

# SAN FRANCISCO CHORAL SOCIETY

ROBERT GEARY, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

## Program Notes

### The Baroque Genius: J.S. Bach (1685–1750)

*“The ultimate end of true music is the honor of God and the recreation of the soul.”*

– J.S. Bach<sup>1</sup>

Johann Sebastian Bach regarded himself as a craftsman whose music’s purpose was to please and edify others for the glory of God. A devoted Lutheran, he believed in God’s grace for the sake of Christ, which informed his selection of Biblical text for lyrics and motivated him to dignify the spirituality of contemporary listeners with incredible music. As a self-defined craftsman, he might be surprised to find his name placed so high in musical history, let alone at the pinnacle of the Baroque<sup>2</sup> era. Yet he used a well-regarded Baroque technique called “parody” to preserve works he had created for special occasions. By transforming secular cantatas into sacred works, he immortalized his best music.

Carol Talbeck was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest countryside of small farms and evergreen woodlands. She has held many jobs – mother of three, health foods worker, ESL and English tutor, and technical writer and manager in high-tech. She re-entered college in midlife and completed a master’s degree in literature. During the past few decades, she has pursued creative writing – poetry, short stories, and, most recently, historical fiction. She has been writing program notes for the chorus for several years.

As capellmeister-cantor from 1723 to 1750, Bach prepared music for services at Leipzig’s two most important churches, St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. What better opportunity to modernize Leipzig church music? Over three decades, he composed nearly 300 cantatas,<sup>3</sup> one for every Sunday and feast day of the ecclesiastical year.

In addition, Leipzig had a tradition of secular musical organizations (*collegia musica*), which were fueled by university students and professional musicians. Bach assumed directorship of Leipzig’s *collegium musicum* in 1729. For their concerts, Bach adapted his and others’ music and composed new works. The performances, held at the centrally located Zimmerman coffee house, often featured distinguished visiting artists. Bach staged the weekly performances, composed and rehearsed new works, served as guest conductor with a wealth of talented musicians, and performed as a virtuoso keyboardist. He loved these activities so much that *collegia musica* became central to his life. He did not neglect his church duties but became even more adept at balancing a very busy life.

Bach’s personal life was also quite full. Bach’s second wife, Anna, bore 13 children and helped raise the four surviving children from his deceased first wife, Maria. Of his total of 20 offspring, ten died in infancy, and ten lived long lives. His son Carl Philipp Emanuel described the swirl of life in their household as a “pigeonry,”<sup>4</sup> which is where

C.P.E. Bach's own career took root. Johann and Anna welcomed many visitors from far and near, including leading musicians, and had frequent house concerts. Even though J.S. Bach never left Germany, he absorbed the musical influences of other composers and constantly refined his compositional art.

### *Christmas Oratorio (Parts 1–3)*

This oratorio, with its festive arias, choruses, and recitatives, is almost like an opera, only without staging or costumes, and it fits nicely into church settings by using sacred text. Bach's oratorios began as cantatas written for important occasions. In the mid- to late 1730s, he decided to preserve what he viewed as his best cantatas by expanding them into three oratorios: the *Ascension Oratorio*, the *Easter Oratorio*, and the *Christmas Oratorio*. Devices from Italian opera, such as the recitative and aria, were already built into his cantatas, with text by talented librettists Erdmann Neumeister and Christian Friedrich Henrici (known as Picander).

The *Christmas Oratorio* is the culmination of Bach's chorale style<sup>5</sup> honed by decades of work as a composer and a teacher. To present the Christmas story as told in the New Testament books of Matthew and Luke, Bach assembled and rewrote some of his existing secular music and composed new pieces. Picander assisted Bach with the libretto changes that transformed secular text to sacred. The *Christmas Oratorio* is divided into six parts to be performed over the 13 days of Christmas in the Lutheran Church calendar (from December 25 to the beginning of Epiphany on January 6). The story of the birth of Jesus unfolds in polyphonic wonder in movements unified by the recurring key of D. Tonight's performance presents the first half of the *Christmas Oratorio*, from Mary's pregnancy to Jesus' birth (the Choral Society will perform the second half in December 2009).

Bach set lyrics that recall events and anticipate their effect, a duality intended to wholly engage the listener. Possibly the congregation even sang along with some of the chorales. For example, Bach set a hymn melody near the beginning of the *Christmas Oratorio* and repeated the tune near the end. The melody would have been familiar to the St. Thomas and St. Nicholas congregations, who could easily sing along.<sup>6</sup> All 15 of the chorales are affirmative statements with which churchgoers of the day could identify.

In Part 1, for the First Christmas Day, the first movement is taken from a cantata originally composed for a royal birthday. Exuberant and engaging, this opening might have swept aside, at least for the moment, the controversy of the day: whether church music should be dramatic or simple. If we imagine ourselves as Bach's congregation celebrating the end of an austere two-week period in pre-Christmas services, we are drawn to the edge of our seats by the dazzling instrumental effect and the choral imperative to rejoice and exult. Notice how different the Baroque trumpet sounds from a modern trumpet. Without valves, the Baroque version requires extraordinary skill to play in tune, especially in Bach's technically difficult music.

Part 2, for the Second Christmas Day, begins with a *sinfonia* in the 12/8 meter of a Baroque dance (the *siciliano*). The flutes pair with a "halo of strings"<sup>7</sup> to personify the irresistible angels, while oboes represent the humble shepherds. The two sets of instruments eventually join together to portray divine forces entering and occupying our mortal realm. Arias and recitatives are interspersed with choral settings that encourage contemplation and celebration. The

jubilant over the angel's appearance is tempered by a more complex subsequent movement, urging all to join in praise for a birth promising peace on earth.

Part 3, for the Third Christmas Day, opens with an orchestral passage, just as Part 1 did, completing a celebratory cycle. Following the angel's revelation in Part 2, a journey becomes necessary. An Old Testament prophet encourages the shepherds to be on their way. The new life the angel announced has filled them with gratitude. The soprano and bass, representing a believer and Jesus, sing what was originally a sentimental love duet in the "Hercules" cantata (BWV 213) and is now a spritely and joyful prayer. The evangelist (tenor) recounts the shepherds' arrival at the manger, where they witnessed an exquisitely tender scene in which Mary sings to her newborn. Even though they traveled there excitedly, they are now a quiet, palpable presence, listening as Mary acknowledges her child's destiny. The chorus, portraying humankind, echoes her sentiment. In a tenor recitative, the evangelist closes the scene as the shepherds depart. The chorus, full of gladness, again joins with the orchestra to repeat Part 3's opening choral prayer. The festive tone is a fittingly exuberant ending for the first half of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

Bach's cantatas are distinguished by their musical inventiveness and technical mastery. His lifetime of work is now recognized as supreme in every genre of his age (except opera). Although his music fell by the wayside for many decades, a renewed interest in German tradition revived Bach's music. In the 1780s, Mozart heard performances of Bach's and Handel's music at Baron van Swieten's house and copied Bach fugues to study on his own. Haydn and Beethoven also became part of the van Swieten circle, where they heard and performed Bach's music, later to compose their own music in his debt.

To Felix Mendelssohn we owe thanks for bringing Bach's choral music back to life. In 1829, Mendelssohn conducted the *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin, the work's first performance in 80 years. With the cultural energy and religious fervor that was awakening in Berlin, Bach became "the center of gravity of the whole history of music."<sup>8</sup> Publication that would make all of his work accessible to the world would take a little longer. After the impassioned attention of such composers as Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt during their lifetimes, the final volume of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition — 46 volumes in all — was published in 1900. With its goal completed, the Bach-Gesellschaft disbanded. Neue Bachgesellschaft was founded the same year with a new goal: to make Bach's music known throughout the world.

– Carol Talbeck

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<sup>1</sup> *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, Christoph Wolff, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> The term “Baroque” came into use in the 19th Century to refer to the period 1600-1750 in Western European music. It was most likely coined from the Portuguese “*barroco*,” meaning odd-shaped pearl, by critics who thought Bach’s and Handel’s music was exaggerated and overly ornamented.

<sup>3</sup> About 200 of Bach’s cantatas have survived.

<sup>4</sup> Wolff.

<sup>5</sup> The chorale was an invention of Martin Luther, founder of the Lutheran church. Its hymn-like melody enabled congregations to sing along. Bach added harmony to well-known melodies to create his chorales.

<sup>6</sup> The first occurrence (in the fifth movement of Part 1) is “*Wie soll ich dich empfangen*” (How shall I receive thee). The second is “*Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen*” (Now thou art well avenged) from Part 6 to be performed next year.

<sup>7</sup> *J.S. Bach’s Major Works for Voices and Instruments: A Listener’s Guide*, Melvin P. Unger, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Md., 2005.

<sup>8</sup> *Two Centuries of Bach: An Account of Changing Taste*, Friedrich Blume and Stanley Godman, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1950.