

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Bach and the Baroque: Bach and the Concerto

Saturday, January 30, 2010 at 8:00PM

As a composition student, one of the major questions I faced was how to “write through” the phenomenal history of classical music to create something new. History had brought my classmates, teachers, and me to *this* point, *this* moment. The tale we told ourselves was, like all myths and epics, full of heroes and villains, mistakes and bold deeds, geniuses and frauds. I heard sharply contradictory opinions as to the validity of Brahms, Shostakovich, Ravel, Britten, Puccini, Poulenc (to say nothing of the living composers, whose names I’ll skip mentioning here). Sometimes, it seemed, at least as far as arguments went, there were *no good composers at all*. They’d all been too retrograde, conservative, flowery, sentimental, simplistic, complicated, et cetera. Except for one man. The lone point of communion was in the humbling effect of the music of J.S. Bach. Bach was—*is*—every musician’s hero. I knew I loved him, I knew I would never rate by comparison, but what I could never figure out was why he was such a universal.

Tonight, pianist Simone Dinnerstein joins the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) for an all-Bach concert which will include selections from two of Bach’s most famous works—the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (for solo piano) and the *Art of the Fugue* (arranged for small ensemble)—as well as two complete concerti. Dinnerstein came to prominence in 2007 with her brilliant, otherworldly, and very personal recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* on the Telarc label. By contrast, since its formation by cellist Clarice Jensen in 2004, ACME has been playing new music by a sprawling range of 20th- and 21st-century composers—Adams, Andriessen, Carter, Volans, Reich, Ives, Xenakis, Martino, Rzewski, and others, just to name a few from their extraordinarily inclusive pantheon.

So what, to borrow a well-worn question, makes this concert so different than any other night’s all-Bach program? Clearly, a pianist making her way through one of Bach’s keyboard pieces is not radical. No more *avant*, necessarily, is an ensemble dedicated to playing the work of current composers (in fact, in the not so distant past, *every* string quartet, orchestra, wind band, sackbut ensemble, and lieder duo was such an ensemble). What is special about tonight is that it makes perfect sense for a new music ensemble to join a pianist for such a program.

Every era claims its own Bach (in the 1970s, Wendy Carlos even switched him on), so tonight, while the music hails from the 18th century; in a way we are hearing these works for the first time. Bach wrote the *Well-Tempered Clavier* for the clavichord or harpsichord; Simone Dinnerstein is going to play it on the piano, which has almost become standard practice. The harpsichord concerti will lack a harpsichord, and the *Art of the Fugue* will be played in a special arrangement for string quartet with added flute, harmonium, clarinet, and vibraphone. The brilliance of Bach is that his work not only withstands and even benefits from alterations such as these, it demands it. It continues to age with us, and thrives.

Why does this music cross genres and aesthetic beliefs? Perhaps for those composers who make cerebral music, it is Bach’s formidable intellect that continues to fascinate; for those who strive to create more connected and emotional work, his inimitable sense of harmonic pacing is irresistible (who does not cry at his cross relations?); for avant-gardists, his into-the-fray fearlessness never ceases to fascinate. But for all of us, regardless of style or point of view, Bach unites with one quality: his rigor. Bach was a virtuoso in the strictest sense of the word (from the root *virtu*, which means one possessed in knowledge of or excellence in the arts). His was a dazzling talent—there are stories of a visiting king whistling a chromatic melody on which Bach quickly improvised fugues in four, five, up to eight parts—but more than this, he was a man who breathed, ate, thought, produced, and lived for art. He did not, like so many of his colleagues and contemporaries, cave to the lucre of the opera stage or engage tawdry but fashionable syrupy-melody-plus-easy-accompaniment Galant style of his day. Many of his contemporaries (including some of his sons) settled for making the musical equivalent of attractive stage sets. Bach, instead, built cathedrals.

One of these cathedrals, Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*, is even more unusual in that it is scored for no instrumental combination in particular. The entire virtuoso work (which, though unfinished, is most often cast in 13 separate “contrapunctus” sections followed by four “canons”) is drawn from a single subject or tune. With each contrapunctus, the ante of complexity is upped. An essay on fugal writing

cast not in words but notes, it is the epitome of “show, don’t tell.” Bach wrote it (probably in the early 1740s, in the final decade of his life) on four staves. Bach’s decision not to specify instrumentation implies that it should exist in a kind of musical suspended animation, as if Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* but never specified who was speaking—the gorgeously musical words and all-too-human ideas would exist, but the thrust of the performance would be in the hands of the director.

The Art of the Fugue is not just good music, it is Good Music. It is music of “the Good,” wrought out of a kind of moral purity, existing both in and out of the world. Both holy writ and practical document, a palimpsest on which endless musical personalities, psycho-biographies, and contemporary notions can be written: definitive and open, a complete piece and an unsolvable puzzle. Tonight, the members of ACME will not only *get* to make some serious decisions that the composer did not, they *have* to. This is one explanation as to the continual appeal of Bach for musicians, but especially for those like the members of ACME, who are dedicated to the new.

The preludes and fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (dating from 1722) tell a different kind of story than the perorations of *The Art of the Fugue*. In this work—two books of 24 fugues in every key, each of which is preceded by a free-form prelude—Bach makes a piece that is not only a fertile musical garden but also stands as an apogee in the history of temperament, the system of tuning that was to become the standard for Western music. Bach states his case by writing a series of virtuoso works that serve as an elegant and at the same time phantasmagorical Q.E.D. to his own simple thesis: Equal Temperament has arrived.

Composers don’t shy from plumbing their own catalogues, making arrangements, new versions, even whole new pieces out of older works—especially in the baroque era. Not countenancing such a thing as recording technology, or even readily transportable scores (in Bach’s day, music was a strictly local affair), Handel could take one aria from an opera that did not fare so well and plug it in elsewhere with a new text. It is here we can see what the minimalists took from Bach—this notion of the notes being material, while other aspects could retain their flexibility.

The two concerti on tonight’s program hail from a single collection of seven like pieces (BWV 1052-1065) written during the period when Bach was the director of the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig. Only one in this collection was actually written for a keyboard instrument. The D minor and F minor were probably originally violin concerti, written during his Cöthen years (we don’t have the originals so we’ve only to speculate). These are thrilling pieces, full of wonders and tiny epiphanies. Both are built on the traditional baroque concerto model (three movements, two fast surrounding one slow). There are vast surprises in these works, for example, in the second movement—the largo—of the F minor concerto, a soulful aria (in the relative major) that would be the pride of any of Mozart’s operatic characters, or the austere (and at times near prog-rock) grandeur of the last movement of the D minor (who said minor keys have to be only used to be sad or macabre?).

Bach is an unquestionable presence, the composer of every age. He was the only point of agreement amongst those otherwise overly opinionated souls alongside whom I studied, not only because his music manages to contain something for everyone—whatever you want from music can be found somewhere in the composer’s incomprehensibly expansive oeuvre—but because, as tonight will no doubt demonstrate, there is no definitive or “right” way to do it. Bach welcomes interpretation; every performance is its own event. Shown in different lights, his lasting cathedrals achieve their maximum effect.

Notes by composer Daniel Felsenfeld