

Telemann: The Cantata Project

The Burney Ensemble
Saturday, September 29, 8pm
St. Mark's-Trinity Church
by Colin MacDonald

While many audience members were looking forward to hearing a performance by young Vancouver baritone Tyler Duncan on the first concert of *Dr. Burney's Musical Journeys* 2001/02 series, a seasonal illness prevented the singer from appearing. The Burney Ensemble did their best to fill out the program with instrumental works, maintaining as a theme the music of 18th century German composer Georg Philipp Telemann.

Telemann was active in the musical period known as the Late Baroque, and was a contemporary of composers such as George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach. He was also writing at the same time as Jonathan Swift, and the publication of *Gulliver's Travels* inspired him to compose the programmatic *Gulliver Suite*, for two violins. A set of movements that musically represented the different races from Swift's novel, the suite made Telemann's sense of humour clear, and violinists Paul Luchkow and Michelle Speller brought the characterizations to life.

Telemann's music was very popular in his day for its lively phrasing and clear structure. He was appreciated more than J. S. Bach, who was often criticized for the complexity of his harmonies. Bach's *Sonata in G major* for violin, played by Luchkow with Nan Mackie and Valerie Weeks on continuo parts, revealed the sinuous counterpoint and expressive harmonies of the Leipzig choirmaster. Luchkow played with a warm, strong tone, and was able

to delicately taper phrases to the point of silence, as he traded intricate melodies with the continuo.

Telemann followed Bach with another *Sonata in G major*, this time for viola da gamba and continuo. The accessibility of the music was evident from the direct, unaffected harmonies and lucid phrasing, structures that were easily perceptible to both the ear and the mind. This was music that celebrated the Age of Enlightenment, when composers worked to make their art popular and pleasing. Mackie showed agility in her playing, but lacked a certain confidence, and was often overpowered by the volume of the harpsichord.

The Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli had a large influence on Telemann's own writing, and the German composer integrated the older Italian's style into his *Sonata II in A major*, from "Corellisierende Sonaten." Speller and Luchkow again joined Mackie and Weeks in this work that revealed a more restrained style, carefully imitative melodies coloured by subtle harmonic shadings.

Corelli's own writing was represented in a *Chaconne* for two violins, and a *Sonata in D major* for two violins, baroque trumpet, and continuo. These pieces sounded nobler in character than the more capricious works of Telemann, the restrained melodies supported by harmonies that were heartfelt caresses of sound. The baroque trumpet had a purity of sound not often heard in modern instruments, but Búi Petersen struggled with the instrument's archaic design, often losing notes to condensation build-up.

Despite having to restructure their concert, the Burney Ensemble was

able to present a delightfully
coherent program, illuminating one
of the most respected composers of
the Age of Reason.