

The Peoria Bach Festival presents:

## **Bach and the Language of Lament**

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12:05 p.m. Friday June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 | TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, PEORIA

*Dr. John Orfe, piano*

### **Part I - works by J. S. Bach**

Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor, Well-Tempered Clavier II

Sinfonia No. 9 in F minor

Sinfonia No. 5 in E-flat major

### **Part II - transcriptions of J. S. Bach**

“*Die Seele Ruht in Jesu Händen*” [“My Soul Doth Rest in Jesus’ Keeping”]..... trans. Harold Bauer  
from Cantata No. 127, *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr’ Mensch und Gott*

“*Schafe Können Sicher Weiden*” [“Sheep May Safely Graze”].....trans. Mary Howe  
from Cantata No. 8, *Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd*

“*Erbarme dich, mein Gott*” [“Have Mercy, My God”].....trans. Frederic Chiu  
from the *Matthäus-Passion*

### **Part III - Variations and Fugue on a Theme of J. S. Bach, Op. 81 Max Reger**

Tema\*. Andante

Variation I. L’istesso tempo

Variation II. Sempre espressivo ed assai legato

Variation III. Grave assai

Variation IV. Vivace

Variation V. Vivace

Variation VI. Allegro molto

Variation VII. Adagio

Variation VIII. Vivace

Variation IX. Grave e sempre molto espressivo

Variation X. Poco vivace

Variation XI. Allegro agitato

Variation XII. Andante sostenuto

Variation XIII. Vivace

Variation XIV. Con moto

Fuga. Sostenuto

\* “*Seine Allmacht zu ergründen, wird sich kein Mensche finden*” [“No man can fathom His omnipotence”]  
from Cantata No. 128, *Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein*.

## PROGRAM NOTES

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In the decade-plus that Dr. John Jost has invited me to contribute recital programs for the Peoria Bach Festival, I have responded with a two-recital survey of the complete Bach-Busoni transcriptions (2011 and 2013), a curation of Bach's more audacious reaches into music theory ("The Chromatic Bach," 2015), a program devoted to genre ("Preludes and Fugues: Bach and Beyond," 2016), and a recital of a major work by the master himself (the *Goldberg Variations*, 2019.) Around the time Dr. Jost invited me to design a program for the 2020 Peoria Bach Festival, my friend Sandy Miller invited me to hear a house concert by the itinerant guitarist-singer and hymnologist Kevin Twit. While listening to him sing and share insights into hymnody, I was struck by one comment in particular: "we have lost the language of lament." The slings and arrows of human experience get glossed over in much of modern Christian worship, in other words, just as Bible readers frequently skip past the many expressions of anguish in the book of Psalms (so many!) in order to savor the more exultant strains. Also around this time, I had been holding up what we know of Bach's Lutheran theology against some of the trends in contemporary Christianity (what might Bach have made of the so-called prosperity gospel, for instance?) This next recital, I decided, would have an emotional thrust. The language of lament certainly exists in the music of J. S. Bach...how does it play out?

Then SARS-CoV-2 upended life as we know it. I would approach this program from a new starting point.

"Everywhere I go, I hear people singing the blues," B. B. King is reported to have said. True depth of human feeling is powerfully revealed in grief, one of the strongest human emotions. Raw displays of grief can make those in its vicinity profoundly uncomfortable. Therefore, stages of grief are proposed, medications patented, and entertainments produced that grief might be classified, contained, domesticated, dulled, or distracted. Artists since antiquity, on the other hand, have recognized grief as central to the human experience. We are deepened by loss and the understanding of suffering, whether our own or that of others. Composers, poets, painters, filmmakers, novelists, and others labor in solitude in order to socially share their work with the public. Artwork borne of grief may challenge, trouble, or even threaten the consumer, yet it also moves barriers of aloneness and disconnectedness. "Our own desolations become more recognizable to us, more articulate, something shared," American poet Edward Hirsch writes in his preface to *100 Poems to Break Your Heart*. "We become less isolated in our sorrow, and thus are befriended by the words of another." Words, yes, and also words set to music, or even music without words, as in so much music by J. S. Bach and others. The program features some of the particularly beautiful expressions of lament from among the many available pieces in Bach's output, but it does not wallow in sadness. There is a variety of emotional affect to be savored here, starting with a set of four keyboard pieces in three voices by Bach himself. The Prelude and Fugue in c-sharp minor from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (strangely overlooked in my experience) begins with a substantial lyrical piece whose rhetorical and ornamental features suggest a sarabande or sicilienne, except that the meter is the compound triple of 9/8. The fugue, also substantial, is a driving 12/16 *moto perpetuo* whose subject frequently appears in inversion. Each movement features a significant moment tonic analogous to recapitulation in the sonata-allegro model.

Bach never wrote a treatise on music theory; rather, the *Inventions*, *Sinfonias*, two volumes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and *The Art of Fugue* are compendia of instruction in both composition and keyboard performance. Bach shows time and time again how a musical idea can give birth to a full-fledged movement of music. The supreme goal of the 2- and 3-part pieces, Bach writes, is "to achieve a cantabile [singing] style of playing and at the same time acquire a strong foretaste of composition." The F minor and E-flat major *Sinfonias* show two very different but equally extremely successful realizations of this. In the former, ten statements of triple counterpoint convey a degree of pathos akin to the Passion accounts of the sufferings of Jesus at Calvary. In the latter, a tender duet that would not be out of place in a Monteverdi opera dovetails above a bass line suggestive of pizzicato cello.

The next part of the program consists of three transcriptions (none by Busoni!) of arias from Bach cantatas. All three pieces have a ternary (ABA) form, sometimes with ritornello framing material. Harold Bauer's deeply affective version of "My Soul Rests in Jesus' Hands" transforms its source in a powerful way: chords originally played staccato by woodwinds, suggestive of a ticking clock, are replaced by resonant tolling chiming via the piano's damper pedal, more vividly portraying the "funeral bells" of the text. Bauer also directly segues the middle section into the da capo restatement of the first section, creating another powerful effect. The repetitive chordal texture suggested that of the far more tranquil favorite, "Sheep May Safely Graze." Written for a secular occasion (the birthday of a duke), Bach's audience (including the duke) would have found its pastoral imagery compatible with Gospel accounts of Jesus the Good Shepherd. In the third transcription, Frederic Chiu has achieved the marvel of rendering for piano Bach's aria from the *St. Matthew Passion* so perfectly conceived for alto and violin obbligato. Here the Good Shepherd is the spotless Lamb of God sacrificed for the redemption of humanity, and we can only look on in grief, shock, and pity. The final part of the program consists of a magnum opus by Max Reger, his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by J. S. Bach, Op. 81*. Reger seemed determined to create as epic a sound from the piano as possible, uniting the harmonic chromaticism of Liszt and Wagner, the rhythmic hemiola and chordal density of Brahms, and the contrapuntal mastery of Bach. Arnold Schoenberg, who famously emancipated dissonance from tonal contexts, considered Reger a genius, and indeed, we can only speculate how much further Reger's musical expressionist tendencies might have gone had he not died of a heart attack in 1916.

Ironically enough, the Bach theme in Op. 81 was not chosen by Reger himself but by one of his performer advocates, the pianist August Schmid-Lindner. It is taken from the beautiful contralto/tenor duet from Cantata No 128, "Seine Allmacht zu ergründen, wird sich kein Mensche finden" ("No man can fathom His omnipotence.") Reger asks for the melody to be played "sweetly and always very legato—that is to say, like an oboe solo" – although for certain passages, the pedals of a cathedral organ would appear more apt! The language of lament or loss can become the language of consolation, even that of resilience and triumph. Hirsch again: "We are not so much diminished as enlarged by grief, by our refusal to vanish, or to let others vanish, without leaving a...record." The poet – or here, the composer – will bear witness in notes or words, transforming "oceanic depths of feeling into the faithful nuances of art."

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