Program IV

AMERICAN BACH

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

Tonight's program features four examples of the Baroque concerto: two are for one solo instrument (harpsichord and violin), another is for two violins, and the fourth is not called a concerto at all!

One of the most significant structures or formats of compositions that emerged and became fully developed during the Baroque period is the instrumental concerto, which typically features a solo instrument or a small group of instruments (called the *concertino*) contrasted with a larger ensemble (the *ripieno* or *tutti*). In addition to the zooming in and out between the soloist(s) and the fuller ensemble, an additional aspect of each movement within a concerto that became standardized is the existence of an opening section, almost always played by the full ensemble (and usually along with the soloist) that contains all of the fundamental musical ideas that will be heard during that movement, and then expanded by the soloist(s). That opening section is called the *ritornello*, an Italian term that translates to "return" or "refrain" in English. By returning to bits and pieces of the opening music during the movement and repeating it in its entirety at the end, the *ritornello* provides structure and a familiar anchor throughout the piece. In fact, in the hands of the best composers, the listener always has a sense of when that familiar music will return, often following a more elaborate passage played by the soloist(s) that showcases their technical skill.

Some compositional characteristics of Baroque concertos are the elements of contrast, ornamentation, and rhythmic or harmonic drive. Contrast is created through the interplay between the soloist(s) and the orchestra, resulting in dynamic shifts in both texture and volume. Performers often embellish melodies with ornaments, adding expressiveness and complexity to the notes already written by the composer. And the sense of trajectory, created both by the harmonic progress of the music and by changing rhythmic activity, engages the listener's attention from start to finish.

Many, if not most, of Bach's instrumental compositions were written while he was in his mid-thirties between 1717 and 1723, during happy years at the court in the city of Cöthen. In 1719, the court acquired a large harpsichord from the renowned Berlin instrument builder Michael Mietke. That particular instrument was of a scale and sonority that was not previously familiar to Bach, who, suitably impressed by its capabilities, decided to incorporate the instrument within the group of concerto soloists in the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, in which the harpsichord part famously launches into a frenzied cadenza, the likes of which had never before been presented within a keyboard concerto. That set the scene for Bach's later harpsichord concertos, and indeed, it can be argued, for all keyboard concertos that have followed in subsequent centuries. But the **Concerto in D Minor for Harpsichord** was actually *not* written at that time ... sort of. One of the violin concertos to have come from that period was almost certainly a (now lost) bravura work in D Minor that had the same music as the version for harpsichord, but the later manifestation was prompted by the need for lots of material for performances in Leipzig's Zimmermann's Coffee House, a famous establishment known for being a social and cultural hub where musicians, composers, and intellectuals gathered. Not unlike the famous solo cadenza passage in the Fifth Brandenburg, you will hear near the end of the D minor harpsichord concerto a similarly extroverted cadenza. But listen closely: imagine all the repeated D pitches played by the left hand to be played on the D string of a violin, and you'll recognize this more-than-likely lineage from the lost violin version.

The outlier on this program of concertos — Bach's **Sonata in B Minor for Violin and Harpsichord** — was indeed written during those years in Cöthen, from which came volumes of instrumental music, motivated by the superb orchestra in residence at the court. Very much like the sonata in F minor that was performed on Wednesday night, the opening at first sounds like a work for solo harpsichord until the violin gently ekes into the texture with a long and, at first, barely noticeable note. Almost halfway into the movement's 36 bars, the two instruments become more collaborative with both the keyboard right hand and the violin each playing "double-stops," all adding up to a five-part texture. Followed by an animated and more traditionally contrapuntal *Allegro*, the sonata returns to a slower pace (*Andante*) which sounds as duet-like as one could hope for. The busy sound of counterpoint and imitative fugue-like writing returns for the last *Allegro* movement.

Vivaldi's **Concerto in D Major for Violin** is nicknamed "***Il grosso mogul***," referring to a few possible associations. In the context of a "great mogul" being someone influential and successful, it has been suggested that the concerto was written to be played by Francesco Maria Veracini (1690–1768), an Italian violinist, composer, and conductor, recognized for his significant contributions to Baroque music, but there is no evidence that he and Vivaldi ever met. Or it could allude to the grandeur and exoticism associated with the Mughal Empire, reflecting the Baroque fascination with the East. But the listener is hard-pressed to find any hint of eastern flavors. It's a puzzle. One thing is sure: This is a concerto that demands monumental talent from the soloist, who must possess Herculean, or mogul-esque, skills.

Bach's **Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B Minor** is a concerto in disguise, if not by name. A grand sequence of dances preceded by an elaborate overture, its format forsakes the usual concerto sequence of three movements (fast, slow, fast). Still, it nevertheless unmistakably puts a single instrumentalist front and center, assigning flourish and fireworks to the solo flute. And those previously mentioned characteristics of contrast and trajectory all but define the **Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins**, whose electrifying contrapuntal interdependence is nothing short of Bach at his best. The middle movement is heavenly, and the *schwung* ("momentum") of the final *Allegro* is unstoppable.