

A Baroque Cabinet of Curiosities

Program Notes

In the Baroque period, a 'Cabinet of Curiosities' was a wide-ranging collection of archaeological treasures, *objets d'art*, natural specimens, religious relics, and other rarities. Sometimes referred to in German as *Kunstkabinett* (Art Cabinet) or *Wunderkammer* (Chamber of Wonders), these collections often represented a microcosm of the world through their encyclopedic variety, and a scope limited only by a curators' imagination (see image at right). Tonight's program represents a 'Cabinet of Curiosities' of the German Baroque period, with an immense diversity of music from different styles and genres by three giants of the era – Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, and Georg Philipp Telemann – alongside three lesser-known but no less influential composers – Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, Heinrich Franz Ignaz Biber, and Dieterich Buxtehude.



A generation before Bach, Handel, and Telemann were born, prevailing musical tastes were in a state of great flux. Rejecting the over-formalized and austere approach of the Renaissance, Baroque musicians charted new paths, and pushed the limits of virtuosity and expressivity as they sought to create a more visceral emotional connection with their listeners. The mid-17th century German Jesuit musician and scholar Athanasius Kircher coined the term *Stylus Phantasticus* to describe this "most free and unrestrained method of composing...instituted to display genius and to teach the hidden design of harmony and the ingenious composition of harmonic phrases and fugues" (*Musurgia Universalis*, 1650).



One of the first composers to embrace this new style was **Johann Heinrich Schmelzer**; he and his student, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, completely revolutionized violin music through their spellbinding virtuosity, and became the first bona fide violin rockstars of their time. Schmelzer was an Austrian who, with the support of the Hapsburg monarchs, became the first non-Italian to hold the post of *Hofkapellmeister* at the Viennese court. In a field dominated by Italians, his collection of *Sonatae unarum fidium* were the first violin sonatas ever published by a German-speaking composer. Many of Schmelzer's unpublished works are preserved in the Rost Codex, an important collection of music manuscripts compiled in the mid-17th century. One such piece, his **Sonata "Polnische Sackpfeifen"**, or "Polish bagpipes", uses unconventional techniques to evoke the sound of the Polish *Bock* (German for 'goat'), a traditional bagpipe made from goatskin and sometimes even the goat's head, fur, and legs (see image at left).

Schmelzer's student **Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber** further expanded the violin's technical and expressive capabilities with his groundbreaking set of 'Rosary Sonatas' published around 1676. The sonatas are preceded by copper engravings depicting the 15 Mysteries of the Rosary, and distinguished by their innovative use of *scordatura*, a method of adjusting the tuning of the violin's four strings to create musical effects not normally possible on the instrument. Biber utilizes the different timbres created by the altered string tensions to evoke the full range of emotions – from joy and contentment to humiliation and agony – experienced by Christ in the Biblical mysteries. Other sonatas are rife with religious symbolism, such as Sonata XI, "The Resurrection", in which the middle two strings are switched to create a literal cross below the violin's bridge (see image at top right). **Sonata X, "The Crucifixion"**, opens with rapid alternations of rhythm and mood to symbolize the terror and anguish of Christ being nailed to the cross, while the explosive ending depicts the violent earthquake that occurred with Christ's death.



The third and final representative of the *Stylus Phantasticus* on our program is **Dieterich Buxtehude**, a 17th century Danish-German composer whose influence was strongly felt by his contemporaries and successive generations of musicians, including Johann Sebastian Bach. Buxtehude organized an immensely popular and well-funded series of concerts called *Abendmusik* at St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, which gave him innumerable opportunities to showcase his considerable compositional creativity through sacred songs and secular instrumental works, including his **Trio Sonata in C Major, BuxWV 266**. By scoring this piece for two violins (the 'new kid' on the block) and the more antiquated viola da gamba, Buxtehude gives a nod to tradition while blazing trails with his no-holds-barred approach to musical form and function. The ever-changing characters in this and other Buxtehude trio sonatas alternate between moments of florid extroversion, pious introspection, and joyful dance-like passages that provide endless variety for both performers and listeners.

It would be an understatement to say that **Johann Sebastian Bach** was merely a fan of Buxtehude. As a young man, Bach was said to have walked from Arnstadt to Lübeck – a trip of well over 200 miles – to study with Buxtehude and "comprehend one thing and another about his art". Bach's month-long leave of absence from his church post in Arnstadt turned into a four-month stay in Lübeck, where he honed his already considerable musical talents with the 86-year old master. Buxtehude's daring use of chromaticism, bold and at-times dissonant harmonies, and virtuosic style left an indelible impression on the young Bach's compositional style. These elements are present even in much later mature works, such as his **Harpisichord Concerto in F Minor, BWV 1056**. At the height of his career, Bach was living and working in Leipzig as cantor of the *Thomaskirche* (St. Thomas Church) and actively involved in the town's Collegium Musicum, an informal gathering of university students and amateur musicians founded in 1701 by Bach's close friend and colleague, Georg Philipp Telemann. By Bach's time, the Collegium met regularly at Zimmermann's Coffeehouse, which boasted a fine harpsichord and plenty of space for music making. Bach supplied chamber music for diverse instruments and voices for these weekly soirees, including his concertos for one, two, three, and four harpsichords. The F minor concerto is distinguished by its gorgeous slow movement, a tender arioso that Bach adapted from a Sinfonia for in Cantata 156, *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe*. The Sinfonia itself appears to have been inspired by a movement from Telemann's G Major Flute Concerto, TWV 51:G2 (see images at top of next page).

Telemann: Concerto in G Major TWV 51:G2, Andante, mm. 1-3

Bach: Cantata "Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe", Sinfonia, mm. 1-3

It is a happy coincidence that two of history's greatest composers – Johann Sebastian Bach and **George Frideric Handel** – were both born in 1685, and not more than 120 miles apart (in Eisenach and Halle). Whereas Bach never left his native Germany, Handel traveled to Rome in his early 20s to seek his musical fortunes, and ended up settling in London, where he completely revolutionized the opera scene and became one of the most famous composers of his day. His opera *Alcina* was written for his first season at Covent Garden, and was fairly well received – it enjoyed an eighteen-show run, and Handel's neighbor Mary Pendarves even called it 'the best he ever made'. Today, *Alcina* remains one of the composer's most popular works, with a plot full of the spectacle, magical enchantments, and romantic intrigue one expects of Baroque opera. Alcina, a sorceress, sings the aria "**Ombre pallide**" in Act 2, after the knight Ruggiero escapes her clutches despite being under her love spell. The slithering, roiling motion of string parts depicts Alcina's simmering rage as she conjures up magical spirits to help her exact vengeance on him. Later in the opera, a boy, Oberto, discovers that his long-lost father has been turned into a lion by Alcina. When the sorceress – still aggrieved from Ruggiero's betrayal – implores the boy to kill the beast, Oberto sings the rage aria "**Barbara! lo ben lo so!**" and harangues the sorceress for her cruel barbarity.

The aria "**M'hai resa infelice**" comes from Handel's final opera, *Deidamia*, which takes its plot from Greek mythology. To keep her son Achilles from being killed in the Trojan War, as foretold by prophesy, the nymph Thetis hides him at the court of Lycomedes on Skyros, where he and Deidamia, one of Lycomedes' daughters, fall in love. Elsewhere, Ulysses learns from an oracle that the Greeks will never conquer Troy without Achilles on the battlefield; he travels to Skyros, where he exposes Achilles through a ruse. In this aria, Deidamia expresses her grief at losing Achilles, and rages at Ulysses' duplicity by cursing him to be plunged into "eternal night" by "raging, horrid, driving tempests" at sea.

One of history's most prolific composers, **Georg Philipp Telemann** wrote well over 3,000 works during the course of his long and successful life. In 1705, Telemann cut his law studies short to assume the post of *Kapellmeister* to Count Erdmann II in Sorau and Pless (now Żary and Pszczyna in Poland), where he was amazed by the folk music he heard in taverns and roadside inns. These experiences left a lasting impression on Telemann, who recalled decades later that "in eight days an observant person could snap up enough ideas...to last a lifetime" from listening to the *Bock* players and fiddlers improvise. It is no surprise then that many of his works bear the unmistakable imprint of Polish folk music. One such work, his **Overture-Suite in A minor** comes to us in a set of manuscript parts signed 'Melante', an anagram of Telemann's name that he sometimes used as a more Italian-sounding pseudonym. According to his autobiography, Telemann had a fondness for this genre while in Count Erdmann's employ, where he claimed to have "produced about 200 *Ouverturen* in two years". This particular Suite must have been a personal favorite as it exists in two other versions: an arrangement for lute (TWV 39:2) in which the boisterous "Rejouissance" and "Harlequinade" movements are renamed "Effronterie" and "Paysans", and an arrangement for harpsichord (TWV 36:49) in which the concluding "Harlequinade" is named "Pollinese" and reimagined as a Polish dance.