

ARS LYRICA

H O U S T O N

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BACH & SONS: AT COURT

PROGRAM NOTES

For most of its history, Western art music has been a family business, with the greatest musical dynasties a defining feature of the Baroque era especially: the Couperins, the Scarlattis, and, of course, the Bachs. Though the music of Johann Sebastian is better known today, for much of the 18th century Carl Philipp Emanuel was considered the more important composer. Papa Bach was revered by serious musicians for his skill with counterpoint and fugue, but professionals and amateurs of Haydn and Mozart's day placed greater value on the more tuneful music of his sons.

Sebastian himself seems to have regarded his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, as the most talented of the lot. How else to explain Sebastian's repeated efforts to help Friedemann land a steady job, or the collections Bach père apparently put together to test his favorite son's legendary skills—the six trio sonatas for organ, for example? Ironically, Friedemann met essentially the same fate as his father: both were regarded in their own day as fusty eccentrics, with neither ever managing to find a post worthy of his exceptional talent. Philipp Emanuel, on the other hand, served the Prussian court before taking up reins as Director of Music for Hamburg's five principal churches, one of the most prestigious church positions of his day.

The two elder Bachs held various court posts as well, though none so prominent as Emanuel's position as harpsichordist to Frederick the Great. Before his long tenure at Leipzig's Thomasschule, Sebastian Bach served the Weimar dukes and Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Wilhelm Friedemann fared not as well, with but one honorific court appointment and a series of church jobs in Dresden and Halle.

During this time, musical service at court meant the regular composition and performance of sonatas, concertos, suites, sinfonias, and the occasional celebratory work for birthdays and holidays. From the large output of chamber music by this extraordinarily productive family,

this evening's program offers a pair of concertos, one sonata, and a multi-movement sinfonia that incorporates a couple of dance movements. Each illustrates in its own way the growing importance of purely instrumental music during a crucial time: at precisely the moment when music without text became widely valued for its hitherto unnoticed expressive powers.

Somewhere along the line, W. F. Bach's Sinfonia in F Major acquired the subtitle "Dissonant" because of its surprising harmonic twists and turns. Like his younger brother Philipp Emanuel, Wilhelm Friedmann Bach forged an individual style, one that owed something to his father's art but which also embraced the *Sturm und Drang* (literally, "Storm and Stress") idea popular among leading German literary and musical figures in the middle of the 18th century. C. P. E. Bach's Concerto in D Minor for solo harpsichord and strings likewise embraces this aesthetic, with tempestuous outer movements and a tender, über-sensitive central *Andante*.

Sebastian Bach's works for violin include a number of important collections, including a set of six sonatas for violin and obbligato keyboard in which the harpsichord's part is, unusually, fully written out in two staves. The normal custom in sonatas from this period was just a single line for the keyboard player, with figures indicating what harmonies to improvise in the right hand. Bach's ingenious texture turns what might have been a solo sonata into a trio sonata texture—but in this case, it's a trio for just two players! The Sonata in B Minor, cast in the traditional four four movements, combines artful counterpoint with fashionable *galant*-style figuration, especially in its memorable slow movements.

Bach wrote his violin concertos, along with the more famous "Brandenburg" concertos, for the music-loving Prince Leopold, who seems to have been the perfect patron. A sunny atmosphere prevails in most of these works, nowhere more clearly than in the outer movements of the E-major violin concerto. Bach liked this work so much that he returned to it during his Leipzig years, rearranging its solo line for harpsichord and transposing the whole to D major for performances by the Collegium Musicum at Café Zimmerman. Returning to the theme of our November program (*Bach & Sons: At the Café*), this concerto then brings us full circle—and just a week after Papa Bach's 330th birthday!

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