

Variations on a Theme #12

from Rich Lynch • for SFPA 227 • written in late-March 2002

A Bit More About Classical Music

March 21st was Johann Sebastian Bach's birthday (his 317th, but who's counting?), and on the long drive south to Florida for the annual family reunion, the various classical music radio stations I tuned to were all playing many of JSB's most well-known compositions. I also learned a bit more about the composer, not so much as the facts about his life, but instead some relative trivia that made him seem a bit more real to me (as opposed to the immortal deity he has become from his music). His mother died when he was 9 years old and his father died when he was 10; he was brought up by his eldest brother, Johann Cristoph Bach, who was an organist in a small town in Germany.

It was only because of this that JSB took up the study of the organ and harpsichord, and in time he became perhaps the best in the world. At age 18 he was invited to try out the new organ in the cathedral at Arnstadt, and the town council was so impressed that he was immediately offered the position as Organist. Soon after that he began composing for the organ. He eventually became Cantor (i.e., Director of Choir and Music) in the city of Leipzig, where he lived for the rest of his life. The familiar saying "pulling out all the stops", which you might think is a sports cliché, is actually a classical music cliché – whenever Bach sat down before an pipe organ he'd never played before, he always pulled out all the stops on the instrument, to check out how good the 'lungs' of the instrument were.

He was a fascinating person, and the more I read and learn about him, the more interesting he becomes. I'm only writing this much detail about him because of the really lousy job I did in my previous SFPazine writing about the 'Red Priest', Antonio Vivaldi. As for Bach's music, he was extremely prolific, and so influential that when he died in 1750, a classical music era (the Baroque Period) died with him. In a previous SFPazine I'd recommended a CD titled "Bach Great Organ Works" (RCA 7736-2-RV) which includes perhaps the most famous work ever composed for organ, the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, but it also includes his 'Little' Fugue in G Minor that I think is actually a better composition. On the way to Florida, one of the radio stations played an orchestra transcription of the work, which showed all the interactions of the different melodies – an oboe would pick up a melody for several bars, then switch to counterpoint as a second oboe picked up the melody, then it would switch to a different counterpoint when another instrument took over the melody, and so on. After becoming more and more complex, it would reset and begin all over again.

I think my favorite work by JSB is the Double Concerto in D-Minor for Two Violins and Orchestra, which is a simpler example of the 'transfer of melody' theme mentioned above. In the opening movement, first one violin, then the other takes the melody while the other has the counterpoint. It's easier to see this in a live performance (which I've seen on TV, but not yet, alas, in person), but regardless, it's a wonderful composition. The recording of it that I have (CBS/Great Performances MYK-38487) includes two other Bach violin concertos almost as famous; the Double Violin Concerto is a concert recording by two excellent violinists, Isaac Stern and Itzhak

Perlman, and is so good you don't even realize it's from a concert until the applause at the end of the piece. This CD is an inexpensive but worthy addition to any classical music collection.

LFR2002

As I mentioned, I drove to Florida on Thursday, March 21st for the annual family reunion – a long trip, but not as tiring as I thought it would be. I found that playing classical music with the volume pumped up helped a lot from getting sleepy; I defy anybody to doze off during Beethoven's 5th Symphony!

I only got as far as the Georgia-Florida border the first day; I wanted to watch the basketball tourney games that evening, so I stopped not long after dark. I'd also taken a side-trip late that afternoon to drive out to Jekyll Island, as it was only a few miles from the Interstate. That was worth it – the miles-long beach there was very pleasant to stroll along (lots of people apparently thought the same thing, from the number of them out there). It was a peaceful way to end a long day.

As usual, baseball was a dominant part of the weekend. We went to two spring training games – the Atlanta Braves vs. Tampa Bay on Saturday (which the Braves won handily) and the Yankees vs. Toronto on Sunday. We got a foul ball in the Saturday game! Chipper Jones hit a high pop foul that looked like it was going to go over the roof, but the backspin on the ball brought it back into the stadium, just missing the edge of the roof overhang and coming down where we were sitting. I got one of my hands on it, deflecting it to my nephew who slowed it down further; it bounced off my older sister, then off my younger sister and into the aisle where my brother pounced on it and presented it to my mom, who was delighted. At the Sunday game, my mom also got to meet George Steinbrenner, who was out in the concourse area before the game. When she told me about it later (I was still on my way in from where the car was parked) I thought at first she was kidding!

Anyway, it was a successful weekend of baseball, eating, and drinking beer. It was a shame it all had to end, way too early. I drove all the way home on Monday; it was like being on the Washington Beltway for 17 hours. There were a couple of bad accidents along the way that brought I-95 to dead stop; on the first one, I took a detour around it that took me into Brunswick, Georgia. There's a huge oak tree there, with its lowest limbs cantilevered out what must have been 30 feet, that is a tourist attraction – the 'Lovers Tree'. The other accident, in South Carolina, was really a bad one (six fatalities, I read later), and I was able to get off the Interstate before I got trapped in the stopped traffic. I was on the parallel highway, US-15, for about 20 miles before the State Troopers started waving traffic back on again. Along the way, I passed through a small town that advertised itself as the 'World Grits Capital' or some such, and passed by a crossroads where a bandstand had been set up and there were members of a church choir singing.

It was almost a shame to get back on the fast road again!



All for now! Bigger SFPazine coming later in the mailing!