Handel's "Chandos" Anthems – Program Notes

In 1717, Handel spent a year in the employ of James Brydges, who would later assume the title Duke of Chandos. This period was arguably the one of the most formative to the latter part of his career, which saw him switch primarily from opera to oratorio. While at Cannons, Handel had occasion to provide compositions to be performed by court musicians led by Johann Christoph Pepusch (the arranger of music for Mountainside Baroque's upcoming "The Beggar's Opera") scored for modest forces that included voices, a small string orchestra, and the occasional obbligato wind instrument (generally oboe). In addition to the eleven anthems composed there specifically for the Cannons Concert, Handel also wrote Esther, his first large scale oratorio in English, as well as the popular "masque" Acis & Galatea.

His creativity at Cannons notwithstanding, Handel already had a well-established musical affiliation with the Church of England since having taken up residence in London in 1712. It was well known that he would borrow, edit, and alter his own music freely to suit, or perhaps improve upon previous iterations of his compositions. As such, the anthems O Sing Unto the Lord, HWV 249 and Let God Arise, HWV 256, each exist in two versions that share the same title and catalogue number. The first version of HWV 249(a) was written in 1714 for the Chapel Royal and was subsequently revised (b) for performance at Cannons. Similarly, HWV 256(a) was written for the Duke of Chandos but reworked for a performance in the Chapel Royal (b) as early as 1722. In an effort to share the breadth of both of these works, Mountainside Baroque has combined movements from each, to create what we believe to be the most exciting rendering of Handel's best compositional efforts. Thus, the anthems presented today are "hybrids" and include music from both versions, the sources of which are identified in your program.

In all but one instance, these individually constructed anthems are similar in structure and length, and consist of arias, choruses, and orchestral material comparable to that of the well-known eighteenth century German cantatas. Throughout, Handel's sense of musical imagery, which some may characterize as obvious or formulaic, seems on this occasion a welcome compliment to the text. Nowhere is this more effective than in the musical depiction of the aggressively shifting waves given to the basses in the image-filled tenor aria "The waves of the sea rage horribly." Giving way to calmer waters, the following duet

between soprano and tenor spins out an expansive line that is heightened by the gentle swelling of orchestral waves underneath the vocal soloists. Similar contrasts are seen in the opening chorus of Let God Arise, with its juxtaposition of varied treatments of the words "be scattered" that alternate between an undulating theme and a series of interjections. This "scattering" theme is followed by his treatment of the words "flee before him," whose hurrying figures are punctuated by shouts of the word "flee," often with space between the syllables.

Finally, and with regard to the composer's aforementioned "borrowing" habit, those familiar with Handel's most famous work, Messiah, will take note of the rhythmic "alleluia" figure that drives the final chorus of the HWV 256. It seems highly likely that this movement, at least in part, served as a basis of the material that helped form his so-called "Hallelujah Chorus" when the oratorio was debuted in 1741.

-Ryan M. Mullaney

“Festive Bach” – Program Notes

The three pieces presented on today’s program give us something of a snapshot of Johann Sebastian Bach’s musical output in the principal posts he held during his lifetime.

Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde Jubiliert dates from 1715 when Bach served as court chamber musician and organist at the Ducal Court in Weimar. While much of the music he composed there was for keyboard, he received a promotion in 1714, which included the responsibility to provide monthly cantatas in the castle church. Of the approximately two dozen cantatas extant from Weimar, this represents one of the largest and most opulent scorings alongside the likes of Cantata 63 (for Christmas Day).

While the dating of Orchestral Suite 3 is difficult to pinpoint with certainty, the first version of the work is from as early as 1718 when Bach was in the employ of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen, a post where his duties as Kapellmeister included very little of his own church music. Instead, much of Bach’s concerted “orchestral” music dates from this post, including the remaining three suites and the six *Brandenburg Concerti.*

Of the three positions he held, arguably the most famous (and certainly the most prolific) is that as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, which he held for the final 27 years of his life. A cantata was to be performed in both of Leipzig’s principal churches every Sunday and concerted music with soloist, orchestra and choir was to be heard on ten additional festival days throughout the liturgical year. Between the demands of this new post, and the lack of any real need for sacred music during his time at Cöthen, Bach had little time to waste upon his arrival. Since Bach had already composed as many as 5 cycles of cantatas for the church year, he turned his attention to writing music for all the major festivals, including this work and the 6 “parts” of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

Considering this brief biography of Bach’s life as encapsulated by representative “festive” works, we see that they share as much in character as they differ in construction and style based on his then-current locale and responsibilities. The cantatas themselves, for example, written 20 years apart, show a notable difference in structure: BWV 31 features a richer and denser texture, with 5-part writing in both the strings (2 viola parts) and oboes (including a “tenor” oboe), which also double the choir. The ensemble music is nimble and often imitative, and if the opening chorus is meant to be the literal laughing of the heavens, what better way to give credence to the adage that “laughter is contagious.” Save the stately sinfonia that opens the work, the format of using pairs of recitatives and arias, bookended by an elaborate chorus and a simple chorale largely follows the model for cantatas that Bach would use during his tenure at Leipzig. In fact, this work was revived there several times (including in 1735).

The *Ascension Oratorio* is a bit more melody- centric, with Bach’s choral approach to instrumental writing becoming arguably more streamlined and transparent. The supplement of a pair of flutes (in lieu of the additional oboes) also adds depth with less of a pervasive edge – perfect for plaintive moments of literal “levity” – it is the Ascension Oratorio, after all. We see this all too clearly in the soprano aria that dispenses with the typical basso continuo that leaves the soloist, in dialogue with obbligato flute and oboe, to be accompanied by a bed of unison upper strings. The word oratorio is used in this instance to signify the use of the biblical narrative being recounted in the recitative portions of the work, in the same guise as a Passion account. Unlike the previously mentioned pairings, we see multiple sections of recitative in succession in order to better service the narrative,

which are often provided additional intrigue with the inclusion of obbligato instruments. Referring to "original" music from before, the quotations marks should provide some further context – the music for the choruses and arias were taken from subsequent secular works to which Bach added new text. Beyond that, listeners may recognize the alto aria as the basis of the "Agnus Dei" from the *Mass in B Minor.*

The 18th century was an interesting time for musical trends and stylings, divided between the "Baroque" and budding "Galant" styles of music. Perhaps common ground between these overarching styles is achieved in the famed and elegant "Air on the G-String," which represents the most well-known portion of Orchestral Suite No. 3. With its song-like and elegant melody, which is both detached from and supported by its homophonic moorings, it bridges the two styles seamlessly. Indeed, it is this portion of the suite that dates from as early as 1718, and most likely in the original instrumentation; the inclusion of winds in all of the other sections certainly gives credence to the fact that they were added in later versions, likely by C.P.E. Bach while a university student in Frankfurt. The noticeable difference in proportions between the overture and the remaining movements is typical – in fact, the overall work would have been referred to as Overture, with the first movement labeled as "overture proper" and the subsequent movement representing typical French-inspired dances. While four of the five movements have a noticeably balanced form, the concluding "Gigue" seems to spin out phrases of unequal length that surely would have kept the dance party going long into the night!

Certainly, another common thread we find in these works is the use of trumpets and timpani, whose presence alone signify a special occasion (and a blissful ambiance to any of his music). While not always at his disposal on a day-to-day basis, Bach often had access to these players, employed as a separate entity for state/municipal occasions – their inclusion in concerted music would have signaled an important event (or feast day), and Bach's writing for them remains consistent and inventive.

Speaking of brilliance, there is little that hasn't already been said about the music of Bach that would prove groundbreaking, but two things bear repeating. First, the interest in the Bach we've come to know so well today is [likely] a result of Mendelssohn's revivals of his works in the 19th century, (including that of Orchestral Suite 3 on his 1848 and 1850 Historical Concerts). Secondly, Bach, while revered among his colleagues, likely did not enjoy that same celebrity among the general public during his lifetime. I'm glad we recognize this brilliance now, and hope that we continue to celebrate it, without pretense or unnecessarily careful reverence - let the music speak for itself!

-Ryan M. Mullaney