

Bach Festival of Charleston at First (Scots)
"Gloria! Cantatas and Orchestral Works by J. S. Bach"
Sunday, March 6, 2011, 4:00 o'clock

Program Notes
by William D. Gudger

Today's program contrasts Johann Sebastian Bach's vocal music with his instrumental works. **Suite No. 3** (Bach actually called it an "Ouverture," the French heading for the first movement) survives from concerts Bach gave in 1730s in Leipzig. Many of these were held in Zimmermann's coffee house, but outdoor concerts were common during fair weather, and the festive scoring with trumpets would have been especially appealing in the town square during one of Leipzig's trade fairs, when book dealers and the like would have been looking for some local culture to enjoy. The "Air" from this suite, a movement for the strings only, remains one of Bach's most wondrous melodies, and despite its many unstylish transcriptions and bad performances, is a powerful testimony to Bach's art and craft.

One of Bach's surviving 200-odd cantatas "**Thou Very God and David's Son**" (BWV 23) was composed as an audition when Bach was given what was to be his last position: Kantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. Although he was not the first choice of some of the city council, Bach obtained the position in 1723. Cantata 23 (the numbering dates from the 19th century and has no chronological significance) is interesting in that it uses two vocal solos and two oboes in the first movement as a musical representation of Christ's dual nature: human and divine. The cantata also incorporates the chorale (hymn) tune for the "German Agnus Dei," the traditional threefold petition to the Lamb of God.

Bach's perhaps more familiar "orchestral" works include the six concertos which survived in an unused manuscript sent to the Margrave of Brandenburg and are typical of the music Bach was composing in the early 1720s at the court in Coethen. Each concerto demonstrates his abilities to write for different and unusual combinations of solo instruments: in **Brandenburg Concerto No. 4**, the solo group is a virtuoso violin and two recorders (flutes in most modern performances). The "**Largo**" from the **Concerto for Two Violins** is a beautiful example of Bach's melodic writing for two instruments, in effect a trio sonata writ large in an orchestral setting.

"**Gloria in Excelsis Deo**," *Cantata 191*, dates from much later at Leipzig, the 1740s. It is unusual in that its text is in Latin, the language associated with the traditional Christmas music at Leipzig's principal churches, rather than German. In it Bach borrowed from himself, slightly reworking three movements of the "Gloria" for the *B-minor Mass* (this part had been composed by 1733). As befits the festive occasion, trumpets and drums join the usual strings, oboes, and flutes. Although Bach never heard a complete performance of his *B-minor Mass*, this compilation gave the Leipzig congregation a sample of the work, as it does us.