

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization, Spring 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 11, Thursday March 8

Sacred Music in the Baroque

In the Medieval and Renaissance periods we listened to a lot of religious music! The Church was, after all, the most dominant and culturally significant source of music during these eras. In the Baroque period, however, secular instrumental music really becomes the mainstream and sacred music recedes in significance. But there are still some interesting trends in sacred music, and we turn to them now.

Bach and the Cantata

As a musical director in various German courts Bach's main responsibility was to provide a sort of musical sermon every Sunday in the town's Lutheran church. These are compositions for a chorus, small orchestra and soloists called *cantatas*. They are usually about seven or eight movements long and take about 30 minutes to perform.

The cantata we are learning this semester is Number 140, "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme." (The title could be translated as "Wake up, the voice is calling to us.")

The most important thing to understand about this work is that it revolves around a *chorale*, a pre-existing melody that the congregation would have been familiar with. (In most other traditions you'd call this a "hymn," but in the Lutheran church it's a chorale.)

The first and fourth movements of the cantata create elaborate polyphonic movements around the chorale melody. I like to say that these are like "remixes" of the chorale – they place it in a new context with lots of new material surrounding it, with cool melodic lines, new rhythms, etc.

Other parts in the middle of the cantata are more stripped down and somewhat more "preachy." We get a recitative from a singer who is actually playing the part of the preacher, telling the congregation to be ready for Jesus, and a duet between Jesus and the soul of a parishioner. In class I noted that this all seems more intensely personal than the traditional Catholic services we've seen in the past, which were perhaps more lofty and abstract.

And of course the final movement is a relatively simple setting of the chorale that the whole congregation can sing along with.

Craig Wright actually has very elaborate notes on this cantata in our textbook (pp. 119-124 in the eighth edition, pp. 128-135 in the seventh).

Handel and the Oratorio

I started this discussion by noting that Handel is an interesting “doppelgänger” to Bach, having been born in the same year, also in Germany. However, his career turned out to be quite different. Rather than staying close to home and composing church music Handel set out for Italy with the intention of becoming an opera composer.

While he was somewhat successful with this, it was his move to the *oratorio* that gained him wild popularity, especially in England where he eventually settled. (Thus, despite being born in Germany he is often considered an honorary English composer.)

The *oratorio* is a long work for chorus, orchestra, and vocal soloists that tells a story, often of a biblical nature. It is like a stripped down opera that has no scenery, costumes, acting, or dialogue – just a lot of standing and singing. This is much more economical to produce than opera.

Despite the religious nature of the material, oratorios were never intended to be a part of a church service – they were entertainment, not unlike the biblical movies that are occasionally still made in Hollywood (like Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah*.)

We will learn a sequence from Handel’s most popular work, *The Messiah* [1742]. I find this particular passage interesting because it has a few clear instances of tone painting, in which Handel uses the music to depict the things mentioned in the text. (In particular, it seems to have “angel music” that accompanies the parts where the angel is talking, and some high/low imagery in the “Glory to God” part.)

On the quiz...

I tend to emphasize that these two pieces have very different functions. Bach is creating an actual church service for his local congregation, whereas Handel is offering a public entertainment that was ultimately intended to draw crowds and make money.

In addition, we want to remember the way that the Bach Cantata is centered around a Chorale melody, as well as the instances of tone painting in the Handel.