

## PROGRAM NOTES, BACHVINSKY

The arguably greatest composer of the twentieth century and the inarguably greatest composer of the eighteenth share traits that invite hearing them in close succession. We're pleased to provide the opportunity this afternoon.

Though there is no record of J.S. Bach's music being danced to in his time (nor was it intended to be), much of it is dance music, collections of various dance forms as suites for keyboard (French Suites and English Suites), for violin, for cello and four for orchestra, of which we play the second this afternoon. That same invitation to stylized motion imbues Stravinsky's work. Though neither of this afternoon's two selections from that corpus was intended for ballet, the 'Concerto in D' has been choreographed several times, as have many of Stravinsky's other concert pieces—in addition, of course, to his ballet scores: "The Firebird" (1910), "Petrushka" (1911) and "The Rite of Spring" (1913), to name only the historic ones. His choreographers trace ballet in the twentieth century—Fokine, Nijinsky, Balanchine, Jerome Robbins.....

Another definition J.S.B. and I.S. share is that they are to the marrow of their bones contrapuntalists. Counterpoint is the art—at times verging on science in its rigorous adherence to rules—of combining various 'voices', various simultaneously sounding independent melodic lines, in such a way that they conjoin while maintaining their rhetorical independence. The ultimate example is the fugue, in which two or more voices enter successively with the same 'melody' overlapping itself, and do so recurrently in the course of an extended composition. Bach wrote reams of fugues, including 24 each in the two volumes of The Well-Tempered Clavier and later in The Art of Fugue, a hieratic catechism. The longest part of this afternoon's Suite, right after the introduction and preceding the dances, is a fugue.—Stravinsky, in his Autobiography, relates that whereas he found his lessons in harmony (the proper succession of chords) irrelevant and boring, he continued doing counterpoint exercises out of fascination long after his student days were over. In addition to the constant interplay of linear ideas in the two pieces of his we perform this afternoon, a central section of the first movement of the "Dumbarton Oaks" concerto is a fugue; there is as well a significant fugal passage in the third movement.

"Dumbarton Oaks" is in fact an acknowledged tribute to the Bach of the six Brandenburg Concertos, and most apparently to the second, the one we open this program with. The new master quotes the old in the violas at the very beginning. Characteristic of the model and of its copy is the repetition of such short melodic fragments, linked in counterpoint with similar, simultaneous nuclei in a propulsive manner. Original and inherent in Stravinsky—not Bachian—is the alternation of 'square' rhythms with off-kilter asymmetrical ones. It's hard to put your foot down in time, though generations of ballet dancers have learned to.

## PROGRAM NOTES, BACHVINSKY

The “Concerto in D” nods less to Bach than perhaps to Haydn, a generation and a very different style later. Elegant, gestural, witty it has been named ‘Classical,’ and its twentieth-century resurrection ‘Neo-Classical,’ or less kindly ‘Wrong-note Classical.’ Closer examination of this concerto at least reveals that the dissonant notes are in fact internally consequential in their introduction and recurrence— not ‘wrong’ after all. I have no doubt this unifying, cohesive factor registers sub-consciously even at first hearing.

The connotation of *concerto* is the opposition of a smaller group, or of several smaller groups, to a larger mass. This is readily apparent in the Brandenburg concertos even when, as in three of the six including today’s, there is no designated group of soloists. Instead, one or two or three players, in turn, come forth to dialogue with the assembled others. Some of that dialectic imbues Stravinsky’s “Basel Concerto,” but more generally he appropriated the term *concerto* to imply a composition in Baroque (“Dumbarton Oaks”) or Classical (“Concerto in D”) style.

As regards origins, we know nothing of the genesis of Bach’s four orchestral Suites, or their dates. Each begins with a grand overture in the so-called French manner that includes a fugue and introduces a set of dances. The Second Suite is the only one to feature a soloist. This afternoon’s other three compositions were all commissioned: the set of Brandenburgs by the margrave of that duchy, near Berlin, ca. 1721; the “Dumbarton Oaks Concerto” for their thirtieth anniversary in 1938 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, appropriately named owners of the Dumbarton Oaks estate in Washington, D.C. (though the concerto was composed in Switzerland and in Paris); the “Concerto in D”, composed in Hollywood in 1946, was commissioned by Paul Sacher for his Basel Chamber Orchestra (hence the alternate name “Basel Concerto”). Sacher commissioned many important works for that group, including Bela Bartók’s “Divertimento” that we performed last season. Danke, Herr Sacher, and patrons all!

*Michel Singher*