

Tafelmusik

Handel *Royal Fireworks*

PROGRAMME NOTES

Philidor Marches de timbales / Pièces de trompettes et timbales

We open this week's concerts – and the 2009/10 season – in a celebratory fashion, with a few marches composed by members of the Philidor family for the court of Louis XIV. Brothers André Danican and Jacques Danican were but two members of a large family of musicians employed at the court as players of various woodwind and brass instruments as well as timpani. Like many of their relatives, they joined the 'family business' as children (one of André Danican's 23 children was given a post with the Cromornes et Trompettes Marines at age 3, although André Danican himself didn't appear on the payroll until age 7!). We are particularly indebted to Philidor l'aîné for his work as the king's music librarian: he carefully compiled music not only from Louis XIV's reign, but as far back as Henry IV. Among the compilations are collections of music used for ceremonial occasions, such as the marches played this week.

Rameau Suite from *Les Paladins*

The tremendous power and influence of Louis XIV's maître de musique, Jean-Baptiste Lully, continued to be felt in France long after his death in 1687. The operas of Lully, for example, dominated the French stage for several generations. French audiences were thus shocked and overwhelmed when the then 50-year-old Jean-Philippe Rameau set tradition aside and boldly presented his first opera in 1733. *Hippolyte et Aricie* was years in the making. Rameau wrote: "I followed the theatre from the age of 12; I did not work for the Opera until I was 50, and I still did not consider myself capable. I took a chance, I was lucky, I have continued." He continued, in fact, to compose no fewer than 28 dramatic works in 30 years, the last being *Les Boréades*, written in the final year of his life.

Rameau's second-last opera, *Les Paladins*, was premiered in 1760 with limited success, and not revived until 1967. It was one of only two *comédies lyriques* composed by Rameau (the other being *Platée*). The libretto was weak, with a mix of comic and serious elements that did not appeal to the French public. Set in medieval Venice, the opera involves a romance between a Paladin or knight errant, and a young Italian girl in the care of an aged senator who is determined to marry her. Youth prevails, after much trickery and deceit. Any weakness in the text, however, is more than compensated for in the music provided by Rameau. A contemporary supporter wrote, "It was agreed that the music was so full of fire and imagination that it seemed to be composed by an artist in the prime of life rather than by an old man of 80." Particularly imaginative are the wealth of

instrumental music and the remarkable colours Rameau finds in the orchestra, with bassoons playing at the very top of their range, brilliant piccolos, and extensive use of the horn (originally played by two musicians who doubled on viola!). We offer a selection of this orchestral music in this week's concerts.

J.C. Bach Grand Overture

Johann Sebastian Bach died when his youngest son, Johann Christian, was only 15 years old, and thus his care and education were entrusted to his older brother, Carl Philipp Emanuel, in Berlin. He became fascinated with Italian opera, and in 1756 set off for Italy, the first Bach in six generations to travel extensively. There he studied with Padre Martini, and in 1760 secured the post of organist at the Cathedral in Milan. "Giovanni" Bach hence became a Catholic, further departing from the family tradition. His passion for opera finally led him to England, where "John" Bach became official composer of opera at the King's Theatre, and music master to the Queen. Like Handel before him, he quickly stole the hearts of the English public, and his compositions clearly reflect the popular tastes of the day.

Bach included three Grand Overtures for double orchestra in his last publication of orchestral music, op. 18, which appeared a few years before his death in 1782. The opus is considered the pinnacle of his instrumental output, and the three works for double orchestra were undoubtedly included to display his mastery. Although works for double choir were relatively common then as now, works for two distinct orchestras were rare. The first orchestra includes oboes, bassoon and horns in addition to strings, and the second orchestra flutes and strings. Bach occasionally has the two orchestras play in dialogue, but his main purpose in writing these works seems to have been to create a grand effect, in which he explores all possible contrasts of sound and space.

Handel *Music for the Royal Fireworks*

In 1749, Handel was commissioned to provide music for a celebration of the signing of the peace treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, a treaty that marked the end (albeit temporary) of the War of the Austrian Succession. The Duke of Montague hired a theatre designer by the name of Servandoni to design and erect an enormous structure to support the largest and most spectacular firework display ever seen in England. Handel was asked to supply the music, with instruction from the King that the music be played by "naught but martial instruments," and no "fiddles." According to some reports, Handel may in fact have added string parts, but restricted their role to simply doubling a massive band of 24 oboes, 9 horns, 3 sets of timpani, 12 bassoons, a contrabassoon and a serpent. The music was written in the French tradition of outdoor wind music established under Louis XIV — a grand overture followed by a sequence of short dance movements. A public rehearsal of the music drew an audience of 12,000, blocking traffic on London Bridge for over three hours. The spectacle itself drew even greater numbers, but was not an overwhelming success because of problems with the fireworks:

many of the most spectacular machines failed to light, and one entire wing of the structure collapsed in flames. The music was noted as a highlight, and Handel turned to it again when organizing a concert a few months later to raise funds for the completion of the chapel of the Foundling Hospital. The orchestra for the indoor performance was much reduced and included strings and harpsichord: it is this version we are performing this week. Handel's connection with the Foundling Hospital continued for the remainder of his life, notably with his annual *Messiah* performances in the chapel.