

About the Music

Italian (and other) Influences

One of the most important events in J. S. Bach's development as a composer took place around May of 1713 when Prince Johann Ernst of Weimar, the son of Bach's employer at the court there, returned from a trip abroad. His time in Amsterdam had given him access to the latest musical publications from the press of publisher Estienne Roger, who issued music by all of the most important composers in the new Italian style—Antonio Vivaldi, Arcangelo Corelli, Tomaso Albinoni, and many others. The prince, an avid music student, evidently brought a great deal of this music back to Weimar.

Among his finds was probably Albinoni's Opus 2, a set of sinfonias and concertos published in 1700. Bach's cousin and musical study partner Johann Gottfried Walther, organist at the Weimar city church, arranged two of the concertos for organ, and a third survives in a basso continuo part in Bach's hand that documents his performance of the work. This is the piece heard on today's program, and it consists of three fast movements separated by brief expressive chords that serve as links. The fast movements present statements of a so-called ritornello ("little thing that comes back")—a block of music heard at the beginning and typically recurring throughout a concerto movement—and some short solo episodes in between. In this work, the music for the full ensemble and for the solo instruments is not strongly contrasted, but the textural differences are clear and the governing role of the ritornello audible.

The influence of Italian concertos, especially those of Vivaldi, on Bach's own composing can be heard in the opening sinfonia from the church cantata "Am Abend aber desselbigen Sabbats" BWV 42. Bach composed the work in Leipzig in 1725, but the sinfonia was almost certainly an earlier composition he reused. It calls for the core Italianate instrumental ensemble of the time: strings, oboes, and basso continuo providing support. The strings form the large ensemble, playing the opening and closing ritornellos and its various intermediate returns. The solo ("concerted") instruments here are the oboes together with a bassoon.

This sinfonia shows why the Vivaldian model caught on so quickly: It is easy to follow the organization of this kind of concerto even on a first hearing. The opening ritornello has a clear beginning, middle and end; its returns are made distinct by the re-entrance of the full ensemble after each solo episode; and the contrasting texture and timbre of the solo woodwinds make their episodes easy to pick out. The structure of the work—alternating ritornello and solo statements, with elaborations of the material—is clearly graspable.

If you have heard arias from Bach's cantatas and passions this organization will sound familiar, because early eighteenth-century arias were assembled in the same way. Arias, too, open and close with an instrumental ritornello and feature its returns throughout. In place of statements by a solo instrument (as in a concerto), arias present sung text, with a voice taking the role of a concerto's solo instrument(s).

You can hear another overlap between concerto and aria in the overall organization of the sinfonia from BWV 42. It consists of a satisfyingly complete opening section, a slightly contrasting second section, and then a literal return of the opening portion. This structure, often referred to by the term "da capo," meaning "from the top" (the instruction to players literally to look back to the start of the movement for the repeat of the first section), is characteristic of many arias as well, and indeed is probably borrowed from the vocal type.

About the Music

Though its name "overture" might suggest otherwise, the work on the program by Antonio Lotti is a three-movement (fast-slow-fast) concerto. The outer movements use the same construction around a recurring ritornello. They are shorter and less ambitious than typical concerto movements by Vivaldi or Bach, and their musical material much simpler and more repetitive. The reason is connected to the work's context and origin. Lotti, like Vivaldi a Venetian, was hired in 1717 by the Saxon Electoral court in Dresden to direct a newly-formed Italian opera company. That year, even before a new opera house was built, the company offered its first production: Lotti's opera *Giove in Argo*, to which today's piece was the overture. The work's pastoral setting explains the plain musical style and the prominent roles of oboes and horns; the consonant, repetitive music is a representation of the Arcadian ideal of a simple pastoral life.

The overture is relevant to Bach because of his documented interest in opera at Dresden. There is a report by his first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, that Bach frequently traveled there, and an anecdote that he would ask his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann "Shall we go hear the pretty Dresden tunes again?" There is even a good chance that he heard *Giove in Argo* itself, because he visited Dresden while it was being prepared and performed. We know this because at that time he was supposed to have a keyboard showdown with visiting French organist Louis Marchand. (The competition never took place because Marchand had the sense to leave town rather than face Bach.)

Along with instrumental concertos, Italian vocal music also influenced Bach and other German composers, especially solo cantatas constructed from a few alternating arias and recitatives. The Italian cantata was Germany's model for both secular works (usually with Italian texts) and for the kind of church piece we now call a "cantata." (Bach tended to call these works "concertos," a reminder of the connections between the vocal and instrumental types.) Vivaldi's cantata "Vengo a voi, luci adorate" RV 682 is typical in many ways, with its two da capo arias flanking a short recitative, its solo soprano voice, its limited instrumental scoring, and its opportunities for virtuosic vocal display.

From Bach we have two works of this kind—secular cantatas with Italian texts. They are both problematic because their only surviving sources date from the nineteenth century, making it difficult to verify Bach's authorship or to discern the works' dates and original purposes. A few phrases in the text of "Non sa che sia dolore" BWV 209, heard on this concert, suggest that it was a farewell gesture for an academic departing for his hometown of Ansbach. The Italian text is partly cobbled together from older poetry; the first recitative is based on a work by Renaissance poet Giovanni Battista Guarini, and the last aria on a piece by opera seria librettist Pietro Metastasio. These borrowings are supplemented with presumably original verses that are uniformly terrible in their poetic language and prosody and trite in their thoughts.

The musical setting for solo soprano, flute, strings and basso continuo is better, and is clearly based on the Italian model. The opening sinfonia is a Vivaldian concerto movement for transverse flute in the same da capo form heard in the sinfonia from cantata 42. The two arias, also both da capo pieces, are contrasting; the first is a slower expressive movement that features both the voice and solo flute, the second a more joyful ensemble piece with rustic touches. In the latter there are patches of virtuosic singing, but not to the degree of Vivaldi's cantata.



About the Music

The final work on the program tends to be called an "orchestral suite" today, but in the eighteenth century was known as an "ouverture." The word refers both to the whole multi-movement composition and to the opening movement, which is constructed in the manner of a French opera overture. It has a stately opening featuring long-short rhythms, then a fast section. The overture is followed by a series of stylized dances mostly derived from the types cultivated at the French court. (The one exception is the Forlane, representing an elite French interpretation of an Italian rustic dance.)

Most of the dances appear in pairs designed to be played I-II-I. Bach's first dances in each pair call for the full instrumental forces, and each of the second dances offers a different sort of contrast. Gavotte II features oboes and bassoon, with string instruments offering interjections based on a trumpet call. Menuet II is an oddly tuneless movement for strings alone; Bourée II calls for woodwinds only. Passepied II is singular: strings play the melody from Passepied I as an inner line under a new tune, a breathless running line in the oboes.

These movements are all very French, and at this point you might be wondering what this piece has to do with Italy or Italian music. There are two connections. The first concerns the event we started with: the Weimar prince's return from Holland with new repertory. Most of the attention to this episode has been on the Italian music he brought back, but it is almost certain that he purchased French music as well, as the publisher Roger also issued a great deal of French repertory, including music from operas by Lully. Bach was thus almost certainly cultivating these French types, including the overture, at the same time he was learning the new Italian style.

The second connection lay in something Bach probably learned from his contemporary Georg Philipp Telemann, the most prolific cultivator of the overture in German-speaking lands. Telemann's music reflected the so-called mixed taste, which often meant combining French and Italian styles. Bach's work, on the model of Telemann's, does precisely this. The opening movement is structured like a typical French overture. But its fast main section repeatedly contrasts the full ensemble—oboes and strings—with a solo group consisting of just the oboes and bassoon. It begins and ends with a ritornello, which also appears between solo statements throughout. In other words, this portion of this French overture is an Italian concerto featuring the same solo ensemble as the sinfonia from cantata 42. The movement is a reflection of the mixed taste and a reminder of how pervasive the new Italian style was, showing up even in a quintessentially French musical type.

—Daniel R. Melamed

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