

Tafelmusik

Baroque Orchestra and Chamber Choir

J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation

Program Notes

by Alison Mackay

J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation is a celebration of the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach, with an emphasis on the instrumental music which he created for his family, his students, and his colleagues. Using words and images, the performance also honours the artisans and tradespeople whose labor and expertise made the performances of Bach's music possible, both in his own time and in the 21st century.

The project was born in June of 2014, when the members of Tafelmusik were invited to live in the city of Leipzig for two weeks as orchestra-in-residence at the city's famous annual Bach Festival. Immersed in the atmosphere of the composer's hometown, we were able to explore the craft of Bach's own artisans under the guidance of our generous partners and advisors at the Bach Museum, who have provided many of the images for the project.

Since that time, the orchestra has toured *The Circle of Creation* in Canada, the US, South Korea, and China. In May 2018 we take it to Australia.

The concert begins and ends with poetry about the honorary patrons of Bach's city of Leipzig — the Roman god of music, Apollo, and his brother Mercury, who made a glorious musical instrument from the shell of a tortoise and seven strings of sheep gut.

Two millennia later, the instrument makers of the eighteenth century still used materials from the natural world — bird feathers for the quills that pluck harpsichord strings, maple and spruce for the bodies of stringed instruments, and boxwood for oboes. Sheep intestines were still used to create strings for Bach's instruments, and brass strings were made by hand for his harpsichords.

Centuries-old methods are still used today for the making of historical strings for period instruments. Because the guild members of early modern Europe were obliged to guard their trade secrets, modern makers have had to be detectives, using forensic evidence from scraps of old strings and sources such as Diderot's eighteenth-century encyclopedia to determine the materials and techniques that would have been used for Bach's instruments.

The images seen in the concert portray artisans from Bach's time as well as modern instrument builders who use historical techniques to create instruments for the Tafelmusik Orchestra. Film footage and still photographs created specially for this performance feature Toronto builder and restorer Quentin Playfair, who made a cello inspired by an instrument from the Stradivarius workshop in 1726; the English harpsichord and string maker Malcolm Rose; the American oboe maker Harry van Dias; German bassoon maker Peter Wolf; Toronto bow maker Stephen Marvin; and the artisans of the Aquila String factory in Italy.

Much of the music on the program is typical of the works which would have been performed at Zimmerman's Coffeehouse in the center of Leipzig. In 1695, the merchants' guild of Leipzig had petitioned the town council for "street lanterns that would, as in Vienna and Berlin, burn all night to prevent incessant nocturnal crime." On Christmas Eve of 1701, 700 oil-fuelled streetlights were installed in the city, making it safe for the first time for all citizens to walk freely at night, transforming coffeehouses into venues for recreation and music. Bach directed an ensemble which performed on Friday nights at the cafe for which the owner, Gottfried Zimmerman, acquired a set of musical instruments. The orchestral suites BWV 1066 and 1068, the Third Brandenburg Concerto, the Trio Sonata BWV 1039, the *Goldberg Variations*, and the shorter solos for

harpichord, violin, or cello are typical of music which Bach would have performed with members of his family, university students, and amateur players of the ensemble known as the Collegium Musicum. Professional players from the Leipzig town band also participated in these performances.

These municipal musicians had responsibilities for outdoor performances from balconies at City Hall or one of the church steeples in town. *Gloria laus et honour* and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* are well-known hymn tunes which would have been played instrumentally by these performers. They were given salaries, clothing, music, instruments, and housing for themselves and their families in the Stadtpfeiffer Gässchen (City Pipers' Lane), which was also the traditional street for the city's midwives.

In 1746, the Dresden official court painter Elias Gottlob Haussmann painted a portrait of the 61-year-old Bach holding, as was customary, an emblem of his art. Rather than being pictured with a keyboard, the famous virtuoso chose instead to hold a small piece of paper with three short lines of music — the first eight notes of the bass line of the *Goldberg Variations* with a six-part canon written in code. It was a powerful symbol of Bach's roles as composer, performer, and teacher. Like the instrument makers who made his violins and harpsichords, Bach regarded himself as a craftsman who had inherited much from the guild musicians who were his forebears.

The concert ends with a reflection on human hands and the thousands of hours it takes to master the use of a violin bow or a chisel. In the long hours of labour, musicians, and artisans are sustained by the beauty of materials, the artistry of their tools, the guidance of inspiring mentors, and the exhilaration of exploring the art of a great genius. We share with our audiences around the world an abiding love for the music of J.S. Bach, and it is a privilege to be able to perform it in celebration of his art and in recognition of the artisans, scholars, tradespeople, and music lovers who have made our own performing lives possible.

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