NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY'S JORDAN HALL • THURSDAY, JUNE 8 • 8PM

# From Heavenly Harmony

## Handel's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* & Bach's *Magnificat*

# Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra & Vox Luminis

**Robert Mealy,** *BEMF Orchestra Director*
**Lionel Meunier,** *Vox Luminis Artistic Director*

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Ode for St. Cecilia's Day, HWV 76 — *George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)*

*Overture: Larghetto e staccato — Allegro — Minuet*
*Recitative: From harmony, from heav'nly harmony*
*Accompagnato: When nature underneath a heap*
*Chorus: From harmony, from heav'nly harmony*
*Air: What passion cannot music raise and quell!*
*Air and Chorus: The trumpet's loud clangor*
*March*
*Air: The soft complaining flute*
*Air: Sharp violins proclaim their jealous pangs*
*Air: But oh! what art can teach*
*Air: Orpheus could lead the savage race*
*Accompagnato: But bright Cecilia raised the wonder high'r*
*Solo and Chorus: As from the pow'r of sacred lays*

Zsuzsi Tóth, *soprano* & Florian Sievers, *tenor*

Magnificat in E-flat major, BWV 243a — *Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)*

*Magnificat anima mea*
*Et exultavit spiritus meus*
*Quia respexit humiltatem*
*Omnes generationes*

The Boston Early Music Festival extends heartfelt thanks to
**Glenn A. KnicKrehm and Constellation Charitable Foundation**
for their leadership support of tonight's performance by the
Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra & Vox Luminis

*Quia fecit mihi magna*
*Et misericordia*
*Fecit potentiam*
*Deposuit potentes*
*Esurientes*
*Suscepit Israel*
*Sicut locutus est*
*Gloria Patri*

Viola Blache & Perrine Devillers, *soprano*; Alexander Chance, *alto*;
Florian Sievers, *tenor*; Sebastian Myrus, *bass*

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Double-manual French harpsichord by Allan Winkler, Medford, Massachusetts, 1991,
after Donzelague, property of the Boston Early Music Festival.

Michael von Clemm Continuo Organ by Henk Klop, 2006,
courtesy of The Memorial Church, Harvard University.

**Vox Luminis**
Zsuzsi Tóth, *soprano*
Viola Blache, *soprano*
Perrine Devillers, *soprano*
Victoria Cassano, *soprano*
Alexander Chance, *alto*
Jan Kullmann, *alto*
Florian Sievers, *tenor*
João Moreira, *tenor*
Sebastian Myrus, *bass*
Lionel Meunier, *bass & Artistic Director*
Anthony Romaniuk, *organ & harpsichord*

**Ripieno choir**
Anney Barrett, *soprano*
Sonja DuToit Tengblad, *soprano*
Cody Bowers, *alto*
Michael Barrett, *tenor*
Paul Guttry, *bass*

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## Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra

**Violin I**
Robert Mealy, *concertmaster*
Miloš Valent
Peter Spissky
Johanna Novom
Beth Wenstrom

**Violin II**
Cynthia Roberts, *principal*
Julie Andrijeski
Sarah Darling
Dagmar Valentová

**Viola**
Daniel Elyar, *principal*
Laura Jeppesen
Anna Griffis

**Violoncello**
Phoebe Carrai, *principal*
Keiran Campbell
Matt Zucker
Jennifer Morsches
David Morris

**Double Bass**
Nathaniel Chase

**Flute**
Andrea LeBlanc

**Oboe**
Gonzalo X. Ruiz, *principal*
Kathryn Montoya

**Recorder**
Kathryn Montoya, *principal*
Gonzalo X. Ruiz

**Bassoon**
Dominic Teresi, *principal*
Allen Hamrick

**Trumpet**
Justin Bland, *principal*
Perry Sutton
John Thiessen

**Timpani**
Michelle Humphreys

**Theorbo**
Charles Weaver



# Notes on the Program

Owing to the facts that they were born in the same year, and that they grew up just under a hundred miles apart, it is often tempting to consider Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel in parallel. Though they never met, each must undoubtedly have held an interest in the other's music. Both were widely regarded by their contemporaries as being at the forefront of contemporary musical developments.

Their biographies share obvious similarities—their language, their Lutheran faith, and keyboard prowess. But their lives also differed in a number of crucial ways. Handel was born in Halle, the son of a wealthy barber-surgeon (who apparently disapproved of him pursuing a career in music), and received a university education. Bach, on the other hand, was born in Eisenach into a family of musicians, and picked up his craft on the job in the traditional manner of an apprenticeship. And while Handel ventured abroad to Italy and England, Bach spent the entirety of his career in Thuringia and Saxony, remaining within a 150-mile radius of his birthplace. The two works featured in this evening's program reflect both the differences and similarities between the two composers.

Bach's *Magnificat* was likely composed during his first weeks in Leipzig, where he had been appointed Cantor at the city's famed Thomasschule. Its first performance was most likely at the Vespers of the Feast of the Visitation, on July 2, 1723 (and not, as is commonly mistaken, Christmas Day of that year). Part of Bach's liturgical duties in Leipzig required him to perform elaborate "concerted" Latin settings of the Magnificat at Vespers services on important feasts, including Christmas, Easter, Whitsun, the Purification, Annunciation, and Visitation. Though Bach assembled a repertory of works by other composers for the majority of these occasions, his own setting was by far the largest in scale and clearly intended to make an impression.

This early E-flat major version of Bach's *Magnificat* was indeed repurposed by the composer for Vespers on Christmas Day 1723. For this occasion, Bach provided four *laudes*—festive interpolations based on traditional German Christmas pieces, to be interspersed between the movements, a customary practice in the Lutheran church from the sixteenth century. Tonight, we'll be performing Bach's very first version of his *Magnificat*, in E flat without the Christmas interpolations. Most listeners will know his more famous later revision of the work in D major: this early version includes many unexpected touches, including the sweet sound of recorders instead of transverse flutes in the *Esurientes*.

Bach's *Magnificat* is undoubtedly one of his most exciting choral works. It is characterized by its sheer variety of

emotional states. Like other Baroque settings of the text, each verse is set as a discrete movement, alternating between choruses and solo movements. Though the solo movements are unusually short and compact for Bach (there are no *da capos*, as in the arias in Bach's cantatas from around the same time), he used the imagery of the words to create vivid affects in each. After the effervescent opening chorus, the second soprano aria *Et exultavit* carries on in an irrepressibly joyous mode. However, in the *Quia respexit*, sung by the first soprano, the obbligato oboe part introduces a more introspective mood, musing on the handmaiden's lowliness. This leads directly into the thrilling chorus *Omnes generationes*, in which Bach represents "all generations" by stacking the different voice parts' entries almost directly on top of one another in rapid succession.

Bach works through the text in a similar way, always finding a musical figure or device to complement the main essence of each verse. But at the center of the doxology, he brings things to a dramatic climax at the words *Gloria Patri*, *gloria Filio*, *gloria et Spiritui Sancto* ('Glory to the Father, glory to the Son, glory also to the Holy Spirit') — before suddenly jumping back to the music of the very beginning with the text *Sicut erat in principio* ('As it was in the beginning'). While this may seem an inspired piece of text setting on Bach's part, this was in fact a common trope in seventeenth-century German Magnificat settings, and cannot be claimed as any indicator of Bach's sense of humor.

While Bach's choral works were almost exclusively composed for the Lutheran church, Handel enjoyed a comparatively greater variety of performance opportunities in London. After bringing Italian opera to the city's theaters, he shifted his focus towards the oratorio. Handel had already experimented with the soloist-led oratorio during his time in Italy. However, the new English-language oratorios that he began to compose in the 1730s were of an increasingly larger scale and incorporated a much more significant role for the chorus.

At the same time, toward the end of the 1730s, Handel also became attracted to writing music in honor of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music credited with inventing the organ. In 1736, he performed his ode *Alexander's Feast*, based on a libretto by John Dryden, at Covent Garden. This performance also included a Cecilian Italian cantata and a series of instrumental pieces. *Alexander's Feast* extols the power of music and its ability to control human emotions, thanking St. Cecilia for bestowing a heavenly gift on the world.

Three years later, Handel reprised *Alexander's Feast* for a performance on St. Cecilia's Day (November 22), which also included several instrumental concertos and the newly composed *Song for St. Cecilia's Day* (now known as the *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*). In setting John Dryden's *Song for St. Cecilia's Day* from 1687, Handel's ode displays the overt influences of Henry Purcell. Purcell was the leading English composer of the previous generation, and also produced a series of first-class works in celebration of St. Cecilia.

Dryden's text depicts music as being at the center of the cosmos, a perspective that was extensively theorized by medieval scholars on the back of classical philosophy. This view carried weight even in the increasingly rational early modern England, where the Bible, classical scholarship, and science were seen as complementary sources of inquiry and knowledge. In this world, music—and, by extension, St. Cecilia—were regarded as playing an important role, conjoining the disparate elements of the universe in a meaningful way for mankind.

Handel's response to Dryden's text, which had been written some fifty-two years earlier, reflects this worldview in an extraordinarily musical way. The opening overture (borrowed, as was Handel's wont, from a keyboard sonata by Gottlieb Muffat) establishes a well-ordered universe as it moves through a series of perfectly proportioned dances, before the tenor soloist explains music's elemental beginnings out of the natural world. He quickly demonstrates its expressive potential when mastered by man. Throughout the ode, Handel's writing is intrinsically meta-musical—it is, essentially, music *about* music. When the chorus enters, it introduces harmony in its most basic form, as if it has only just been discovered by some accident.

After this opening sequence, Handel begins to work through the instruments, marvelling at their distinctive and powerful qualities. In the air "What passion cannot music raise and quell," he introduces the soprano soloist only after an extended, seemingly improvisatory passage for the solo violoncello. This demonstrates one of the most important devices used by Handel in the ode—allowing the audience to simply hear and appreciate each instrument's characteristics *before* the singers begin to list them, meaning that we cannot help but agree, as they are celebrated in turn. ❊

—David Lee

# Texts & Translations

**Ode for St. Cecilia's Day — George Frideric Handel**

**Overture**

**Recitative – Tenor**
From harmony, from heav'nly harmony,
This universal frame began.

**Accompagnato – Tenor**
When nature underneath a heap
Of jarring atoms lay,
And could not heave her head,
The tuneful voice was heard from high:
"Arise! Ye more than dead."
Then cold, and hot, and moist and dry,
In order to their stations leap,
And music's pow'r obey.

**Chorus**
From harmony, from heav'nly harmony,
This universal frame began,
From harmony to harmony,
Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
The diapason closing full in man.

**Air – Soprano**
What passion cannot music raise and quell!
When Jubal struck the chorded shell,
His list'ning brethren stood around,
And wond'ring, on their faces fell,
To worship that celestial sound.
Less than a god they thought there could not dwell
Within the hollow of that shell,
That spoke so sweetly and so well.
What passion cannot music raise and quell!

**Air (tenor) & Chorus**
The trumpet's loud clangor
Excites us to arms,
With shrill notes of anger,
And mortal alarms.
The double, double, double beat
Of the thund'ring drum
Cries: "Hark! the foes come;
Charge, charge! 'Tis too late to retreat."

**March**

**Air – Soprano**
The soft complaining flute
In dying notes discovers
The woes of hopeless lovers,
Whose dirge is whisper'd by the warbling lute.

**Air – Tenor**
Sharp violins proclaim
Their jealous pangs, and desperation,
Fury, frantic indignation,
Depths of pain, and height of passion,
For the fair disdainful dame.

**Air – Soprano**
But oh! what art can teach,
What human voice can reach
The sacred organ's praise?
Notes inspiring holy love,
Notes that wing their heav'nly ways
To join the choirs above.

**Air – Soprano**
Orpheus could lead the savage race,
And trees, unrooted, left their place,
Sequacious of the lyre.

**Accompagnato – Soprano**
But bright Cecilia raised the wonder high'r:
When to her organ, vocal breath was giv'n,
An angel heard, and straight appear'd,
Mistaking earth for Heav'n.

**Solo (soprano) and Chorus**
As from the pow'r of sacred lays
The spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator's praise
To all the bless'd above;
So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.

—John Dryden

**Magnificat — Johann Sebastian Bach**

**Chorus**
*Magnificat anima mea Dominum.*

**Aria – Soprano II**
*Et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.*

**Aria – Soprano I**
*Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae;*
*ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent*

**Chorus**
*omnes generationes.*

**Aria – Bass**
*Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est,*
*et sanctum nomen eius.*

**Duet – Alto & Tenor**
*Et misericordia a progenie in progenies*
*timentibus eum.*

**Chorus**
*Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,*
*dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.*

**Aria – Tenor**
*Deposuit potentes de sede*
*et exaltavit humiles.*

**Aria – Alto**
*Esurientes implevit bonis*
*et divites dimisit inanes.*

**Terzetto – Soprano I & II, Alto**
*Suscepit Israel puerum suum*
*recordatus misericordiae suae.*

**Chorus**
*Sicut locutus est ad Patres nostros,*
*Abraham et semini eius in saecula.*

**Chorus**
*Gloria Patri, gloria Filio,*
*gloria et Spiritui Sancto!*
*Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper*
*et in saecula saeculorum.*
*Amen.* ❊

**Chorus**
My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

**Aria – Soprano II**
And my spirit has exulted in God my savior.

**Aria – Soprano I**
Because he has regarded the lowly state of his slave girl;
for look! from now on [they] will say that I am blessed

**Chorus**
every generation.

**Aria – Bass**
Because he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

**Duet – Alto & Tenor**
And his mercy [continues] from generation to generation
for those who fear him.

**Chorus**
He has made known the power of his arm,
scattered those who are arrogant in the thoughts of their heart.

**Aria – Tenor**
He has put down the mighty from their seats [of power]
and raised up those who are lowly.

**Aria – Alto**
The hungry he has filled with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

**Terzetto – Soprano I & II, Alto**
He has taken under his protection Israel his boy,
and remembered his mercy.

**Chorus**
In accordance with what he said to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his seed for ever.

**Chorus**
Glory to the Father, glory to the Son
glory also to the Holy Spirit!
As it was in the beginning and [is] now and always
and throughout ages of ages.
Amen. ❊