Program III

AMERICAN BACH

Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall • San Francisco Conservatory of Music
7:30 p.m.

It's difficult to imagine that any "acoustical" instrument inspired a quicker and more explosive period of technical development among its players than the Baroque violin. As both performing violinists and composers, a long list of celebrated musicians excelled in playing the violin, often pushing the boundaries of technique and expression, whether through their compositions or the execution of their performance styles, or both. Vivaldi, Locatelli, Tartini, Corelli, Geminiani, Leclair, and others established a new world of sensational string playing.

Just as new compositions with greater technical demands than those that preceded them created the need for instrument builders to develop enhancements to support those calls for improvements, the growing coterie of violin virtuosi during the Baroque era opened up a forum for (mostly) friendly competitiveness, oneupmanship, and mutual inspiration on an international stage. Star violinists traveled extensively throughout Europe and Great Britain, giving concerts and serving as leaders of the finest orchestras. That sort of intercontinental marketplace for dazzling violin skills was new and contributed to, if not created, the world's appreciation for an instrument of almost limitless expressivity that had its humble origins in ancient lyres, harps, and Medieval fiddles.

In Telemann's **Concerto in F Major for 3 Violins**, the demands for virtuosity are quite evenly shared among all three soloists. An impression of musical egalitarianism is one of the first things that one notices about this particular composition. Collaboration seems to be the theme, and it is always noticeable. Solo passages are never more than a few measures long, and the central movement brings the three soloists together in a most collegial way. Moving further toward shared responsibilities (and shared riches), the final movement seems to be hardly a concerto at all, rather more like a grand sinfonia with a particularly palpable *joie de vivre,* melding the ensemble together into an especially enthusiastic sense of unity.

Although Bach is known infinitely more for his compositions than for virtuoso string playing, he was very adept at playing the viola and enjoyed doing so. Telemann must have shared Bach's interest in the larger sibling of the violin, and his remarkable **Concerto in G Major for Two Violas** allows us to peer deeply into an entire family of instruments with many variations. Telemann lists the solo instruments in his score as two "*violette*," and a closer examination of the word (*viol* + *ette*) reveals much. First of all, the concerto was composed around 1740, about a year and a half after Telemann returned from his only trip to France, which was the impetus for the composition of his famous "Paris Quartets." Throughout many centuries, the Italian spelling of *violett**a*** was used to describe any one of a menagerie of string instruments. By the 18th century, however, *violett**e*** had acquired a narrower definition, with most contemporaneous writers citing it as a synonym for *viola da braccio* (literally "viola of the arm"). So it seems that Telemann might have been bewitched by his sojourn in France and that he chose a French-sounding term for what is, after all, a concerto for two "regular" violas. Musically, it's a glorious miniature that, in the course of barely six minutes, presents heavenly sounds and ample opportunity for the soloists to demonstrate their virtuosity as well as their sensitivity. The opening section bears the description "*avec douceur*" ("with sweetness") and introduces the entire concerto's pervading characteristic of elegance. When the *Allegro* section begins, however, it's clear that dazzling bravura is ahead, rivaling the complexity and sheer difficulty of passages in Bach's Sixth Brandenburg Concerto. A short, eleven-bar *Largo* bridges the two fast movements, and the final brisk *Allegro* (marked *vivement*) reminds us that no one in the Baroque era could write animated and perky dances as well as Telemann. The movement tumbles briskly along and brings this all-too-short concerto to a happy *dénouement* (if you will forgive further indulgence in Telemann's Francophilia).

One of the many fruits borne of Leclair's synthesis of Italian and French styles — the very essence of his contributions to the Baroque violin concerto — is the dramatic impetus heard in the **Concerto in G Minor for Violin**. The "Italian" virtuosity is front and center, brilliant and imaginative, creating a sense of breathlessness in the outer movements that draws the listener's attention to the mesmerizing and raw excitement of the music. The "French" elegance, grace, and lyricism of the middle movement provide contrast and repose before a return to the fireworks display.

Handel's **Concerto Grosso in G Major** and Muffat's **Sonata V in G Major** are both quintessential examples of two different approaches to the concerto grosso format wherein the full ensemble joins and leaves, over and over again, a smaller core of instruments. In most cases, those core "soloists" never stop playing. It's the ebb and flow of the full sonority that creates perhaps the most noticeable aspect of these works, other than the attractiveness of the solo passages. Tiered dynamics guide the listener's experience and provide a sense of progression throughout the music. Both works have their distinct charms, but Muffat's closing *Passacaglia* is a thing of exquisite beauty. Ten minutes of variations over a repeated bass line, with internal episodes that bring us back to the main theme, amount to a Rondo-like structure that makes the listener long for each return with an eagerness that can bring to mind the desire of the psalmist's hart for water brooks and the soul's yearning for fulfillment. It is deeply satisfying music.

Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, one of Bach's patrons, was a Vivaldi enthusiast, collecting his publications and even going so far as to write his own concertos in that style. For him, Bach transcribed several of Vivaldi's compositions, and for Weimar's star violinist, Johann Spiess, Bach wrote several concertos, including the **Concerto in A Minor**. The soloist's virtuosic turns, the quick movement from orchestral to solo episodes, the strong melodic profiles, as well as the long melodic inventions over a repeated bass line in the central movement are indebted to Vivaldi's example. However, we also find more complex phrasing and melodic elaborations in counterpoint, as well as a different, more mobile harmonic sense that is clearly Bach's response to Vivaldi's music. A lively jig-like final movement uses as its theme a subject derived from the opening measures of the first movement, a device that Bach also used in his Violin Concerto in E Major.