

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Bach and the Baroque: Bach and the Bohemian Gypsies

Saturday, November 14, 2009 at 8:00PM

While it may seem unusual to consider the works of an icon such as J.S. Bach in proximity with music performed by the itinerant musicians of the 18th century, there are some parallel aspects that deserve closer scrutiny. There is evidence that he was a free spirit with little respect for authority. While listening to his music, few of us recall that he was imprisoned like a common criminal in 1717 by the Duke of Weimar for sulking because an anticipated promotion had not materialized. Also, Bach never held back when it came to arguments with those in control of his income, to the extent that the church authorities in Leipzig (where he was employed from 1723 until the end of his life) learned to dread the demands and uncompromising attitude of their renowned employee.

It is also difficult to imagine the creator of such masterpieces as the *Saint Matthew Passion* and the *Mass in B Minor* becoming involved in physical aggression that would not be typical social behavior for people of his class. After humiliating a young member of his orchestra by calling him a *Zippelfagottist* (a ridiculous bassoonist) the young man responded to the insult by attacking Bach with his bare fists and later they even pulled out their swords. Mercifully, some of the other orchestra members were able to separate the two before any harm was done.

However, there are two other factors that lead to the assumption that Bach was well acquainted with the gypsy music of his time. First, as a young and very poor man, he had traveled, walking considerable distances in the northeastern part of Germany. It is obvious that here the circumstances were very favorable for mingling with people on the road.

Furthermore, Bach's friendship with G.P. Telemann allows us to speculate further about Bach's exposure to music in this genre. Telemann reports in one of his autobiographies how much he was impressed by the creative playing of itinerant musicians and it seems to be an obvious conclusion to assume that he and Bach must have exchanged ideas about this exciting source of inspiration. Little detail is known about their encounters but their relative geographic situation facilitated them. From 1708 to 1712, Telemann was employed as the Kapellmeister in Bach's native town of Eisenach, whereas Bach worked at the nearby court of Weimar. The fact that Telemann became the godfather of Bach's second son Carl Philipp Emanuel shows that the two were clearly good friends.

Prior to his appointment in Eisenach, Telemann had spent two years in Sorau (in today's Poland), from where he traveled to Cracow and Pless in order to become familiar with what he later described as the "barbaric beauty" of Polish and Moravian music. As mentioned in his autobiographies, Telemann's encounters with Eastern European gypsy music influenced his own compositions. The young composer must have been enthralled by the wonderful inventiveness of this music, as typified in the last movement of his Double Concerto for recorder and flute.

In addition to the melodic construction in the pastoral genre that was considered aesthetically pleasing at the time, the fashionable *Polonaise* also contributed to making Eastern European folk and gypsy music court-worthy. The door to this eastern-oriented cultural expansion had only recently been opened upon the appointment of Augustus II the Strong, Prince Elector of Saxony, to the Polish kingship in 1697. Telemann did not miss the opportunity to embrace it.

It is therefore logical to conclude that Telemann revealed the fascinating elements of the gypsies's art to Bach, who also composed fashionable *Polonaises*, which were pieces in 3/4 meter with typical dotted eighth note rhythms and contrasting patterns of 16th and quarter notes. The *Polonaise* from the *Suite in B Minor* for traverso and strings is perhaps the most well-known example of this particular genre.

Bach attempted to give a definitive and final form to his compositions by reworking them frequently and he also had no hesitation in simply rearranging them for purely practical reasons if the circumstances called for it. Musicologists agree that most of his concertos for harpsichord were arrangements of earlier versions of the same piece composed for other solo instruments. Thus, in its original form, the *Concerto in F Major for harpsichord, BWV 1057*, was in fact another rendering of his *Fourth Brandenburg Concerto* for violin, two recorders and strings! Bach would have certainly been in

favor of arranging his famous *Italian Concerto* for recorder, strings, and basso continuo that we are performing here this evening. There could be no better proof of his craftsmanship than having all these different parts that were in the two hands of one harpsichordist in Bach's original version.

The *Uhrovská* collection (named for the eponymous town in present-day Slovakia where it was found) from 1730 is a fascinating document that provides a direct glimpse into the world of gypsy music. The approximately 350 melodies it contains were probably intended to be as comprehensive a collection of gypsy music as possible. Its multinational character documents the extent to which the gypsies—and with them their music—traveled. Hungarian melodies appear next to Czech songs and the location of *Uhrovská's* discovery in Slovakia suggests further ethnic influences.

Contrary to the oral tradition of the gypsies, in essence without written record, a traveling master violinist must have attempted to assemble the music of his people into a comprehensive "catalogue." Few gypsies would have studied notation and so we can infer that *Uhrovská* was compiled by a traveling musician who had come into contact with the educated classes of his time. In this case, he utilized a sort of shorthand, allowing plenty of liberty for creativity. With a few exceptions, the music in the *Uhrovská* collection is notated in a single voice and so the bass line and the harmonic and rhythmic fleshing-out in the mid-range would have been improvised. Thus, it was implied that the pieces would be arranged *ad hoc* by gypsy bands. We have adopted this practice and expanded the melodies into multi-voiced pieces.

The mostly single-line melodies do not provide any indications regarding the formal figuration. It is impossible that a melody would have been played through only once, although even here the sequence is left to each performer. In this instance it is akin to jazz music, where relatively short melodies are expanded into longer pieces through improvisation. This generous freedom allows the interpreter of this music quite an unusual role, because it is the interpreter who actually gives the music its form. The melodies contain surprising "twists" that can make harmonizing in the traditional baroque sense impossible. The eventful history of the Sinti and Roma people, who during the Middle Ages found their way to Europe from their origins in India, has left its traces here and it is impossible to establish exactly how this music would have sounded. We have attempted to do justice to the inner richness of these melodies with arrangements that are as diverse as possible.

In putting together this program, it became obvious that the undercurrent of kinship between these two different musical styles is too insistent, and that the rough and fresh gypsy music had greatly fascinated composers like Bach and Telemann. Although cause for speculation remains, we hope that you, our audience, will share our enthusiasm for this unusual musical encounter.

—Notes by Matthias Maute