

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



March 2019

www.bachcantatachoir.org

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Lenten Concert *Sunday, March 17, 2019 at 2:00 pm*

Antonio Vivaldi: Stabat Mater RV 621
Giovanni Palestrina: Meditabor in mandatis tuis
Heinrich Isaac: Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine
Johann Sebastian Bach: Jesu, Meine Freude BWV 227

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church at the corner of NE 44th & Sandy (office address 1907 NE 45th Ave) in Portland, Oregon ([map](#)).
Admission is free. Free-will offerings gratefully accepted.

Music for the Second Sunday in Lent

By John Chilgren, Bass
and John Vergin, Accompanist

Heinrich Isaac (1450-1517)

Heinrich Isaac was born in 1450 in Flanders, Belgium; possibly in the city of Brabant. He was the contemporary of Josquin des Prez and Jacob Obrecht, and with them represented the best of the late 15th century Flemish School of composing.

Like many of the composers of his day, he began his musical life as a choirboy, and would continue to be hired as a singer for much of the rest of his life, even when his fame as a composer grew.

Prolific as a composer, he wrote in all musical forms of his time: vocal and instrumental, secular and sacred. His contribution to music for the Roman liturgy was great. He wrote at least five settings of the ordinary of the mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei), but of larger import, he composed settings for the propers of the mass for the entire year (the different texts appropriate to each Sunday). This was an enormous undertaking, and in the end his student, Senfl, aided in its completion.

Isaac is also remembered for his simpler secular songs, in which tuneful melodies are supported by spare accompaniment. The famous song, *Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen*, is such a tune. And though Isaac's authorship of this particular song is now disputed, it demonstrates the simplicity and charm for which this genre is known.

Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine (Remember your mercies, Lord), Isaac's motet based upon the introit for the second Sunday of Lent, is typical of his style, in which an original chant melody is introduced,

then elaborated upon with a blend of homophony (all voices moving together in a 'block', as in a hymn) alternating with polyphony (each voice moving independently in a melodic line).

Isaac traveled extensively, and died in Florence in 1517.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525?-1594)

The name most readily evoked when considering Renaissance polyphony is Palestrina. Born in the small town of that name, he was taken to nearby Rome while still a boy, and became a chorister at the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. This was the beginning of an unfaltering musical trajectory, which would culminate in his being recognized—even revered—as an undisputed master of the compositional style of his day; much in the way J. S. Bach was regarded in his time as the apotheosis of the Baroque. Palestrina was the chosen composer of popes and of royalty; he held musical sway at St. Peter's in Rome for more than one tenure.

Palestrina's compositional output was vast. Though best known today for his sacred music, his secular works display the same mastery of technique and style. To the contemporary ear, all Palestrina may sound of a sameness. But a closer look will reveal some breadth of manner. In one piece he will adhere faithfully to a chant melody, letting it govern the overall shape of the piece; while in another he will compose freely, inventing new material out of new cloth. And while one may argue that not every piece may be as inspired as another, one cannot deny the overall excellence of the craft at work.

The offertory motet, *Meditabor in mandatis tuis*, is a serene and heartfelt evocation of the text: "I will meditate on your commandments which I love exceedingly; I will lift up my hands toward your commandments which I love." The gentle urgency of the melodic line, the attention to the meaning of the text and its accentuation, the interplay of rhythms among the voices; these are all employed to create something of quiet beauty, that is also quite alive.

If there is a down side to all of this (the utter mastery of technique and style, the honor accorded him then and now), it is that we might allow this great music to calcify, to have its very exemplariness lead to stuffiness. The student—and singer—presented with Palestrina's perfect counterpoint, should take care to remember that this was music meant to be sung; it suits the voice; the beauty and breadth of the musical line encourages us toward profound expression.

John Vergin is the accompanist for the Bach Cantata Choir. He will conduct the choir in the Isaac and Palestrina works for the March 17 concert.

J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

Of the six motets written by Johann Sebastian Bach during his tenure in Leipzig, perhaps the most popular is *Jesu, Meine Freude* (Jesus, My Joy, BWV 227), also known as Motet No. 3 in E minor. While music historians may not agree on its original orchestration (or lack of it), the Bach Cantata Choir will perform this work with strings and organ. Many Bach scholars believe that it was written in 1723 for the funeral of the wife of Leipzig's postmaster, although it is suspected that some of the music was written years earlier; that would be in keeping with Bach's known practice of recycling his own compositions. It is the longest and most musically complex (11 movements) of all the motets, rich in textural contrasts.

The noted author, conductor, and composer John Eliot Gardiner has remarked "If one wanted to pick a single example of how Bach harnessed his compositional prowess and capacity for invention as a means of articulating his zeal and faith, this motet would be it."

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

Meanwhile in Venice, another Baroque star was born... to Giovanni Battista Vivaldi (a violinist in San Marco's Basilica) and Camilla Calicchio on March 4, 1678, in the republic of Venice. Antonio Vivaldi's father taught his son to play as well, and they would eventually tour together throughout Italy.

Born in somewhat ill health, Vivaldi was baptized immediately either due to fear of his malady or fear from an earthquake that trembled the day of his birth. He appears to have suffered from what he called "*strettezza di petto*" (tightness of the chest) throughout his entire life that inhibited his speech, and made him weak and dizzy when he spoke.

It was common in this era for the eldest son to pursue the priesthood (free education) at age 25; Vivaldi was

ordained and became known as "*il Prete Rosso*" (the red priest owing to the crop of red hair he inherited from his father). However, he did not pursue the priesthood seriously owing to his ill health, and ceased offering mass soon after ordination.

As a composer, Vivaldi may be best known for his four concerti grossi known as "*The Four Seasons*," but he also wrote more than 500 other concertos. These were primarily written for solo instruments including mandolin, cello, flute, viola d'amore, recorder, and lute. And considering his own musical beginnings, it is not surprising that nearly half of these are for violin.

Although he had been a prolific composer and successful musician, during the 1730s it became clear that younger composers and more modern styles were putting an aging Vivaldi out of favor and out of funds. So in 1740 he departed Venice for Vienna, possibly hoping for financial support from Emperor Charles VI, whom he had met. But the Emperor died in October of that year, leaving Vivaldi without a patron. Vivaldi himself died in July 1741 at age 63 and was buried in a pauper's grave; no money was available to hire musicians. For many years after, it seemed that his music was in danger of dying out as well. But the work of J. S. Bach helped to keep Vivaldi's music alive.

The two composers never met, but Bach was well aware of Vivaldi's prowess at writing violin concertos. During Bach's tenure in Weimar (1708-1717), Bach had transcribed several of Vivaldi's concertos for organ and harpsichord for the Weimar court; these were published in the 1850s by C. F. Peters and later by Breitkopf & Hartel in the 1890s, both of which helped bring about a revival of Vivaldi's music in the early 20th century. Vivaldi compositions have continued to be discovered, or identified, even within the past decade as described in this article from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jul/15/orlando-furioso-vivaldi-1714-version>.

The *Stabat Mater*, which will be performed at this concert with alto soloist and strings, is considered one of the seven greatest hymns of all time and is associated with the stations of the cross. Here is a link to the discovery of the famous *Stabat Mater* being used as a sequence in the Gradual produced by a convent of Dominican nuns in Bologna in the later 13th century: <http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2018/09/scholarship-on-origins-of-stabat-mater.html>. The article states: "This is by far the earliest known manuscript example of this hymn used as a sequence rather than as a devotional hymn. It has been commonly believed that the hymn only became used as a sequence in the late middle ages."

Over 150 *Stabat Mater* compositions have been documented. In February 1711, Vivaldi and his father traveled to Brescia, where they played violin as part of a religious festival. From this, Vivaldi received a commission to compose the *Stabat Mater* which was performed the following year. It is considered to be one of his early masterpieces.

John Chilgren sings with the Bach Cantata Choir and sang for many years with the Portland Symphonic Choir and Choral Arts Ensemble. He plays clarinet with a Portland marching band.

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Bach Cantata Choir

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Artistic Director
Ralph Nelson

Accompanist
John Vergin

Board of Directors

Concert Notes

This concert is dedicated to the memory of Wayne Carlon, a former member of the Bach Cantata Choir.

Admission:

- Tickets are not required at this concert. A free-will

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offering will be taken.

Parking:

- The church's parking lot is very small and fills up quickly. Please allow time to find on-street parking.
- Do not park in the Grocery Outlet lot!

Accessibility:

- The church has an elevator accessible from its parking lot, facing Sandy Blvd.

The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years.

The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

Emily Rampton, Editor

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