

Program Notes for A Grand Tour October 24–27 2025

Handel: *Eternal Source of Light Divine*, HWV 74

The term “ode” usually conjures up an image of classical poetry; an elaborate homage addressing subjects ranging from a vaunted lover to a Grecian urn. For music history, however, the ode has a more focused meaning. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, odes were substantial, ceremonial works, structured like cantatas with opening instrumental “symphonies” followed by assorted short movements for solo and ensemble singers. These elaborate pieces would be performed at suitably momentous functions: praising the reigning monarch on his or her birthday, expressing remorse upon the death of a ruler, offering thanks on other special occasions, or as tributes to St. Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians.

Court performance was a central feature of the genre, and having one’s music displayed in this venue was a sure sign of success. Not surprisingly, many of England’s court composers used odes and other laudatory pieces to deepen their relationships with royal patrons. In the early decades of the Reformation, William Byrd wrote music praising Queen Elizabeth I despite his personal Catholic leanings under her Protestant reign (a heresy that could be punishable by death). Henry Purcell’s career during the 1680s was heavily focused on court music for Charles II and James II; he also wrote numerous odes for the subsequent monarchs William III and Mary II, as well as some famously exquisite funeral music upon Mary’s death in 1695. And in the 1710s, George Frideric Handel managed to make a strong impression on Queen Anne during his initial travels to England, despite her being (according to the Duke of Manchester) “too busy or too careless to listen to her own band, and having no thought of hearing and paying new players, however great their genius or vast their skill.”

During Handel’s lifetime, odes were routinely performed twice per year, for the New Year and on the reigning monarch’s birthday. Handel’s *Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne* is both a birthday gift to the queen and a commemoration of the 1712 Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession. Both themes are combined in a recurring refrain that closes each choral section: “The day that gave great Anna birth / Who fix’d a lasting peace on Earth.” Composed at age 28 during Handel’s second sojourn to England, the piece was meant to be performed on February 6, 1713 (the queen’s birthday), but such a performance did not actually occur. Nevertheless, the work’s ultimate premiere went a long way toward Handel’s gaining Anne’s favor, for she soon awarded him a pension of 200 pounds per year.

Structurally, the ode comprises seven sections, each of which begins with a soloist and ends with the chorus. Stylistically, the ode shows several signs of Handel’s training in Rome, with melodic flourishes redolent of Italian opera and relatively straightforward choral writing. The idea of peace provides a thematic through-line for the ode, with an especially vivid expression in the closing movement “United nations shall combine,” where the chorus begins in antiphonal division before coming together both musically and symbolically for the final refrain.

— © Joseph Sargent

Bach: Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major, BWV 1066

Historians have noted that Bach's music is intensely infused with the spirit of dance, whether expressing joy, felicity, sorrow, or devotion. The musical forms of dance were some of the most essential and permeating components of music from the Baroque era. Those clearly defined elements determined tempos, moods or affects, and the structural architectures of the vast majority of Baroque musical works, both with texts and purely instrumental. Bach's suites not only celebrate the dance, but also the phenomenal technical abilities of his musicians. Bach titled them *Ouvertures*, referring to the grand opening movements that are followed by suites of dances, all requiring the most virtuoso instrumentalists.

In 1732, Johann Gottfried published his *Musicalisches Lexicon* in Leipzig. It was a monumental dictionary of musicians and musical terms. Regarding the term "overture," he wrote: "The overture takes its name from 'to open,' because this instrumental piece opens the door, as it were, to the suites or following music." Walther further explains that the "real place" of an overture is at the "beginning of an opera." Bach must have known Walther's definition. They were colleagues and, in fact, cousins, and Bach acted as a sales agent for Walther's dictionary. Traditionally, when compilations or suites of individual movements from ballets or operas were selected for a concert performance, the overture to the complete work was included as the suite's first movement. This practice determined the basis of works that would be composed as independent suites, and Bach, following this practice, titled each of his orchestral suites "*Ouverture*." Unfortunately, only four such works have survived.

Assuming that many of Bach's orchestral compositions have been lost, the surviving repertory — a small fraction of the works that he must have written during his years at Cöthen (1717-1723) and while he was working with the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig — gives us only an incomplete idea of his output for larger instrumental ensembles. For a long time, Bach scholars assigned most of his chamber and ensemble music to the Cöthen years, but it now seems that only the smaller part of the extant, or surviving, instrumental ensemble music belongs to the Cöthen period. The greater part was composed at Leipzig, and principally for the Collegium Musicum, which Bach directed from 1729 to the early 1740s. The four Orchestral Suites, with their leaning towards French style, were probably written in Leipzig during these years.

Bach's C Major Suite contains no less than five "modern" dances (or more specifically, pairs of dances): *Gavotte*; *Forlane*; *Menuet*; *Bourrée*; and *Passepied*, in addition to the more traditional *Ouverture* and *Courante*. What makes Bach's dance movements so unusual is the sheer detail of the writing: The inner parts of the *Courante*, for instance, exploit the opening melodic gesture to create a highly cohesive texture, while the traditional metrical clashes of the dance are exploited to their fullest. The paired dances show a degree of wit which is often neglected in Bach studies: *Gavotte II* introduces an actual horn call as counter melody, but not, as might be expected, in the wind instruments; rather, it is played unexpectedly by the strings. *Menuet II* dispenses with winds altogether and sounds, on first hearing, as if the melodic line has been omitted. But soon it emerges that the "accompanimental" material is all there is, and this skeletal economy proves to be very satisfactory. Other important "accompaniments" are the lower strings in the *Forlane*, which in some ways determine the character of the movement more than the melody. The same sort of figuration reappears in the second *Passepied*, as a complement (rather than mere accompaniment) to the melody of the first *Passepied*.

— © Jeffrey Thomas & John Butt

Vivaldi: Gloria, RV 589

It is nearly impossible to overstate the profound and welcome influence that Italian music had on the rest of Europe during the Baroque era. Whether one considers the genres of the Italian cantata, the Italian *concerto grosso* style and its use of *ritornello*, the development of the concerto for one or more solo instruments, or the evolution of *opera seria*, all of these forms were studied and propagated by the non-Italian composers who made important journeys to the cities of Florence, Rome, Venice, and Naples to learn all they could about the tremendously important and desirable trends that were developing throughout Italy, many of them advanced by Antonio Vivaldi.

The course of Vivaldi's professional career is well charted and rather uncomplicated. At the age of twenty-five, he was ordained (leading to his subsequent nickname as the "Red Priest," owing to his red hair) and began his appointment at the Ospedale della Pietà, a home for abandoned children in Venice, in the same year (1703). He remained in the employ of that organization until the year before his death, despite occasional absences in order to follow his career as a successful composer of opera that took him to Mantua, Vienna, and Prague. In his final year — his music having gone out of fashion — he moved to Vienna, primarily to take on a position as composer at the imperial court of Charles VI, Holy Roman Emperor. But shortly after his arrival, the emperor died, leaving Vivaldi without any solid source of steady income. Vivaldi died a pauper less than a year later.

His nearly four decades of service to the Ospedale brought fame to Vivaldi and to the orchestra and chorus that were under his direction. Boys at the orphanage were taught a trade and were forced to leave at the age of fifteen, but the girls received musical education, and the most talented ones became members of the ensembles that performed for the public, which quickly gained in reputation and esteem throughout Europe. Hundreds of compositions were written for the girls and mature women (some stayed on for decades), whose abilities were astoundingly impressive.

Vivaldi's setting of the Gloria was probably composed in 1715, one of at least three settings of the same text, although only one other has survived. The music lay undiscovered for nearly two centuries after Vivaldi's death, discovered not until the late 1920s. Its first revival performance took place in the Tuscan city of Siena in 1739, but by no means in its original orchestration. The work as we know it now is the result of a publication/edition from 1957 that led to its first proper performance since the early 18th century. Today, it is one of the most immediately recognizable choral works from the Baroque. Vivaldi showcases his Ospedale charges in the solo movements of the Gloria, all set for soprano or alto, but the choral sections carry the work as a whole. In Vivaldi's chorus, the soprano, alto, and even tenor parts were sung by the young, budding virtuosi, and bass parts were sung by older women, including one known as Anna *dal basso*. After the exuberant opening movement in D major, Vivaldi shifts to the more somber key of B minor for "*Et in terra pax*"; at least the first two measures of descending arpeggios in the strings over a gently palpitating bass line suggest a literal descent of peace from above (and are remarkably similar to Bach's setting of "*Et incarnatus est*," the last-composed movement from the Mass in B Minor). Later, in the "*Domine fili*," the bass line repeats a stepwise descent through an octave, in the manner of a ground bass, suggesting the "descent" of the son of God to human form as expressed in the text. More rich chromatic writing appears in "*Qui tollis peccata*," evocative of the pain of sin. The opening material of "*Gloria in excelsis*" makes a brief return as the text reverts to praise and jubilation at "*Quoniam tu solus*." This gives way to a double fugue on "*cum Sancto Spiritu*" for the final section. Composed in the "old style" (*stile antico*), the movement was borrowed and arranged by Vivaldi from the 1708 setting of the Gloria by Giovanni Maria Ruggieri (circa 1665–circa 1725). Known in his day to be a scholar but not a first-rate composer, Vivaldi seems to have held him in high esteem. Such "borrowing" from older masters was considered to be one of the highest forms of flattery and respect that composers could demonstrate through their own works.

Handel: Dixit Dominus, HWV 232

Both Handel and Bach were avid students of the Italian style. Bach's method was to obtain the musical scores of Italian concertos and transcribe those works for keyboard. Through this process, he was able to analyze the powerful rhetorical effects that the constant repetition of musical ideas had on the listener (a characteristic of Vivaldi's music that we all recognize quite easily). Handel's approach was to make the most important journey of his life. As a young man, he traveled to Italy to absorb everything he could about the Italian style and, in all practical terms, mastered it more greatly than most Italian composers themselves.

At the age of twenty-one, George Frideric Handel embarked on an expedition that would prove enjoyable, enlightening, profitable, and integral to his career. The Florentine prince, Gian Gastone de' Medici, had invited Handel to visit Italy. He packed up his things in Hamburg — where he had been employed at the Hamburg Opera for two years and premiered his first two operas (with German librettos) — and in August 1706 began his journey to Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. Italy was the center of European music, and one of the most valuable traits of Italian music was the expressive style in which its composers wrote for the voice. Italian vocal writing was characterized by its qualities of suppleness, expansiveness, flexibility, and lyricism. Handel would quickly master the art, and Italian opera would become the bedrock of his career. But in Rome, where he spent most of his time between 1706 and 1710, papal decrees had closed the public theaters since 1698, the ban not lifted until 1709. Nevertheless, the musical styles of opera, barely disguised, were manifested in concert performances and in particular through the Italian cantata, the genre that would provide Handel with the most opportunity to grow and to succeed as a composer at that time. In fact, Handel would compose more than a hundred such cantatas during the few years of his Italian journey. Nevertheless, and operatic restrictions notwithstanding, Handel was in Italy to hone what would become his mature musical style, absorbing technique at every turn, developing his traits of adaptability and malleability, and showing the Italians that he could one-up their skills and produce "Italian" music better than native composers. Perhaps recalling the intuitions he felt as a young boy, however, he was there for another reason, too. Donald Burrows, the most important living biographer of Handel, wrote that "Handel wanted to be where the music was, and where the patrons were" — that is certainly what he found.

A notable manifestation of the flexibility of Handel's social and musical skills is the fact that in 1707, within only a few months of his arrival in Rome, one of Handel's aristocratic patrons, Cardinal Carlo Colonna, invited him to compose music for the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel by the Carmelite order at Santa Maria di Monte Santo, on the Piazza del Popolo, facing the northern gate of the Aurelian Walls. One of two nearly twin structures, in that year, the venue would have still appeared brand new, having been completed in the 1670s, and according to its dimensions, it would have had phenomenal acoustics. The Latin church music he composed in Rome is superb. His lifelong reputation could have been set on the basis of the stunning *Dixit Dominus* alone. But many more equally compelling works come from those years.

In the *Dixit Dominus*, Handel made use of his already developed, but still impetuous operatic inclinations. Many lines of the text are depicted with striking clarity: "*Dixit Dominus Domino meo*" is sternly declaimed; the great block chords of "*Juravit Dominus*" are menacing and leave no room for misunderstanding; the day of the Lord's wrath ("*in die irae*") is hauntingly depicted through the use of an intensely threatening bass line; and the chilling effect of the decapitating blows of "*Conquassabit*" simply has to be heard to be believed. While Handel's tone painting is perhaps less vivid in the solo movements, they present nonetheless beautiful music, which, in the case of the duet for two sopranos "*De torrente in via bibet*," is utterly ravishing. Altogether, the composition's immediacy and captivating range of colors and dramatic effects belie its extreme difficulty.

— © Jeffrey Thomas