

Johann Sebastian Bach and his Musical Contemporaries



A LIFE Institute Course

Bob Fabian

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[LIFECourses.ca]

My Path

- Always loved J.S. Bach's music
- Offered Bach & His Successors
 - Impact of Bach on succeeding generations
- Class seemed pleased with course
- LIFE asked for another music course
- >> Bach & his Contemporaries <<
 - The musical world(s) of Bach's day

Bach & his Contemporaries

- Bach: 1685 – 1750
 - contemporary: 50 year overlap with Bach
 - Big 4: Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Rameau
- Interesting time in Europe
 - Age of Enlightenment was beginning
 - Newton published his major scientific works
 - The *individual* became far more important
 - Set the stage for the revolutions to follow
- Musical echoes of social revolution

Initial Objectives

- Explore the parallel musical and social changes of the early 18th century Europe
- Each session should introduce new, interesting, lesser-known composers
 - As well as widely recognized great works from that time and place
- Build a richer contextual understanding of the world of Bach and his contemporaries
 - And enjoy listening to some great music

Your Objectives

- From your perspective, what would make this a successful course?
- How much knowledge do you have of the early 18th century and its music?
- Does it make sense to largely confine our listening to YouTube videos?
 - We can sample in class; you can listen in leisure
 - But that means that some interesting music will not be available for use in the class

Telling of History

- My first serious effort to “make sense” of history
 - Names & dates don't do it for me
- What were the forces at work shaping history?
 - Always difficult to isolate *the* cause for events
 - Changes were not uniform across Europe
 - Timing of changes varied widely
- Does the telling resonate on a deeper human level?
 - Unrealistic to hope for definitive answers about cause and effect

Confession

- The combination of words and melodic line is deep in our collective psyche
 - It's how we told and remembered our history
- Opera, specifically Italian opera, swept across Europe in the early 18th century
- For me, the story too often gets in the way of the music
 - I want the musical development to drive the composition, not have the structure of the story drive the music
 - Early opera more about spectacle, less about story
 - I'm in a minority, ... but at least I recognize my status

Dozens & Dozens

- Music was really important back then
 - Music is no longer “special” the way it used to be
 - I remember George Szell ended the season with Beethoven's Ninth, ... and it was always great
 - Now I can listen to the world's greatest conductors and the world's greatest orchestras and the world's greatest singers at the press of a button. Beethoven's Ninth is no longer “special” in the same way.
- There's a large and growing body of music from that time which is now available on record

This Course

- We'll start with Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, & Rameau
 - They are the recognized leading composers in Germany, England, Italy, and France
- My Goal: Introduce at least one new composer to everyone in the class every week
 - Not really practical – too many of you are too knowledgeable, but it's a worthy goal
- Let's start with selections from the Big 4
 - Aside: I'll use YouTube examples to which you can return

The Big 4

- Bach – 1685-1750 (Germany)
 - Spent his entire life in German lands
- Handel – 1685-1757 (Germany, England)
 - Born in Germany, traveled to Italy, settled in England
- Vivaldi – 1678-1741 (Italy)
 - Ordained in Venice, traveled in Italy, died in Austria
- Rameau – 1683-1768 (France)
 - Successor to Lully, leading French composer

Connections

- Vivaldi got rediscovered because Bach had transcribed some of his concertos
- Handel traveled with Telemann (godfather to Bach's second son) to Italy and met Vivaldi
- Italian Opera was all the rage in London (Handel started out presenting Italian operas)
- France went its own way, but the pan-European influences also influenced the French

From Bach to Vivaldi

- Bach – Concerto (keyboard) BWV 972
 - Boris Bloch, piano
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqDsDCWEqzk>
- Vivaldi – Concerto, Op. 3, No. 9 RV 230
 - Fabio Biondi Europa Galante
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2fyM7_UxVU
- Bach – often as trumpet & organ
 - Alison Balsom, trumpet
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUYVvwaH_qM

Sampler

- Bach – Easter Oratorio
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWcpB15Ta2w>
- Handel – Alcina
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9viOmJrTw4>
- Vivaldi – Farnace
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPSrm2pQ71A>
- Rameau – Castor et Pollux
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wgj7OmGJdc>

Bach – Easter Oratorio

- First performed in Leipzig on 1725 April 1
 - Revised in the 1730s and again in the 1740s
- Based on “Shepard's Cantata” BWV 249a (lost)
- Festively scored for
 - three trumpets, timpani, two oboes, oboe d'amore, bassoon, two recorders, transverse flute, two violins, and continuo.
- Four voices, four characters
 - Simon Peter (tenor)
 - John the Apostle (bass)
 - Mary Magdalene (alto)
 - Mary Jacobe (soprano)



Handel – Alcina

- First performed at Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in London on 16 April 1735
- Characters
 - Alcina, a sorceress - soprano
 - Morgana, her sister - soprano
 - Oberto, a boy searching for his father - boy soprano
 - Ruggiero, a knight - mezzo-soprano/castrato
 - Bradamante, Ruggiero's betrothed, disguised as her own brother, the knight Ricciardo - contralto
 - Oronte, lover of Morgana - tenor
 - Melisso, former tutor of Ruggiero - bass
- The heroic knight Ruggiero is destined to a short but glorious life, and a benevolent magician is always whisking him away from the arms of his fiancée, Bradamante.

Vivaldi – Farnace

- First performed in 1727 at the Teatro Sant'Angelo in Venice
- Cast of Characters
 - Farnace, King of Pontus contralto en travesti
 - Tamiri, Farnace's wife contralto
 - Berenice, Tamiri's mother soprano
 - Pompeo, Victorious Roman soldier contralto castrato
 - Selinda, Farnace's sister soprano
 - Gilade, Berenice's Captain soprano castrato
 - Aquilio, Roman soldier contralto castrato
- Farnace, King of Pontus, has been defeated, and to avoid their falling into the hands of the enemy, he commands his wife, Tamiri, to kill their son and then herself. Tamiri's mother, Berenice, hates Farnace and is in cahoots with Pompey, the Roman victor. ...

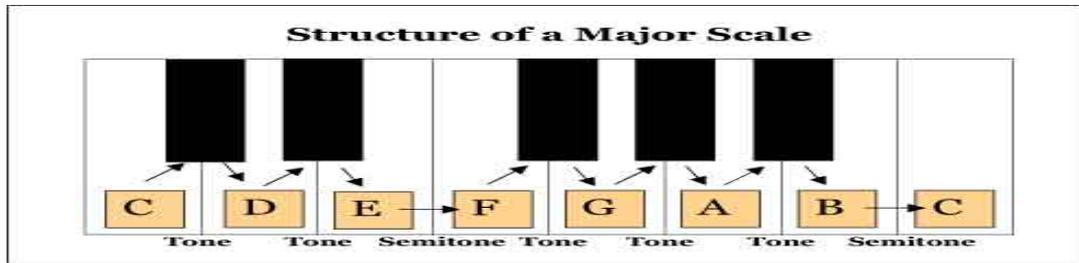
Rameau – Castor et Pollux

- First performed on 24 October 1737 by the Académie royale de musique In Paris
- Characters
 - Castor haute-contre
 - Pollux bass
 - Téléaire soprano
 - Phébé soprano
 - Jupiter bass
 - Vénus soprano
 - Mars bass
 - Minerve soprano
- Castor and Pollux are twin brothers, one of them (Pollux) is immortal and the other (Castor) is mortal. They are both in love with the princess Telaira (Téléaire), but she loves only Castor. The twins have fought a war against an enemy king, Lynceus (Lyncée) which has resulted in disaster ...

Hypothesis

- The music of this era can be heard by modern ears without adjusting the mental state
 - Tonality was solidly established, with all music being based on a dominant key
 - The scale was well-tempered allowing music to be played in any key
- What came before was almost an extension of the voice, flowing along a single vocal line
 - Medieval and renaissance music can appeal, but it's not “our” music. We need to shift our ears and our head.

Scale Diversion



- “Tonal” music has a home pitch; the music naturally revolves around that basic note
- There is a “natural” progression from the tonic up the scale to the same note one octave higher
 - Major scale: half tone between 3rd & 4th and 7th & 8th
 - Minor scale: half tone between 2nd & 3rd and 5th & 6th

More Scale Stuff

- There are 12 half tones between a note and the same note one octave higher
 - The frequency doubles in an octave
- The “perfect” fifth is a seven half-tone interval
 - The “perfect” frequency ratio is 2 : 3
 - We “hear” that interval as pleasing and stable
- But it's not practical to tune one scale for perfect fifths (or thirds) – the other scales would be out of tune
 - Well-tempering → acceptable adjustment of intervals

Different Cultures

- Don't necessarily have a 12 tone scale
 - Could be more or less tones in octave
- Don't necessarily hear music as being in a major or minor key, ... the way we do
- Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier
 - Two books of 24 major and minor keys
 - Gould playing WTC
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcJrr74mQeU>
 - Well-Tempered, ... and great music!

Hildegard von Bingen

- Nobel birth, but sickly tenth child
- Tithed to the church at eight
- Lived from 1098 to 1179
- Almost a “liberated” woman
- A large body of her music survived
- Ordo Virtutum (Order of the Virtues)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBGgRSPyUFQ>



Ordo Virtutum

- May have been composed in 1151. No known performance history
- morality play / liturgical drama
 - About the struggle for a human soul, or Anima, between the Virtues and the Devil
 - Part I: the Virtues are introduced to the Patriarchs and Prophets who marvel at the Virtues.
 - Part II: complaints of souls that are imprisoned in bodies, ...
 - Followed by Parts III, IV & V
- Plainsong for everyone but the devil. It's monophonic, with a single unaccompanied melodic line. The rhythm is freer than the metered rhythm of later Western music.

It was different ...

- Medieval music was about a single, engaging story line. Music supported the story telling.
- By the 18th century, music was about an interwoven fabric of musical ideas. The “story” was a collective one.
- Some things have remained (largely) constant, others have changed
 - Our music is tonal with a well-tempered scale
 - But our music is no longer as exceptional or as special or as memorable

Plan for Course

- Week One: Introduction
- Week Two: Italian music – the singing melodic line
- Week Three: German music – interwoven, but now with more singing lines
- Week Four: English music – confluence of forces, new commercial reality
- Week Five: French music – refined, sophisticated, regal, ... distinctly French
- Week Six: “Other” music – the other composers that you or I feel should be included