

Program Notes by Dr. Mary Jane Ayers
The Choral Artists of Sarasota
Bach's Cantata *Du Hirte Israel, höre* and Mozart's *Requiem*
April 16, 2023

In this concert you will hear beautiful, meaningful music by two of the most famous, most respected, most beloved composers who ever lived. Their music is so brilliant that it is still performed regularly, centuries after their deaths. Each is regarded as one of the greatest classical composers of all time. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is remembered best for his sacred music (and much more); Joannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart (that's taken from his birth certificate—his name was *Latinized!*) (1756-1791) is remembered for operas, symphonies...and much, much more.



Johann Sebastian Bach



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Bach and Mozart were both born into Germanic societies, Bach in 1685 in the town of Eisenach, which was in the duchy of Saxe-Eisenach in present-day Germany. The first successful unification of Germany did not occur until 1871. Mozart was born 71 years after Bach (in 1756) in Austria. Austria was also Germanic in tradition, education, and language, but it resisted unification with what became Germany, and Austria remains independent today.

So, there were similarities in Bach and Mozart's cultural backgrounds, but their lives could not have been more different.

Johann Sebastian Bach was descended from a long line of musicians, and, in fact, in Eisenach and the surrounding area, the name "Bach," which translates from German as "brook," had come to mean "musician." There were over 50 known musicians in the Bach family over seven generations, including four of Johann Sebastian's sons.

After the death of his parents, 10-year-old Johann went to live with his brother, who encouraged him to join the family business—music. With training from his brother and others (and his innate talent), Johann became a fine organist and keyboard player. The keyboards of the time were primarily the clavichord and the harpsichord. The "fortepiano" was not invented until 1727 in Italy. It was called the "loud/soft" (*forte/piano*) because its hammer action allowed the player to control dynamics. Bach lived

until 1750, but is believed to have played a fortepiano only once, when visiting with Frederick II of Prussia.

Bach spent much of his life as a church musician, but also became an expert technician for the pipe organs of his day, and when invited, he travelled extensively to build or fix the instruments. He also played, tuned, and repaired harps, and he was a teacher and conductor. And then there was the music—in his 65 years he wrote over 1,000 compositions, many of them still performed today.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johann Sebastian Bach." The script is fluid and characteristic of the 18th century.

Bach's life and work have been researched and studied for centuries and there is a great deal of material (and some guesswork) immediately available online for your further study.

Many people are fascinated by Bach's family life. Is it true that he had many, many children? Yes. Bach married twice, first to his second cousin Maria Barbara, with whom he had seven children. Following Maria Barbara's unexpected death, his second wife was Anna Magdalena, with whom he had 13 more children. So, that is a total of 20 children, but, as was ill-fated but typical in the 18th century, only ten of the children survived to become adults: six boys and four girls.

Four of his sons continued the family tradition and became professional musicians and composers: Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Friedrich, and Johann Christian. All of them composed in the "new" style of "classicism," later brought to perfection by Haydn and Mozart. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was the second surviving son and he became the leading composer of the early Classical Period, working for some time in the court of Frederick II of Prussia. In his autobiography C. P. E. Bach wrote, "For composition and keyboard-playing, I have never had any teacher other than my father."

In Bach's time music publishing was rare, and copies were produced by hand. So how did we end up with so much of Bach's music? Most musicologists date the end of the Baroque Period in music as 1750. In other words, the year Bach died truly was the end of an era! That is a powerful testimony to his musical legacy. However, by the time Bach's sons were maturing as composers (and more famous than he, at the time), the Baroque style was already deemed passé, and J. S. Bach's music was considered old-fashioned, except...

Bach's music was so consistently excellent that composers like Haydn and Beethoven carefully studied his compositional techniques. Here is some evidence taken from a letter Mozart wrote to his sister Nannerl (who was also a fine musician). "Constanze" was soon to be Mozart's wife:

"I composed the fugue first and wrote it down while I was thinking out the prelude. (This is an extraordinary statement—Mozart says, quite casually, that he is writing out one complex musical score while planning another one in his head—apparently that was possible for him!) I only hope that you will be able to read it, for it is written so very small; and I hope further that you will like it. Another time I shall send you something better for the clavier. My dear Constanze is really the cause of this fugue's coming into the world. Baron van Swieten, to whom I go every Sunday, gave me all the works of

Händel and Sebastian Bach to take home with me... When Constanze heard the fugues, she absolutely fell in love with them. Now she will listen to nothing but fugues, and particularly (in) the works of Händel and Bach. Well, since she has often heard me play (improvise) fugues out of my head, she asked me if I had ever written any down, and when I said I had not, she scolded me roundly for not recording some of my compositions in this most artistically beautiful of all musical forms and never ceased to entreat me until I wrote down a fugue for her."

So, a nobleman had collected the scores of G. F. Handel (1685-1759) and Bach and allowed them to be studied. That still happens today—aspiring composers study the music of those who have gone before. In 1850, 100 years after Bach's death, composer Robert Schumann and some of his well-known musician friends formed the Bach-Gesellschaft, setting out to make Bach's complete works available in print, a project that took many years.

The German word Gesellschaft can mean a company, as in adding the word "incorporated" to a company title. However, considering the Bach-Gesellschaft was originally a company of friends trying to preserve the work of a composer they greatly admired, it is more likely that they used Gesellschaft in the sense of a social/professional club or society—a Bach Society.

In 1829 there was a significant concert that brought Bach's music back into the popular arena. German composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was only 20 when he presented a "rediscovered" work: Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. The concert was hugely successful. Seventy-nine years after his death, J. S. Bach was suddenly in the limelight again, and there he remained.

Bach wrote over 300 sacred and secular cantatas, primarily when he was employed for many years in Leipzig, Germany, at the Lutheran Church of St. Thomas. A cantata is a narrative work for voices and/or soloists with instrumental accompaniment. At St. Thomas, Bach set out to compose a cantata for each Sunday of the Church Year plus additional cantatas for special services at Christmas, Easter, etc. It took a few years to complete, after which the cantatas were repeated on their special day or days. Over 100 of those cantatas have been lost because they were not published, and hand-written copies were no guarantee of their survival.

The cantata *Du Hirte Israel, höre* (You Shepherd of Israel, listen) was written in 1724 for the second Sunday after Easter, "Misericordias Domini" (The Lord's Mercies). The cantata was first published in 1876 by Bach-Gesellschaft. The cantata has six movements (sections), beginning with a "chorus," a complicated and lengthy piece, ending with a brief but fascinating fugue that is led by the tenors of the chorus. The sixth movement is a Lutheran Chorale (hymn) sung by the full choir. The second through the fifth movements are sung by soloists in a style that is quite operatic.

By this time, opera, which was invented in Italy about 1600, was extremely popular, but Bach was not interested in secular stories of love or politics. The cantata solos, however, have some of the same structure as Baroque arias, with plenty of challenges for the singer. In the second movement of *Du Hirte Israel, höre*, the tenor begins with a short Recitative (the narrative part) accompanied by simple chords (the continuo). The next section is a highly rhythmic Aria written for a tiny orchestra with music that has bright, intricate, running notes and repetition of a few simple phrases of text. This is followed by movements four and five for bass solo—a Recitative, an Aria—and then the Chorale. The text of the Chorale is taken from the 23rd Psalm.

The tone of the text of this cantata is peacefulness and assurance, the kind of personal peace found in the hands of a Shepherd in an ideal Arcadian world. That is reflected in the musical structure as well, in the (calm) key of G major, with “pastoral” rhythms, often with triplets, 123, 123, 123, etc., to quiet the soul, body, and mind.

Wolfgang Amadei Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's father, Leopold, was a musician, composer, and teacher, and he immediately recognized that his daughter, Maria Anna Mozart (1751–1829, nicknamed "Nannerl") had real musical talent. And then, five years later (1756), along came Wolfgang (he later called himself Amadè), who at the age of three was able to duplicate music at the keyboard. This is an incredible feat for a trained musician, let alone a small child. He played from memory with accurate notes, rhythms, and musical interpretation. By four or five he was writing his own songs, which his father wrote down. Leopold decided his talented children were going on the road, and that is what they did for much of their childhoods, travelling from noble house to castle, meeting Kings, Queens, Emperors, and lesser nobility, travelling in carriages throughout Europe in every possible kind of weather and never sure of their accommodations.

Young Wolfie was obviously a child genius, and, after he and Nannerl played the harpsichord and other instruments as part of a performance, he was often asked to do compositional “parlor tricks.” For instance, he might be given a tune or a few notes that someone else had offered, and he would immediately improvise a short sonata using the melody as the primary theme. One time it was suggested that he was “cheating” somehow because he could see the keyboard while he played. His father found a cloth and threw it over the keyboard—Wolfie played just as well. He sat on the Emperor’s lap, the ladies of the courts kissed and caressed him—he was a star! And then...he grew up.



The charming little boy



Portrait about 1780 of Nannerl, Wolfgang, Mother (on the wall!), Leopold

The growing up part was apparently very difficult; he was no longer an adorable little boy but rather a ribald young man who managed to offend most of his employers (or would-be employers). At that time, musicians were dependent on the aristocracy for their engagement at court or in a noble house. Typically, musicians were treated as servants—they ate in the kitchen and were expected to live and do as they were told. Mozart's upbringing did not prepare him for this, and his frustrated outbursts alienated many. (Beethoven began his career about the time Mozart died in 1791, and was among the first to struggle out from under this societal system and be able to support himself as an independent composer and musician.)

There were some who believed that Mozart's genius made it worth the effort to employ him, but many others did not. This led to financial insecurity for the composer and his family, and ultimately he left Austria and travelled to Germany, Italy, France, England, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia looking for work. Fortunately, part of his brilliance was a natural gift for languages, and apparently he spoke enough of all those languages to do well in his travels.

There is a great deal of information about Mozart, his life, his work, and his family available online, and I hope you will explore that further. Unfortunately, we must move our discussion to his death at just 35, both the mystery surrounding it and its relationship to his incredible final work, *Requiem*.

1791 had been a productive year for Mozart. He had several excellent commissions and was able to start paying back some of the loans he had accrued. His final opera, *The Magic Flute*, had premiered to great acclaim in a Viennese theater on September 30. On November 20, less than two months after that premiere, Mozart fell ill. He was working on *Requiem* at the time. It was a commission from a local nobleman who intended to claim the music as his own composition. That secret lent an air of mystery to the commission. Mozart tried to work on the *Requiem* despite his illness, bringing in fellow musicians and students to sing the parts as he completed them. He had a very high fever, pain throughout his body, and his kidneys began to shut down. More horrifying symptoms followed, and he was probably delirious from time to time. He died on December 5, 1791, at the age of 35, leaving his wife, Constanze and two small sons. Five days later portions of the *Requiem* were performed for Constanze, friends, and family.

Over the last two centuries more than 100 different possible causes of the early death of Mozart have been proposed by medical researchers. Their only available evidence is descriptions of his symptoms from his wife and her sister in addition to friends and fellow musicians who visited during his illness. His health was further compromised by the accepted treatment of the time: bloodletting. This was done several times. There are researchers who believe that excessive bloodletting killed him.

There was no poisoning by his fellow composer, Salieri. In fact, Salieri was a friend, and he was very helpful to Constanze after Mozart's death. Unlike his portrayal in the movie *Amadeus*, Salieri had no reason for jealousy—his was by far the more successful career. He was a popular composer, well-liked and well supported by the aristocracy. The link below will take you to a short article about Mozart's final illness. You may either click on the link, copy and paste it, or type it into a search engine.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/symphony-second-opinions-mozarts-final-illness>

What is a requiem? In the Catholic tradition it is a Mass (service) said for the dead to “help” them into heaven. The word is taken from the first word of the Introit (introduction) to the service, in Latin:

“Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine” (Rest eternal give them, O Lord). The ancient text has been set thousands of times either in chant or in music ranging in style from simple to operatic (Verdi’s *Requiem*).

The text of a requiem mass is divided into sections, the Introit, Kyrie, Gradual, Tract, the Sequence Dies Irae, Offertory, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Communion (look for translations in the program). Composers choose how to approach each section. The text of the requiem was very familiar to Mozart’s fellow Catholics in 1791, and he used his powerful skills in text setting to bring the words to life.

We cannot analyze the entire work here, but let’s try three pages: The first few bars of the Introit are dark and mysterious, in a minor key, with a slow melody passing from instrument to instrument. Voice parts enter one at a time, first the basses, then tenors, altos, and then sopranos, all singing “Grant them eternal rest, O God.” The music seems to weep with grief, but changes to hope on the words (and grant them) “perpetual light.” Listen next for a short (angelic) soprano solo before the choir’s next entrance. When the choir enters again, see if you recognize the melody of the sopranos on the word “Exaudi” (rejoice). It is the same melody the soprano soloist just sang. And that is only three pages!

Composers often find irresistible the drama of the text “Dies irae” (Day of wrath), and Mozart is no exception. His ‘end of the world’ is as theatrical as any of his opera scenes. The entire *Requiem* is characterized by dramatic changes in dynamics, tempos, with melodies and rhythms that pound or weep, creating an enormous emotional impact. Mozart died before he could complete his *Requiem*, and it was finished by one of his students, Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who did his best, perhaps using some scraps of paper with notes Mozart left behind.

Fugues were considered old-fashioned by Mozart’s time, but you will hear several fugues in *Requiem*. Listen for a single voice part to begin alone (soprano, alto, tenor, or bass), while the other voices enter several measures later, one at a time, singing the same melody. Picture a simple round like *Three Blind Mice*, then make it ten times longer and add 1,000 more notes, and you will begin to get the idea of a Mozart fugue. We owe these wonderful fugues to Bach’s impact on Mozart, as well as influence by Constanze, Mozart’s wife and greatest fan.



Constanze Mozart