

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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J.S. Bach, Baroque Music and Moving the Passionate Soul

By Katherine Lefever*

Unlike the names for other periods of music history, the word *baroque* was originally coined by music critics and composers of the subsequent generation as a derogatory term. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a composer in his own right used the term in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), in which he took issue with that style. Rousseau argued that in baroque works “harmony is confused, charged with modulations and dissonances, the melody is harsh and little natural.”¹ While history has proven Rousseau overly judgmental in regard to some of classical music's canonic composers, on a certain level he was correct: the baroque style is at times quite dissonant and mannered, passionate and virtuosic. What these classicists were reacting so strongly against was the baroque understanding of the affections, or the passions.

It was Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), an accomplished composer of madrigals, who fathered the baroque style with his famous proclamation that “words [are] the mistress of the harmony.”² While it seems intuitive today that text

describing pain or heartbreak should be set to chromatic pitches in the vocal line or the accompaniment—that is pitches outside of the given key—while text describing pleasant emotions or beautiful things should be set to consonant pitches or chords, this was not always standard practice. Monteverdi's theory of harmony (called *seconda prattica* to differentiate it from the compositional techniques of the late Renaissance) was groundbreaking. Monteverdi believed that music need not be pleasant to be evocative. In fact, he argued, it most definitely should not be, if the text dictated otherwise. While he was

writing for his contemporaries and Monteverdi's new practice did not entirely replace the existent style, his text setting innovations paved the way for the following generation of composers.

Perhaps more important for the high baroque period was René Descartes' 1645 scientific treatise, *Passions of the Soul*.

In this work, Descartes argued that all possible human emotions could be condensed into “six simple and primitive passions, i.e., wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness. All the others are composed of these six, or are species of them.”³ Descartes' systematization was later applied directly to music theory by contemporaries of Bach, where it was argued that, in order to convey the relevant emotions, “music,



A page of the "Gloria" from B-Minor Mass.

Member Spotlight



Phil Ayers - Baritone

Phil Ayers is no stranger to choral music: an Episcopal priest and former chapel organist, he sings with the Portland Symphonic Choir and hosted the popular program *Choral Classics* on KBPS 89.9 for six years. Here is a tiny slice of Phil's story in his own words:

"I was born in Newton, Kansas right before World War II, where my Dad was a high school teacher and coach. After the war we moved to Wichita, where I grew up and where all but a year of my schooling from kindergarten through college took place. My history with Bach goes back to grade school, [where] we were subjected to some phonograph records by a well-meaning person trying to make Bach palatable to a third-grader. I can't remember much of it, but I do remember that name "Bach". In junior and senior high school I sang in choirs with varying degrees of passion. The repertoire often left much to be desired, but performances of *Messiah* were always thrilling to me. We also had exposure to a decent symphony orchestra that performed concert versions of operas. Later on in college I sang in performances of *Aida* and *Carmen* that I still remember with fondness.

I wanted to be an English major and pursue that noble path (*pace* G. Keilor) but music held sway, so I switched to the School of Music in the Fine Arts College and pursued a music education degree in voice. Never in my wildest dreams would I think that I'd become a music major. Music had always been a sort of avocation anyway, and my main interest was to become a monk in the Episcopal Church (yes, we have them—not many, though). When LaVera (and other girls) entered my life, that put a stop to a monastic vocation! LaVera was a graduate student in voice at Wichita State and had taught for about three years when we met. Our first date was a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Tulsa. We later married and have two sons.

'Next to theology, music is the language of God' said Luther. Well, we might say 'Music IS the language of God' and get away with it! And 'Those who sing, pray twice' said Augustine of Hippo or the Wesleys or Whoever. I live by both of those slogans and singing with BCC helps me live them in a wonderful way."

although its main purpose is to please and to be graceful, must sometimes provide dissonances and harsh-sound passages" to serve the text most effectively.⁴ This controversial statement echoes the one Monteverdi made more than a century earlier, granting it a scientific grounding in its reference to and interpretation of Descartes work. Musicologist Claude Palisca has said that, "it is an underlying faith in music's power, indeed its obligation, to move the affections" that unites the music of the baroque period.⁵

There were multiple ways baroque composers sought to move their audience. One way was harmonically—certain progressions or keys were seen to have specific connotations. Another practice was the use of word-painting, or "a musical gesture in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect."⁶ It's an illustrative technique, used by composers to make their work more communicative and evocative. Word-painting, also known as text depiction, came into practice in the motets and madrigals of the fifteenth century.⁷ It is not to be confused with mood or tone painting, which are more general and less pictorial. Because of word-painting's literal emphasis, the technique is seen most commonly in vocal music or music with an associated text. Certain traditional examples of word-painting are inescapable even today: fast notes underscoring a description of running, a flute accompaniment to the textual mention of a bird. As Tim Carter points out, given the Western classical tradition, even today it wouldn't seem right to set the Latin phrase "descendit de caelis" (He came down from heaven) to an ascending melodic line. To do so would seem ironic.

Bach's use of the technique is typically subtler than that of Renaissance madrigalists. The use of sixteenth note melismas, both in the alto and flute parts, to echo and accompany the word "Tropfen" (tears) in the aria "Buß und Reu" from his *Matthäus Passion* is a delicate touch. Though the composer does occasionally use more literal word-painting techniques, underscoring words like "run" or "flee" with quick, melismatic passages—the duet "Wir eilen mit Schwachen doch emsigen Schritten" from Cantata 78 is an excellent example—his genius lies in the way he takes the technique and makes it uniquely his own.

The expressive use of chromaticism Monteverdi was advocating in the early part of the seventeenth century is a type of word-painting as well. The use of chromaticism to underscore text describing the pain and suffering of the Passion is a common trope in sacred music and Bach's work is no exception. Often

Photo Gallery

this word-painting is audible, but sometimes the symbolism is best appreciated by looking at the score. Bach might use sharp notes in works where the text refers to the cross (*Kreuz*). The use of a sharp or natural, rather than a flat, for setting the word *Kreuz* is also a visual pun. As Carter says, at times word-painting is “a matter of music play”—an intellectual exercise intended as much for the composer himself as for his audience.⁸

The use of word-painting in sacred compositions serves a pedagogical intent by presenting tenets of the faith as clearly as possible. While most of the Mass in B Minor is mood painting rather than literal word-painting, there are moments of great chromatic intensity in the *Crucifixus*, depicting Christ’s suffering for the audience and even allowing them to internalize a certain degree of discomfort and sadness. To modern ears much word-painting sounds fussy or, at its worst, clichéd. As Palisca has said, in the music of the baroque period “the rendering of affections tended to be intellectual and calculated;”⁹ it was an age governed by reason. Yet Bach’s personal style and appropriation of the technique continues to move, and to evoke a passionate response from listeners today. ♪

* Katherine Lefever is a graduate of Reed College where she studied music history, vocal performance and foreign languages. While her area of interest is primarily the romantic and early modern periods, she has always loved performing and studying baroque music.

Katherine sings with the Portland Symphonic Choir and hopes to embark on a career in non-profit management and development.

¹ Quoted in Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981, p. 2.

² Quoted in Weiss, Piero and Richard Taruskin. *Music in the Western World*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1984, p. 172.

³ Descartes, René. *Passions of the Soul*. Excerpted in *Music in the Western World*, pp. 212-217.

⁴ Mattheson, Johann. *The Complete Music Master (Der vollkommene Capellmeister)*. Excerpted in *Music in the Western World*, pp. 217-219.

⁵ Palisca, pp. 4-5.

⁶ Tim Carter: ‘Word-Painting’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 February 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

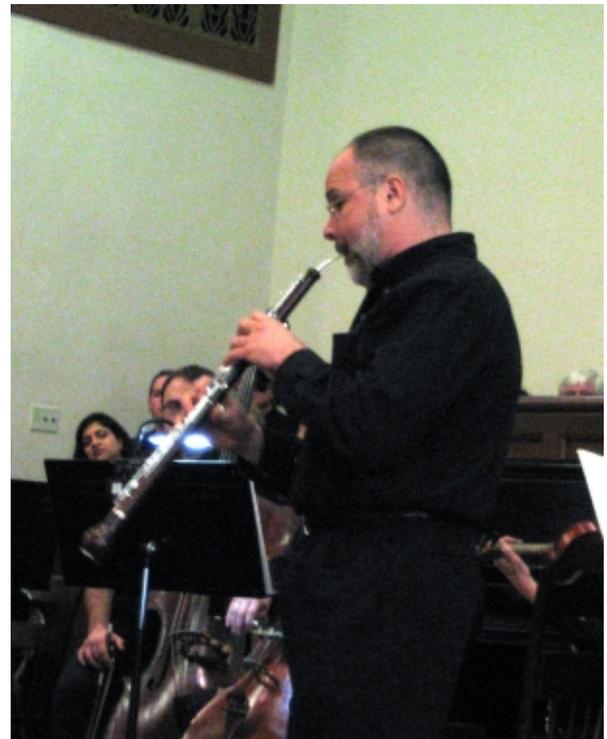
⁷ The term word-painting is often conflated with the term *madrigalism*, a misleading association because the practice was not confined to secular music. Word-painting is associated most commonly with the Renaissance or Baroque periods, but it can be seen in later works as well: think about a Schubert’s *Lied* “Gretchen am Spinnrade” in which the decidedly pictorial spinning wheel motive in the piano underlies the entire piece.

⁸ Carter: ‘Word-Painting’, *Grove Music Online*.

⁹ Palisca, p. 6.



John Vergin prepares for the Graupner concerto...



...with Paul Pitkin, oboe d'amore soloist.



The Bach Cantata Choir and Orchestra pull out all the stops for the Festival Cantatas at the February 2, 2008 concert.

Antonio Lotti 1667-1740

By Lorin Wilkerson - Bass

Antonio Lotti was born in Venice and for most of his musical career served the Catholic Church. He was a well-known and respected composer—Bach, Handel and other German luminaries knew his *Missa Sapientiae*, and Bach is known to have made copies of some of Lotti's other works. He studied under Giovanni Legrenzi, and Lotti's motet *Miserere* supplanted his teacher's version and is still sung at St. Mark's in Venice on Holy Thursday.

While Italian (and Italian-influenced) music was all the rage throughout Europe for much of the 18th century, Germanic composers considered themselves (sometimes rightly so) more 'serious' students of harmony and composition than their Italian brethren; Italian music was sometimes seen as frivolous or lacking in true substance. Lotti, having himself studied in Dresden for two years as a young man, kept up lifelong correspondence with some of the musicians he met there. In a 1737 letter to his friend Georg

von Bertuch in Oslo, Lotti states that "my fellow countrymen have good ideas, but are no composers; the true composing one finds in Germany."¹ Nevertheless, the music of the Italian masters from the 15th century on was closely studied by virtually all serious European composers.

Lotti continued to influence the musical styles that came after him; among a number of notable pupils of his were Alberti and Zelenka. Lotti composed 27 operas, most of which were highly successful, and could probably have had an extremely lucrative career as an opera composer. However, he preferred serving the church, and from 1719 on devoted himself exclusively to church music at St. Mark's. In 1736 he was finally made *maestro di cappella*, a post he held until his death four years later.²

¹ *Bach Dokumente* Bach-Archiv, Leipzig. Cited in Martin Geck *J.S. Bach: Life and Work*. (Rowholt Verlag GmbH, ©2000. Eng. Translation ©2006 John Hargraves), p 213.

² *Catholic Encyclopedia* : Antonio Lotti.



Upcoming Concerts

Sunday, March 2, 2008, 2pm

Lenten Concert

Antonio Lotti: *Crucifixus*

J.S. Bach: Cantata 56

J.S. Bach: Selected Chorales from the *St. Matthew Passion*

J.S. Bach: *Crucifixus* from the *Mass in B Minor*

Sunday, April 27, 2008, 2pm

J.S. Bach: Motet, *Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden*

J.S. Bach: Cantatas 6 and 66

Sunday, June 1, 2008, 2pm

"Cafe Bach"

J.S. Bach: *Coffee Cantata*

Telemann: *The Schoolmaster*

Tickets required. Call 503-224-TIXX or visit website to order online

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church, located in the Hollywood district at 1907 NE 45th Avenue, Portland, Oregon (corner of NE Sandy Boulevard and NE 45th Avenue). All concerts are free (free-will offering accepted) unless noted otherwise.

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