

Fall 2012 Collegium Musicum Program Notes: Bach and Before

Tonight's concert examines the composers and traditions that influenced and shaped J.S. Bach's unique compositional style. Rather than quintessentially Baroque, Bach assimilated and then amalgamated the best of the two national compositional styles that prevailed for many generations preceding his own: the dynamic Italian style driven by its emphasis on the voice or vocally inspired instrumental works exemplified by Vivaldi's compositions and the sophisticated French style steeped in rhetoric, dance, and timbre and well represented on our program by Marais' works. Bach was, of course, also keenly interested in the latest currents in German-speaking countries, particularly those introduced by Biber and Buxtehude, yet he still preserved the equal-voiced contrapuntal style demonstrated by the lute fantasias of Francesco da Milano. Indeed, there are musicologists who maintain that rather than the composer who summed up everything Baroque and did it better than everyone else, Bach was really a super-Renaissance composer who applied a Baroque vocabulary to the framework supplied by the cosmopolitan Franco-Flemish composers of the High Renaissance. Both views have merit, and we hope that tonight's musical offering gives you some insight into how to approach the music of music history's finest craftsman, an honorific Bach would have been most pleased to have received.

Our performers are tuning to an unequal temperament typical of the type that Bach is known to have used: 1/6-comma meantone temperament. Compared to the equal temperament that one would find on a modern piano, the dissonances are stronger, and the consonances are sweeter. Equal temperament has a dulling affect that flattens the progression from one harmony to another whereas meantone temperaments add life and color to the sound.

We begin with a sonata for violin and continuo, in this case, harpsichord, cello, and theorbo, by Antonio Vivaldi whose works Bach diligently copied out at night by candlelight, which has been thought to have brought on Bach's vision problems. Vivaldi is best known today for his 500+ concerti, but he was a surprisingly facile composer whose catalogue includes sonatas as well as sacred concerted vocal music and a lengthy list of operas. Antonio Vivaldi was almost completely forgotten until musicologists rediscovered his works and began to program them on collegium musicum concerts in the 1940s. Our violin soloist, Usman Waseem, will provide some embellished repeats, a performance practice technique that in Vivaldi's time, was considered obligatory.

With our next set, we introduce the FIU Viol Consort, facilitated by Theron McClure's generous gift of his entire collection of student viols and two other viols donated by FIU professor Kip Irvine, several of which will be used for tonight's concert. An accurate translation of "viola da gamba" would be a viol held between the legs. The repertoire for viol consort is vast, and we hope that tonight's introduction of our new collegium ensemble directed by Mikaho Somekawa will be the start of another collegium tradition. From Prof. Somekawa's performance of several selections from one of Marin Marais' many suites, you will easily see why he is considered to be history's most important viola da gamba composer. This is virtuosic repertoire of the highest order that US audiences rarely have the pleasure of experiencing live.

Francesco's lute music is notated in Italian lute tablature, while the accompaniments for the French songs in our next set are notated in French lute tablature. The Renaissance lute Celso Cano will be performing on tonight was graciously donated to our program by Ned Mast. This instrument fields eight courses, a course being either a pair of strings tuned in unison or at the

octave or a single string not part of a pair, such as the top string which, since it often carries the melody, is referred to as the *chanterelle*. In written works on the arts, Francesco was often confused with Michelangelo because each of them was commonly referred to as “Il Divino.” If you are familiar with the French language, you will immediately recognize that the songs by Attaignant and Sermisy are in old French.

If you want idiosyncratic idiomatic music for violin and continuo (in this case, chamber organ instead of harpsichord), leave it to Biber. His Mystery Sonatas are also known as the Rosary Sonatas because the score for each one of them is accompanied by a woodcut illustrating one of the Stations of the Cross. Sonata No. 1 is a theme and variations introduced by violinistic runs and arpeggios and concluded with an improvisatory outburst that expels the pent up energy built up in the previous section as if our soloist, Matthew Tobin, was freeing himself from the confines of the strictly repeated harmonic pattern. Sonata No. 1 ends with a half cadence that most listeners interpret as a question. Andres Villa’s performance of the Prelude from Bach’s sixth cello suite provides the answer. A bravura showpiece, this prelude imitates typical techniques associated with the lute: ubiquitous unisons, *stile brisé* (chord tones staggered to compensate for the lute’s inability to sustain notes), and implied lines, which through the clever manipulation of *stile brisé*, give the listener the impression that the instrument is sustaining several contrapuntal voices at once.

Buxtehude was the composer whom Bach walked 280 miles to visit, roughly the same distance as that between Miami and Daytona Beach. The elderly Buxtehude fired Bach’s imagination and inspired his innate creative spirit. Bach must have been totally entranced by Buxtehude for he risked losing his job by turning a two-week leave of absence with permission into a three-month leave of absence without. *Jesu, meine Freude* provides a perfect introduction into Buxtehude’s soundscape. For this performance we are pleased to collaborate with the FIU Concert Choir, directed by Mary Kauffman, whose fluency in German and many years of experience working on this music in Germany informs our performance of Buxtehude’s splendid cantata.

To conclude our concert we present a work that has been prepared and directed by our two violin soloists, Jorge Vasquez and Meagan Slattery, in true Baroque fashion. While a conductor is required for concerted works such as the Buxtehude cantata, instrumental concerti such as Bach’s Double Violin Concerto in D Minor were customarily directed by the soloists, and we have followed suit in typical Baroque fashion. It was thought that a conductor in such circumstances would not only be in the way, but would cause the players to shift their focus to the conductor and thus away from the other contrapuntal voices, a surefire way to depersonalize the interpretation. After all, who ever heard of using a conductor for a string quartet? Indeed, the freedom this allows the players results in a noticeably more dynamic performance that actually does “move the affect.”

We are grateful that you have made time in your busy schedules to allow us to share with you the musical experiences we are privileged to enjoy every day. Finally, as always, please join us on stage after the concert for a closer look at our impressive and burgeoning collection of instruments that continues to grow rapidly through the generosity of our many benefactors listed in the program.

– David Dolata