

PROGRAM NOTES

Most of the compositions for “Musik zur Fastenzeit: German 17th-Century Music for Lent,” commemorate the Lutheran Holy Week, the most solemn portion of the Church Year—and in particular, Good Friday. The others are meditations on the end of life. Although only a small fraction of it is ever performed nowadays, German sacred music of the early Baroque era was once a mighty mainstream. Tonight’s concert explores the century before Bach, offering works by composers skilled in the rigorous, classical techniques of counterpoint. These musicians were also strongly committed to the new principle of musical rhetoric, wherein melody, harmony, and rhythm—when joined to a vocal text—embody and amplify every nuance of meaning and feeling in the lyrics, whether sacred or profane. Our program also celebrates an ensemble sound much favored in 17th-century Germany: the distinctively hued scoring of one or two voices in combination with viols.

Samuel Capricornus is known also by his German name “Bockshorn.” He led a short and rather dreary existence that began in Bohemia; his family soon fled to Hungary to escape persecution and the devastation of the Thirty Years War. He held various posts in Germany, eventually attaining the prestigious position of Kapellmeister to the Württemberg court at Stuttgart. *O Traurigkeit*, published in 1660, is from *Zwey Lieder von dem Leyden und Tode Jesu* (Two Songs on the Suffering and Death of Jesus). The text is by the Jesuit priest, Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld (1591-1635), a poet, hymn writer, and humanitarian best known for his heroic stand against the prevailing witch mania. Throughout the piece Capricornus’s word-painting is profound. An especially searing moment occurs when Jesus’ body is lowered into the grave: broken, offbeat quarter notes in the viol parts contrast with flowing triplets in the vocal lines.

The *Suite I* is by Johann Hermann Schein from his *Banchetto Musicale* of 1617. During his relatively short life of forty-four years, Schein distinguished himself as a composer of Lutheran church music; *Banchetto Musicale* is his only major instrumental collection. The suggested instrumentation is a viol consort without continuo, a reflection of an earlier style. Called a “variation suite,” the haunting opening melody at the beginning of the *Padouana* reappears in altered form in the other movements. Additionally, the *Padouana* and *Gagliarda*, and the *Allemande* and *Tripla* are linked thematically; the pairs frame a sweet, lilting *Corrente*. The movements possess the distinctive characteristics meant for dance music, but the rich counterpoint and elaborate rhythms mark them as concert pieces.

The three pieces that follow are scored for two bass viols on the upper instrumental lines, and a third bass viol on the continuo line. The first and third are texted laments that gain in eloquence from the viols’ sweet blend and low *tessitura*. In fact, the use of two or three bass viols in chamber works was not all that unusual in Germany and France.

Christian Geist was born and trained in Germany and spent much of his professional career in Sweden; he wrote *Es war aber an der Stätte* while employed at the German church in Göteborg. The piece opens with a relatively straightforward recounting of the burial of Jesus (with texts taken directly from the gospels of Matthew and John) then concludes with a reflective lament, made more poignant by means of heavy, descending melodic motifs and half-step sighing figures. Here Geist sets *O Traurigkeit* by Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld using the same text as the Capricornus lament, the first piece on the program. Geist breaks *O Traurigkeit* into eight verses, each covering a line of the poem. We have selected two verses, the first and last, for this performance.

Johann Michael Nicolai, a double-bass player in the Stuttgart court orchestra, favored compositions for low instruments; his *Sonata in A Minor* is aptly written for three bass viols. We perform only the final movement—the affecting *Ciacconi Adagio*—which stands well on its own. This type of movement, commonly known as a chaconne, is a triple-meter set of variations over an *ostinato* bass that became a favorite throughout Europe. Although purely instrumental, Nicolai’s piece evokes lamentation through its use of the repeated, four-tone, descending minor scale, a motif frequently heard in 17th-century dramatic music, where it is invariably associated with tragic outcomes.

Dietrich Buxtehude, renowned in his own time as organist and composer, was evidently Danish by birth but spent the last thirty years of his career in Lübeck, then one of Germany’s most outstanding musical centers. (The young Bach famously walked 250 miles there in 1705 to meet and learn from Buxtehude.) Buxtehude composed the *Klag-Lied*—the affecting words also by him—in 1674 upon the death of his father, who was also a musician. Its lachrymose character is manifested

by the angular vocal line's extended range, and by the unusual tremulous bowing effect the score specifies for the accompanying bass viols. We perform three of the seven verses that describe the anguish of the son left behind and the father, who finds himself in heaven where he enjoys making music with the *Himmels-Chor* (heavenly choir).

Andreas Hammerschmidt was organist at Zittau's principal church, St. Johannes. The demanding position included writing for, and directing the church and school choirs, and the town players. A greatly admired musician, "Orpheus of Zittau" is inscribed on his tombstone. Hammerschmidt's instrumental music is confined to the three-volume collection of dances begun in 1636: *Erster Fleiss allerhand neuer Paduanen....* With its fashionable dances, a continuo part, and scoring for viols, the collection shows Hammerschmidt's familiarity with English dance suites. The dynamic markings are unusual: the *Aria* (third movement) contains the words *stark* and *stille*, or "loud" and "soft," to create echo effects. Unlike Schein who linked the movements thematically in his *Suite I*, Hammerschmidt had a do-it-yourself attitude, not unusual at the time: he left the selection of dances to form a suite entirely up to the performers.

Franz Tunder, organist at the Marienkirche in Lübeck, was a composer of great distinction whose scores have mostly been lost to the ravages of time. A surviving work—*An Wasserflüssen Babylon* for soprano, five viols and continuo—is appropriate for Lent and Holy Week. Tunder has turned the hymn by Wolfgang Dachstein (1487-1553) from Psalm 137 into a dramatic composition in which the instrumental lines elaborate upon the tune in the vocal part. Like Capricornus, Tunder's attention to the changing moods of his text is exquisitely detailed, and, for dramatic effect, he punctuates the individual phrases with long pauses. The most expressive section goes way beyond the outline of the tune; it contains an ascending chromatic motif on the words *da weinten wir* (we poured out tears).

The anonymous *Fuga* from the *Partiturbuch Ludwig*, an important collection of instrumental music from North Germany, brings a cheerful moment to our solemn Lenten concert. The heraldic dotted-note themes seem to suggest performance on loud winds or brass, but the title of *Partiturbuch Ludwig's* #85 is most specific: *Fuga à quattro Viol.di Gamb*, with basso continuo. The piece is enlivened by internal duets in imitation, with all the musical threads relating back to the introductory theme.

Tunder's *Ach Herr, lass deine lieben Engelein* is a meditation on the time spent after death. The text of the piece's two sections contains a double entreaty—that the end of physical life may bring peace (resting in Abraham's bosom), and that the resurrection of the soul may follow. Each half is preceded by a symphonia, the second graphically describing the transition between death and reawakening. You will notice the exquisite word-painting, the changes in tempo to fit each textual nuance, and the delicate balance between the soprano and the instruments. Incidentally, J.S. Bach used the same text for the final chorale of the *St. John Passion*.

The concert closes with three settings of the chorale, *Vater unser im Himmelreich* (The Lord's Prayer), which is liturgically appropriate for any time during the Church Year, including Lent. The first two settings are by Samuel Scheidt, the distinguished composer and organist from the German town of Halle. The settings are from his monumental keyboard collection, *Tabulatura Nova* of 1624. The pieces' four-part scoring fits a viol consort perfectly without the need to change a single note. The first setting has the chorale tune in the top line so that it is easy to hear. In the second, the tune is slower paced, and in the tenor voice. In both, the parts that accompany the tune play elegant, often imitative and syncopated melodies around it.

Michael Altenburg was a successful choir director and composer with more than a dozen publications of his music still extant. Distinctive among these works are his intradas, which nestle traditional Lutheran chorale melodies within a vigorous contrapuntal web of instrumental lines. The chorale melody is in the tenor line, but is sung an octave higher. *Vater unser im Himmelreich* comes from his *Neuer lieblicher und zierlicher Intraden* (1620). Altenburg's preface reflects his optimistic assessment of his nation's burgeoning musicality: "Soon there will not be a single village, especially in Thuringia, in which music, both vocal and instrumental, will not flourish in good order with splendor or refinement...."