

Program Notes

By Peter Laki

Additional Notes by Paul Flight

Entrance of the Queen of Sheba from Solomon (1749)
by **George Frederic Handel** (Halle, Saxony, 1685—London, 1759)

George Frederic Handel was born in Germany, spent four formative years in Italy, and in his late twenties settled in England where he made his home for the rest of his life. He quickly established himself as England's foremost composer, achieving prominence as an opera director and later as the author of a series of celebrated oratorios on Biblical themes.

Act III of Solomon, one of Handel's later works, opens with the famous orchestral movement also known as the "Entrance of the Queen of Sheba." The overture resembles a concerto in its alternation of solo and tutti passages; the two oboes are given special treatment throughout. This vibrant music does brilliantly what all overtures ought to do: arouse our expectations for more great music to follow.

Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 2 and 5 (1721)
by **Johann Sebastian Bach** (Eisenach, 1685—Leipzig, 1750)

At the age of 36, Bach had yet to find a position worthy of his genius and, on March 24, 1721, he sent what we today would call a job application to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg. As his "portfolio," he enclosed the six masterworks now known as the Brandenburg Concertos.

At the time, Bach was employed at the tiny court of Cöthen, where opportunities were rather limited. During the six years he spent there, Bach wrote mostly chamber music, as well as some concertos. Especially after the tragedy of his wife's death in 1720, he grew increasingly restless in this isolated location.

The six Brandenburg Concertos seem to have been a long time in the making. Scholars believe that some of them were written, or at least begun, when Bach was still in Weimar, prior to his move to Cöthen in 1717. The six works display great variety in scoring and structure. Nos. 1, 3 and 6 represent an older type of concerto, with no prominent solo instruments. Nos. 2, 4 and 5, by contrast, belong to a more modern type, each featuring a different group of solo instruments in front of an accompanying string ensemble.

Concerto No. 2 has four solo instruments: trumpet, flute (originally recorder), oboe, and violin. Of these, the trumpet, which appears in none of the other concertos, is of special importance. In Bach's time, both the trumpet and the horn were "natural" instruments, which means that they could only play the natural overtones of their fundamental pitch. The higher we go in the series of overtones, the closer the tones will be to one another. For this reason, Baroque trumpet parts make frequent use

of the instrument's highest register, because it is only there that they can play a complete melody. The sustained notes and fast passage-works of the trumpet soar high above the other instruments, determining the character of the first and last movements. The slow movement, however, dispenses with the trumpet, which evidently needed rest. In fact, the orchestra is also silent during this movement, which is scored only for flute, oboe and violin with continuo (harpsichord and string bass). The three soloists engage in a heartfelt lyrical conversation, repeating and continuing one another's phrases. The last movement opens with a spirited trumpet call, imitated in turn by the other solo instruments in a texture that is in some ways like a fugue.

In Concerto No. 5, the harpsichord takes center stage in what is in fact the first concerto ever written for a keyboard instrument. The harpsichord joins a violin and a flute (this time, Bach explicitly called for a transverse flute, not a recorder) as the other solo instruments. The energetic opening theme is a square rhythm, contrasting with more fluid figures in the solo sections. The harpsichord is certainly the most important of the soloists; this is clear from the spectacular cadenza at the end of the first movement, the first such solo in the concerto literature.

The second movement ("Affettuoso") is, again, scored for the solo instruments only—it is an exquisite piece of chamber music. The last movement is impossible to label: it begins as a fugue with the solo instruments taking turns with the main theme, but as the orchestra joins in, the music loses its contrapuntal character, although the fugue theme keeps intruding. The fragmentation of the fugue theme results in something similar to the development section in sonata form, anticipating Classical techniques by some sixty years. Somewhat later, the music comes to a halt in B minor to "jump-start" after a short rest in the home key of D major, creating the feel of a Classical recapitulation. The transformation from Baroque to Classical style takes place before our very eyes and ears.

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Quaeramus cum Pastoribus
by **Pedro de Cristo** (c.1550–1618)

Pedro de Cristo was a 16th century Portuguese musician who lived and worked in Coimbra, an important city in the central part of Portugal. Like many of his Iberian contemporaries, his compositional style is indebted to Italian models. There was at that time a very rich cultural exchange between the cities of the Iberian Peninsula and Rome, with many