

Program Notes: Leipzig

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

(Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany; died July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany)

Keyboard Concerto in d minor, BWV 1052

Composed: ca. 1738–1739

Publication: ca. 1836

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 22 minutes

Johann Sebastian Bach was elected in 1723, at the age of thirty-eight, to the position of Music Director and Cantor in Leipzig, where he taught at the St. Thomas School and directed all musical activities at the city's two churches, the Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche. Bach would remain in Leipzig until his death, in 1750, and produced many of his mature masterpieces during his time there. In fulfillment of his church duties during this period, Bach created his greatest sacred works, including the **cantatas**, the *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion*, and the Mass in b minor.

But Bach's second decade in Leipzig saw the creation of much of his great instrumental music, as well. In 1729, Bach assumed the directorship of the Collegium Musicum, a concert series presented by local musicians and students, which had been founded in 1702 by Georg Philipp Telemann. The Collegium presented weekly concerts for the Leipzig culturati, primarily at the consequently iconic Zimmermann's Coffeehouse near the city center; Bach programmed music by Telemann, Corelli, Vivaldi, and other leading composers of the day and also composed much new music himself for the series. With the Collegium as a newly available outlet for Bach's creativity in addition to the church, the 1730s saw a revitalized output of keyboard, chamber, and orchestral music to match the inspired catalogue of sacred vocal music composed over the previous decade.

Harpsichord **concerti** made up a significant part of Bach's compositional output for the Collegium Musicum in the 1730s. Around 1738–1739, he wrote seven harpsichord concerti (BWV 1052–1058), mostly transcriptions of earlier concerti for wind or string instruments. In addition to these, Bach also composed, several years prior, a number of concerti for multiple harpsichords (BWV 1060–1065), which are likewise transcriptions of earlier works. The first of the seven harpsichord concerti, the Concerto in d minor, BWV 1052, is a transcription of a violin concerto, now lost, likely composed during his time in Cöthen.

The concerto's powerful opening presents the stern **ritornello** in unsmiling **octaves**. A solo keyboard **episode** follows, precipitating an intricate dialogue between soloist and strings. The ritornello **theme** forms the basis of the entire **movement**, yet Bach nevertheless achieves a great spectrum of colors and expressive characters, as the soloist steers the ensemble through various keys. On display, too, is Bach's signature **contrapuntal** complexity.

A pithy keyboard **cadenza** appears midway through the movement—not the bravura display, placed before the movement's final breath as would become the custom in, e.g., Mozart's piano concerti, but a short expressive gesture, followed by further discourse between keyboard and strings. Later, hushed ululations of alternating sixteenth-note chords between the soloist's right and left hands, colored by atmospheric strings, herald the ritornello's emphatic final statement.

The **Adagio** retains the first movement's dourness. It is set, unexpectedly, in g minor—the slow second movements of Bach's minor-key concerti typically appear in major to offset the prevailing

moodiness. Here, as in the opening **Allegro**, the movement begins in pallid octaves, presenting a bass **ostinato** that underpins the movement. Meditative string lines surround **arioso** melody in the soloist's right hand. Following the slow movement's quiet introspection, the concerto concludes with an energetic ritornello-form finale.

GEORG PHILIPP TELEMANN

(Born March 14, 1681, Magdeburg, Germany; died June 25, 1767, Hamburg, Germany)

Canary Cantata, TWV 20: 37 (*Trauermusik eines kunsterfahrenen Canarienvogels*)

Composed: 1737

Other works from this period: *Tafelmusik* (collection of instrumental pieces) (1733); Twelve Fantasias for Solo Violin (1735); Six Symphonies (1738–1739); Twelve **Trio Sonatas** (1740)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

So musically precocious was the young Georg Philipp Telemann—he had taught himself to play the recorder, violin, and **zither** and composed numerous works, including an opera, by the age of twelve—that his parents feared a career in music inevitable and confiscated his instruments. In 1701, Telemann entered the Leipzig Conservatory to study law. As per his mother's demands, he abandoned music. But the renunciation of his art, thankfully, was short-lived: Telemann's roommate discovered a psalm setting among his personal effects, which was performed at the Thomaskirche, and Leipzig's mayor subsequently commissioned Telemann to compose music for services at the city's two churches, the Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche, every other week. Telemann steadily became one of Leipzig's preeminent musical figures, spurred in large part by his founding directorship of the Collegium Musicum, a student ensemble that gave public concerts.

In 1705, Telemann departed Leipzig for a post as **Kapellmeister** to Count Erdmann II of Promnitz at Sorau, in modern-day Poland; he subsequently took posts in Eisenach, Frankfurt, and, in 1721, Hamburg, which saw the most productive time of his career. In Hamburg, Telemann composed prolifically, producing sacred and secular vocal music, instrumental music, and more; directed an opera company and another collegium musicum; engraved and published his own music; wrote and published poetry; and emerged as a prominent public intellectual.

He was recognized in his lifetime as his generation's finest composer. So highly regarded was Telemann that only when he declined an invitation to return to Leipzig as Music Director of the Thomaskirche (he leveraged the offer to obtain a higher salary in Hamburg) was the position offered to the second-choice candidate, Johann Sebastian Bach. (Once installed in Leipzig, Bach succeeded Telemann as the Collegium Musicum's Director.)

If history has ceased to view Telemann as his era's greatest composer (reflecting more a reappraisal of Bach and Handel than of Telemann), he was unquestionably one of its most versatile and prolific. His oeuvre comprises an extensive catalogue of instrumental music, including solo keyboard, chamber, and orchestral works; numerous annual cycles of church cantatas as well as oratorios, masses, and other sacred music; and a varied range of secular vocal music, from songs to **serenatas** and cantatas to opera.

The secular cantatas, commissioned for weddings, birthday celebrations, civic ceremonies, and other events, constitute a motley body of work. Perhaps the strangest of them is the *Cantate oder*

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 94.

Trauermusik eines kunsterfahrenen Canarienvogels, als derselbe zum grössten Leidwesen seines Herrn Possessoris verstorben (Cantata of Funeral Music for an Artistically Trained Canary-Bird Whose Demise Brought Greatest Sorrow to His Master)—commissioned by the bereaved master of the work's title.

The cantata—known by the less unwieldy handle *Canary Cantata*—is a purposely tragicomic work. Its humor lies in Telemann's deployment of the heady affect of Italian opera (think of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*) in service of such an utterly mundane subject. "Oh dear! Oh dear!" the singer keens, inconsolably, in the cantata's opening *aria*, "my canary is dead." The following **recitative** signals a resigned acceptance: "So gehet's mit der Vogel Freude und mit den Dingen dieser Welt...Allein, die Freude ist aus. Er lieget nun gestreckt, und wird mit schwarzer Erd' bedeckt" ("And so goes the joy of a bird, and all the things of this world...Alone now, joy is gone. He's now laid out before me, soon to be covered with black earth").

The second *aria* gives further voice to the bereaved's desperate sadness, as the master sings, "Ihr lieblichen Canarienvögel, beklaget meine Freud' und eure Zier" ("You lovely canaries, lament my joy and your beauty"). Note the expressive melodic descent of Telemann's setting of the word "beklaget" ("lament").



The master next addresses Death: "Nur dir, dir grausamer Tod allein, konnt der verliebte Ton doch nicht beweglich sein" ("Only you, cruel Death, and you alone, could remain indifferent to that beguiling sound. For you have roughly and rudely devoured that treasured morsel"). The cantata assumes a **buffa** character in the following *aria*—whimsical **arpeggios** and quick repeated notes, *allegro*, in a major key—"Friss, dass dir der Hals anschwelle, friss, du unverschämter Gast!" ("Eat, so that your throat swells up, eat, you shameless guest!") (Death, we shall learn, came to the mourned canary in the form of a cat: "So the bird will scratch you, and tear at you," the master continues spitefully, "and peck at your stomach and intestines, until you spit it out; eat and may you burst open on the spot!")

The music becomes tender for the master's sentimental farewell—"Mein Canarine gute Nacht!" ("Good night, my canary!")—before the cantata's catty conclusion, in which the tombstone text is sung in the Low German dialect:

So lasset dieses noch die letzte Ehre sein,
dass ihr schreibt auf den Leichenstein:
"Dat die de Hagel!
Hie ligt en Vogel,
de kunn mann neerteck quinqueleeren,
un alle Minschken konten teren.
Du Streckbeben!
Als du wollst düssen Vogel freten,
so wull ick, dat du wär wat in den Hals geschmeten!"

So let this be his final honor,
that you write on his tombstone:
"Devil take you!
Here lies a bird,
who once sang so beautifully
that he brought joy to everyone.
O Death!
Because you would eat this bird,
I want to wring your neck!"

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany; died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany)

Andante and Variations in B-flat Major for Piano, Four Hands, op. 83a

Composed: February 10, 1844

Published: 1850, Leipzig

First performance: Detailed in the notes below

Other works from this period: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. 61 (1843); Violin Concerto in e minor, op. 64 (1844); Piano Trio no. 2 in c minor, op. 66 (1845); *Lied ohne Worte* in D Major for Cello and Piano, op. 109 (1845); *Elijah*, op. 70 (oratorio) (1846)

Approximate duration: 13 minutes

Fanny Hensel née Mendelssohn—like her brother Felix, a precociously gifted pianist and composer, though inevitably overshadowed by him on account of her gender—hosted biweekly Sunday musicales at her home in Berlin. It was for one of these gatherings that Felix Mendelssohn created, on Saturday, February 10, 1844, a four-hand piano arrangement of his **Variations** in B-flat Major, op. 83, composed in 1841. Mendelssohn biographer R. Larry Todd paints a cozy picture of brother and sister preparing for the show: "as [Felix] copied out a duet arrangement of his Variations, op. 83, Fanny took the sheets one by one to the piano and began to practice; on Sunday, the two of them premiered the new work, playfully described on the autograph as *composte per la musica delle Domeniche in casa Hensel dalla (vecchia) Vedova Felice* [composed for the music of Sundays in the Hensel house from the (old) Happy Widow]; (why Felix dubbed himself an 'old widow' remains a mystery)." The *Andante and Variations* in B-flat Major for Piano, Four Hands—published as Mendelssohn's **Opus 83a**—received its public premiere later that year, on June 25, in London.

The theme, a gently flowing melody marked *Andante tranquillo*, is virtually identical to the two-hand version; in the four-hand transcription, primo and secondo pianists simply divide the theme into alternating **phrases**. The first variation, too, hews closely to the original, garnishing the theme with **syncopated** ornaments. But as the variations proceed, Opus 83a diverges from Opus 83. (The four-hand version comprises eight variations to the original's five.) Following the first variation, the music becomes increasingly spirited: the second variation, marked **animato**, is driven by **staccato triplet** chords and the third and fourth, by swirling thirty-second-note runs. The fifth variation unleashes a giddy fusillade of densely voiced chords.

The music turns abruptly severe with the sixth variation, in gloomy g minor. Supporting a marked transfiguration of the theme in the primo part, the secondo nods to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with its characteristic four-note rhythmic **motif**. The seventh variation, **pianissimo, legatissimo**, restores the theme's tranquility. The climactic eighth variation, marked *Allegro molto agitato*, provides the work's most dramatic moment, setting the stage for the vivacious **coda**.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(Born June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Saxony, Germany; died July 29, 1856, Emdenich, near Bonn, Germany)

Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, op. 44

Composed: 1842

Publication: 1843

First performance: December 6, 1842, Leipzig

Dedication: Clara Schumann

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

Robert Schumann's compositions appear in clusters over the course of his creative career. The 1830s primarily saw the creation of piano works; 1840 was his year of lieder, followed by a year of symphonic music. In 1842 came Schumann's most significant chamber pieces. Between February and July of that year, he completed his three string quartets, each dedicated to Felix Mendelssohn. In the fall, he composed two companion pieces: first, the Piano Quintet, op. 44, and then a month later, the Piano Quartet, op. 47. Both were composed for Clara Schumann. The quintet, which paved the way for such seminal works as the piano quintets of Brahms and Dvořák, took Schumann all of three weeks to complete. The work's fiendish piano part testifies to Clara Schumann's virtuosic ability at the keyboard. Ironically, illness prevented her from taking part in the premiere, and Mendelssohn—likewise one of the nineteenth century's foremost pianists—filled in at the last minute, sight-reading at the performance.

The quintet is rife with searing expressivity, discernible, as with much of Schumann's music, as a dialogue between the composer's alter egos: Florestan, the masculine (in eighteenth-century parlance) and extroverted, and Eusebius, the feminine voice of tenderness and pathos. An ebullient energy drives the opening *Allegro brillante*: the first theme comprises two powerful ascending leaps answered by eight emphatic chords, unquestionably the work of Florestan; but Eusebius immediately transforms their stentorian might into a soft, loving gaze. The lyrical second theme, an enchanting duet between the cello and viola, contrasts the exclamatory first theme. The **development** section is all nervous energy, its devilishly intricate piano part audibly conceived with Clara Schumann's virtuosity in mind.

The second movement is a somber funeral march. Schumann offsets the movement's solemnity with an expressive second theme. A faster *agitato* section combines the two themes in a show of **Romantic** pathos before reprising the march. As if rising from the dead, the third movement **scherzo** follows the elegiac march with ecstatic ascending scale figures, interrupted briefly by a poetic **trio** section and then by a longer, fiery second trio. The final movement recalls the first in its unrelenting character. A literal reprise of the first movement's opening theme, combined with the finale's own main theme in a magical fugue, brings the work to a blazing finish.

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