

## **Bach Festival of Charleston at First (Scots)**

### **“J.S. Bach and S. Karg-Elert: Influence and Inspiration”**

**Saturday, March 5, 2011, 7:30 p.m.**

#### **Program Notes**

**By Stefan Engels**

Born into a musical family, **Johann Sebastian Bach** received his earliest instruction from his father. After his father's death in 1695, Bach moved to Ohrdruf, where he lived and studied organ with his older brother Johann Christoph. He also received an education at schools in Eisenach, Ohrdruf, and Lüneburg. Bach's first permanent positions were as organist in Arnstadt (1703-1707) and Mühlhausen (1707-1708). During these years, he performed, composed taught, and developed an interest in organ building. From 1708-1717 he was employed by Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Weimar, first as court organist, and after 1714, as concertmaster. During this period, he composed many of his best organ compositions; in his capacity as concertmaster, he was also expected to produce a cantata each month. In Weimar, Bach's style was influenced by his study of numerous Italian compositions (especially Vivaldi concertos). From 1717-1723 Bach held the position as Music Director for the Prince Leopold of Cöthen. In 1723, Bach was appointed cantor at the St. Thomas Church and School, and Director of Music for Leipzig, positions which he retained for the rest of his career. His official duties included the responsibility of overseeing the music in the four principal churches of the city, and organizing other musical events sponsored by the municipal council. For these performances, he used pupils from the St. Thomas School, the city's professional musicians, and university students. Bach divided his singers into four choirs (one for each of the four main churches); he personally conducted the first choir, which sang on alternate Sundays at St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. His usual performing group consisted of around sixteen singers and eighteen instrumentalists, although these numbers could be augmented for special occasions. During his first six years in Leipzig (1723-1729), Bach's most impressive compositions were his sacred cantatas (four yearly cycles), and the St. John and St. Matthew Passions. Bach apparently gave virtuoso organ recitals in Leipzig and on various tours, although he had no official position as organist in Leipzig. In the 1740s, Bach made various journeys, most notably to the court of Frederick the Great in 1747. He continued a lively interest in the building of organs, and kept informed about the latest developments in the construction of harpsichords and pianofortes. Johann Sebastian Bach himself represented the end of an age, the culmination of the Baroque in a magnificent synthesis of Italian melodic invention, French rhythmic dance forms and German contrapuntal mastery.

**Sigfrid Karg-Elert** is among the most intriguing and interesting personalities in the sphere of organ composition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born Siegfried Theodor Karg on November 21 1877, in Oberndorf am Neckar, the family relocated to Leipzig in 1883.

Karg-Elert's teachers at the Leipzig Conservatory included, at the time, well-known personalities such as Alfred Reisenauer and Robert Teichmüller. 1905 until 1915 marks Karg-Elert's first period of composition with works for piano, harmonium, organ, voice and choir. In 1919 he was appointed to the Leipzig Conservatory as instructor for Music Theory and Composition as successor to Max Reger, who died in 1916. Karg-Elert was named Professor many years after his initial appointment. His second period of composition followed from 1921 until 1927 with works for piano, organ and chamber music ensembles. The slow beginning of National Socialism in Germany in the 1920s had its impact on Karg-Elert and the general musical life. His 'cosmopolitan' and unique style of composing was different from his contemporaries. Only 'pure German' music was appreciated in Leipzig and at the Conservatory. Karg-Elert was considered an outsider. His interest in the music of Debussy, Scriabin and Schönberg was viewed as suspicious. During his third period of composition from 1930 until 1933 Karg-Elert composed organ and chamber music as well as orchestral works. A concert tour through the United States in 1932 was unsuccessful and financial problems and sickness continued. Karg-Elert died on April 9, 1933 in Leipzig. In truth, Karg-Elert was no organist and his efforts to obtain an organist's post in Leipzig were unsuccessful, yet his writing for that instrument shows a clear understanding of organ technique and a most resourceful use of the instrument's capabilities.

### **The Works**

#### Bach - Concerto

The Concerto in C heard tonight occupies a special position among the five Concerti that Bach transcribed for the organ. The main reasons are the extended cadenzas created by Bach in the outer movements. In those it was clearly his intention to transfer the extensive idiomatic violin figurations to the organ. But Bach went further by creating a unique type of compositional texture, turning this Concerto into a modern and extravagant transcription of his time. The second movement, with its freely designed right hand, is reminiscent of a highly ornamented chorale prelude.

#### Karg-Elert - Pastels from the Lake of Constance

The Pastels from the Lake of Constance were composed in 1921, after Karg-Elert and his family spent a vacation in Radolfzell at the Lake of Constance in South Germany. Among Karg-Elert's impressionistic compositions for the organ, the Pastels from the Lake of Constance occupy a unique position due to their compositional density and extraordinary combination of stops.

After the mysterious sounding opening in *The Soul of the Lake*, Karg-Elert composes a storm of thunder and lightning. Those of you who have not yet visited the Lake of Constance should know how sudden the weather there can change there from pure loveliness to heavy storms.

In *The Sun's Evensong* Karg-Elert's musical language is truly picturesque. The atmosphere of the evening is characterized by flute, string and reed stops. An

„Animato“ leads into a hymn-like section suggesting the sun’s slowly disappearing beauty. The concluding „Epilogue“ celebrates the final moments of the sun’s visibility to invisibility.

*Hymn to the Stars* is yet another example why the Pastels from the Lake of Constance were highly respected and frequently played in this country and also in Australia already during Karg-Elert’s lifetime. Timpani-like bass notes at the beginning lead into rich harmonies which are followed by impressionistic shadings. A sequenced B-A-C-H motif prepares the way for the concluding hymn-like section: Under a so-called fixed tone over 20 measures rich harmonies move through the entire circle of fifths until a decrescendo brings the piece to a contemplative conclusion.

In the way Bach created new textures and sounds in the Concerto in C, Karg-Elert achieved the same in the Pastels of the Lake of Constance. Both composers intended to create new elements in the sphere of organ performance and composition and thus shared a willingness to step beyond existing boundaries.

#### Bach - Fantasia

Bach’s Fantasia G Minor BWV 542 is divided into five sections. Sections one, three and five are recitative-like (without a steady pulse) and harmonically spicy in character, whereas sections two and four are lyrical and constructed with instrumentally related motifs. This Fantasia is reminiscent of the famous compositional style of the North German Baroque Period called *Stylus phantasticus* (Fantasy-like Style).

#### Bach - Canzone

The term Canzone literally means song in Italian and refers to a shorter instrumental piece of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bach’s Canzone heard tonight may have been written about 1715. The main characteristic of a Canzone is the re-occurring musical material. But the term was also used to describe a type of poem consisting of five to seven stanzas typically set to music. In Bach’s Canzone, the opening theme is first introduced in the Pedal and then answered on the manual. A chromatic counter-theme is added and the subtle counterpoint works its way to a half cadence at slightly less than midpoint. Here the meter changes from 4/4 to 3/2 and a slightly different version of the theme is introduced, but with the same chromatic counter-theme (slightly modified for the meter). A two measure Adagio concludes this Canzone.

#### Bach - Passacaglia

Bach composed his Passacaglia C Minor early in his career, probably between 1706 and 1713, in Arnstadt, after his return from visiting Lübeck where he presumably studied Buxtehude’s Ostinato forms (Chaconne and Passacaglia). The Passacaglia belongs to Bach’s most important and well-known works. There is a build up until its climax in variation twelve. This is followed by three quiet variations and the remaining five variations end the work. For many decades the work has provided

much discussion among Bach scholars as to its architectural structure and theological associations.

#### Bach - Fugue

The first half of the Passacaglia theme is used as the first and main subject in the Fugue. Then, a transformed version of the second half of the Passacaglia theme is used as the second subject in the Fugue. Both are heard simultaneously in the beginning of the Fugue. A countersubject enters immediately afterwards and is then used throughout the piece. When the three subjects appear simultaneously, they never do so in the same combination of voices twice. French Organist Marie-Claire Alain pointed out the inversion of the numbers 21 and 12 in connection with the amount of appearances of the Passacaglia theme: There are 21 repetitions of the Passacaglia theme in the Passacaglia and 12 statements of the fugue subject in the Fugue.

#### Karg-Elert - Fantasia

Most similar to Bach's Fantasia, Karg-Elert's Fantasia is also dominated by two main characteristics: an energetic primary theme which occurs in alternation with a secondary impressionistic and floating theme. Furthermore, the forte sections consist of imaginative figurations, virtuosic runs as well as rhythmically varied accents, where we find accents on weak beats. It almost seems Karg-Elert intended to reinvent the Stylus phantasticus for the late-Romantic period.

#### Karg-Elert - Canzone

Karg-Elert composed three stanzas in his Canzone: At first a highly lyrical, indeed song-like theme is presented in the Soprano part. This theme moves to the Tenor part in the second stanza and is then played in the pedals as the Bass part in stanza three. Karg-Elert increases the dynamic and harmonic intensity from stanza to stanza thus concluding the Canzone almost in full organ.

#### Karg-Elert - Passacaglia

There are some interesting similarities between Bach's and Karg-Elert's Passacaglia. Both composers structure their Passacaglia theme into two four-measure long phrases with an upbeat (Bach's meter is 3/4 and Karg-Elert's is 6/8). Both composers show a remarkable creativity in the harmonic, melodic, rhythmic and imaginative design of the variations. Karg-Elert also composes a dynamic build-up towards the middle of the Passacaglia but composes an quiet transition into the Fugue.

#### Karg-Elert - Fugue

Like Bach's Fugue, Karg-Elert's Fugue shows a lively transparency, a variety of contrasting articulations and a combination of legato and slightly more detached played phrases. This fugue contains elements of the gigue dance character. Karg-Elert does not use the Passacaglia theme as the Fugue theme but combines both in the concluding and effective ending of the piece.