So it can be said that even though Bach had never met Vivaldi in person, he spent a great deal of time in his company and that they were intimately acquainted.

Another Italian genre that Bach and other German composers adapted for their own use was the "cantata" -- these were originally miniature operas, with a single singer/character expressing a struggle of some kind, often romantic in nature. As in the larger *opera seria* form, these consisted of a series of recitatives that narrate the story alternating with arias that express a tableau of the emotional state of the character at that point in time; these arias were often in an A-B-A *da capo* form where the opening section is repeated at the end, separated by a middle section in a contrasting key and mood. Bach had also become acquainted with the recently-imported French dance forms, and used them in instrumental suites and on occasion to add graceful pleasure to his cantatas.

The "Wedding Cantata" *Weichet nur betrübte Schatten*, also likely dating from his Weimar period, celebrates a marital union in a metaphorical dramatic arc: the first aria, in slow-fast-slow *da capo* form, calls for the banishment of cold and troubling shadows with the warmth of spring and its flowers; in the second the sun is driven to its zenith by Phoebus and his swift horses; then Cupid sneaks up on his prey accompanied by spring breezes. Then comes a recitative announcing the union, and a cheerful duet between soprano and oboe in the form of a Passetied about the joys of love follows, also in *da capo* form. A final Gavotte serves as benediction and recessional for the happy couple..

While visiting Dresden, where the court was Catholic with masses celebrated in Latin, Bach also encountered Italian and Austrian-trained musicians and many works written for those occasions. Back home in Leipzig, Lutheran worship services were expected to be conducted in the vernacular, so the vast majority of Bach's

sacred music is in the German language. However, traditional Catholic liturgy was not completely banned, and sometimes was used for feast-days. Bach produced several pieces with Latin texts early in his tenure there including a *Magnificat* and a single-movement *Sanctus*, later recycled in the Mass in B Minor; he also copied and adapted numerous Latin works by other composers including Pergolesi, Caldara, and Kuhnau.

It isn't clear for what occasion he wrote his four settings of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the Mass Ordinary in the late 1730's, including the Mass in G Major--they could possibly have been presentation pieces for a neighboring Catholic town as the *Missa* from the B-minor Mass was for Dresden. All six of its movements are parodies of choruses and arias from German-language cantatas from the previous decade.

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