

Reno Chamber Orchestra
Baroque to Beatles
Program Notes
By Chris Morrison

Antonio Vivaldi

Born: March 4, 1678, Venice, Italy

Died: July 28, 1741, Vienna, Austria

Antonio Vivaldi is remembered as one of the fathers of instrumental music and the master of the concerto for soloist(s) and orchestra – of which he wrote over 550, including some 240 for the violin. Colorful works like *The Four Seasons* are among the most popular in all of classical music. His operas and religious works also brought him fame during his lifetime. Ordained as a priest in 1703, the redheaded Vivaldi came to be known as “il prete rosso” (“the red priest”). He decided to pursue musical rather than ecclesiastical duties, becoming a teacher at the Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage and school for girls famous for its excellent choir and orchestra, where he worked in several capacities over the ensuing three-plus decades. Meanwhile his concertos and other instrumental works were being published to great acclaim. In his later years Vivaldi fell on hard times, and on his death he was buried (as was Mozart five decades later) in a pauper’s grave in Vienna.

Bassoon Concerto in A minor, RV 499

Composed: 1720s?

Duration: 9 minutes

Instrumentation: solo bassoon, strings, continuo

The Ospedale della Pietà was one of four such institutions in Venice, where girls from a disadvantaged background could get a wide-ranging education, including music. Vivaldi was the violin master at the Ospedale, but the young women could choose to learn a variety of instruments, not just the usual string and keyboard instruments of that time but also woodwind and brass instruments. Among these was the bassoon, and of his hundreds of concertos, Vivaldi wrote thirty-nine for that instrument (two have come down to us incomplete). Why he wrote so many works for the bassoon is unknown, although the instrument was a fairly regular member of ensembles of that day – not usually in a soloistic role, though, but rather playing along with the bass line in an orchestral or chamber continuo.

Ten of Vivaldi's bassoon concertos are in minor keys, four of them in A minor, including the present RV 499, which is in the standard three movements. The opening Allegro, as was typical, alternates statements by the orchestra and passages for the soloist that show off the

performer's dexterity. The bassoon line employs a regular dotted rhythm, accompanied by sustained notes from the orchestra, in the following Largo slow movement. The skipping line of the bassoon opens the concluding Allegro, which also features a back-and-forth dialogue between the soloist and the violins.

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born: March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany

Died: July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany

Acknowledged along with Beethoven and Brahms as one of the “three Bs” of classical music, Johann Sebastian Bach was the culminating figure of music’s Baroque era. His over one thousand works – ranging from religious cantatas and masses to orchestral, chamber, and solo compositions – are loved and respected for their depth, contrapuntal invention, and their combination of intellectual rigor and great beauty. Born into a family of musicians, Bach was taught the rudiments of music by his father. He held several posts in his teens and early twenties as a singer, violinist and organist, during which time he also started to compose his first organ works and cantatas. The main body of his musical life is usually divided up into three periods. From 1708 to 1717 he served as court organist and composer for the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar. He then assumed the position of Kapellmeister in the city of Cöthen, where he worked until 1723 and where he wrote the famous *Brandenburg Concertos* and many other instrumental works. In 1723 Bach became the Kantor of the Thomas School in Leipzig, holding that post until his death. In Leipzig he taught, directed the city’s Collegium musicum orchestra, and composed hundreds of cantatas for the city’s churches.

Ich habe genug, BWV 82

Composed: 1727

Duration: 20 minutes

Instrumentation: vocal soloist, oboe, strings, continuo

The third and final major period of Bach's life began in 1723, when he became one of the leading musical lights in the city of Leipzig. Leipzig was at that time a wealthy center of trade, with a major University as well as the church of St. Thomas, a center for Lutheran music in Germany. Bach was kept very busy over those last twenty-seven years of his life. As music director of the city and Kantor at St. Thomas, he was responsible for music at Leipzig's four churches. He also wrote music in the role of Kapellmeister to the court in Dresden. And for many years, he led the Collegium musicum concerts mentioned above.

Bach composed *Ich habe genug* (I have enough), one of his most famous cantatas, for the Feast Mariae Reinigung, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ, the Feast of the Holy Encounter, and

Candlemas, it is a Christian holiday marking the presentation of Jesus at the Temple as described in the *Gospel According to Luke*. Documented as early as the fourth century, it is one of the oldest feasts of the Christian church. As Luke describes the scene, "And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord Christ." Once Simeon was able to hold the infant Jesus during a ritual at the Temple, he felt ready to meet death peacefully and joyously.

Unlike a lot of Bach's works, his church cantatas can very often be dated, and this particular one was first performed on February 2, 1727. It is scored for bass, oboe, two violins, viola, and continuo, although there is another version Bach prepared that substitutes a soprano or mezzo-soprano soloist for the bass and a flute for the oboe. The libretto for the cantata is anonymous, although possibly by Christoph Birkmann, a student at the University of Leipzig in the 1720s. This cantata was a favorite of Bach's, and his wife Anna Magdalena even copied parts of it into her famous eponymous notebook.

The first movement, the aria "Ich habe genug," begins with the oboe presenting a lovely melody over pulsating strings that is soon taken up by the singer. There are many felicitous touches here, including the oboe's decorations, imitated by the singer, around the word "Freude" (joy). Musicologist Julian Mincham believes that, in this aria, "Bach encapsulates this experience of peace and acquiescent submission beyond anything that mere words can convey."

After a brief recitative that also begins with "Ich habe genug," although with a new melody, comes the so-called "slumber aria," "Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen" (Fall asleep, you weary eyes). The various sung sections in this lullaby are separated by a *ritornello*, or repeating melody, from the strings. There are frequent pauses in the music and underlying eighth notes in the bass line, both of which evoke and underscore the idea of rest.

Another short recitative, "Mein Gott! wenn kömmt das schöne: Nun!" (My God! When will the lovely 'now!' come), ends with a brief arioso in C minor, "Welt! gute Nacht" (World! good night), in which the world is bid farewell. This leads into the final aria, "Ich freue mich auf meinen Tod" (I am looking forward to my death), the somewhat paradoxically joyous music, marked *vivace* (lively), emphasizing the longing for the hereafter, the paradise that ensues after our release from the miseries of the world.

John Lennon

Born: October 9, 1940, Liverpool, England

Died: December 8, 1980, New York, New York

Paul McCartney

Born: June 18, 1942, Liverpool, England

Luciano Berio

Born: October 24, 1925, Oneglia, Italy

Died: May 27, 2003, Rome, Italy

Beatles Songs (arr. Berio)

Composed: 1965, arr. 1967

Duration: 8 minutes

Instrumentation: flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, harp, harpsichord, strings

The Beatles were, of course, a musical and cultural phenomenon. Formed around 1960 in Liverpool, they created a unique sound, revolutionized the music industry, and remain the best-selling musical performers of all time. Likewise, many of their songs have gone on to become classics. The large majority of those songs are designated as being by "Lennon-McCartney," although in reality John Lennon and Paul McCartney tended to write separately. Those songs quickly became more sophisticated and diverse as their careers and fame grew.

Active at the same time, composer Luciano Berio became well-known for his experimental, avant-garde compositions. After studying at the Milan Conservatory, he accompanied singing classes for a time. At one of those classes he met mezzo-soprano Cathy Berberian, who became his wife and for whom Berio wrote several pieces. In the 1950s, Berio continued his involvement with the avant-garde in Europe and the United States, embracing electronic as well as acoustic music, including co-founding Italy's first electronic music studio. Perhaps his most famous work is *Sinfonia* from 1968. Among his most-performed compositions today are the fourteen virtuoso solo pieces called *Sequenza* (1958-2002).

One might not think that The Beatles and Luciano Berio would have much in common. But they actually admired one another's work, and there are even some occasional similarities to be found between them (listen, for example, to the collage-like third movement of Berio's *Sinfonia* and "Revolution 9" from the Beatles's so-called *White Album*, both created in 1968). Both McCartney and Lennon had done some exploring of the music of the classical avant-garde – you can actually see composer Karlheinz Stockhausen among the crowd on the famous cover of the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. As McCartney once said in an interview, "That's my thing, really. I'd once said to John – I was talking about Stockhausen, Berio, Cage and these far-out composers – 'I should do an album called 'Paul McCartney Goes Too Far.' He said, 'That's a great idea, man, you should do it.' Of course, I never did."

McCartney even attended a lecture given by Berio at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, where the two briefly met. That meeting seems to have inspired Berio. Around that time, Berio's now-former wife Cathy Berberian released an album called *Beatles Arias* in which she gave the full operatic treatment to familiar Beatles songs. Berio also published an article praising the group in an Italian music journal.

At the request of Mario Labroca, director of the music festival of the Venice Biennale, Berio also arranged three famous *Beatles Songs* for Berberian. Berio was known, along with his original works, for his arrangements of music by a variety of others, ranging from Claudio Monteverdi to Johannes Brahms and Gustav Mahler.

Berio's *Beatles Songs* provides the three Lennon-McCartney songs quasi-Baroque arrangements and textures. The set begins with "Michelle." Berio created three different arrangements for this song, with slightly different instrumentations; each of them joins the original melody to new lines in counterpoint. In the second song, "Ticket to Ride," the accompaniment is more full and muscular. For "Yesterday," Berio extends the song with a central instrumental interlude. Despite his avant-garde credentials, Berio's arrangements are spare and tasteful, adding only the slightest of dissonances to the originals.

George Frideric Handel

Born: February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany

Died: April 14, 1759, London, England

George Frideric Handel is one of the most beloved composers of music's Baroque era. Born Georg Friedrich Händel in Halle, Germany, Handel held early posts as church organist and violinist before moving to Italy to learn about Italian opera at first hand. He had his first successes as a composer there and attracted the attention of the Elector of Hanover, who brought him back to Germany as his court composer. When the Elector became King George I of England in 1714, Handel followed him to England. The Italian operas Handel subsequently wrote for the London stage made him famous, and when the audiences for those operas diminished by the early 1740s, Handel won even greater fame composing religious oratorios like *Messiah* (the source of the ever-popular "Hallelujah" Chorus), *Israel in Egypt*, and *Judas Maccabeus*. Decades after Handel's death, Ludwig van Beethoven, who thought Handel the greatest of all composers, said of him "I would bare my head and kneel at his grave."

Water Music Suite No. 1 in F Major, HWV 348

Composed: 1717

Duration: 28 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 oboes, bassoon, 2 horns, strings, continuo

In 1712, the Elector of Hanover allowed Handel a period of leave from his position as court composer in Germany to visit England. Handel's music, particularly his operas, was so popular in England that Handel was little disposed to return to his old job. The Elector's anger grew as Handel's time away increased. In 1714, the Elector, on the death of Queen Anne, became King George I of England, and eventually moved there himself. Handel was, unsurprisingly, a bit apprehensive about how the newly-installed King would treat him. According to one telling of the story, it was at this point that one Baron von Kielmansegge, a mutual friend of the King's and Handel's, intervened.

Water parties on the Thames River were not unusual in Handel's time. They were occasionally accompanied by music, called "water concerts" or "water serenades." To celebrate the Hanoverian dynasty's arrival in England, King George planned for a particularly elaborate water party as a public display. Baron von Kielmansegge convinced the King that musical entertainment would be most appropriate, and he secretly engaged Handel to write the music. So in 1715 the first of what over the years became several such water parties took place. Behind the King's barge was another with a fifty-piece orchestra playing Handel's music, and surrounding these two were dozens more boats in what must have been an amazing spectacle. The King was reportedly delighted with the musical accompaniment, and asked the Baron who had been engaged to write the music. When Handel's name came up, the King decided to restore him to favor, and Handel was asked to write the music for water parties in 1716, 1717, and again in 1736. The music he wrote for these parties has come to be known as the *Water Music*.

The *Water Music* consists of about two dozen short dances which are typically divided into three collections or suites based on the music's character, key signatures, and prominent instruments – hence the "Horn" Suite No. 1 in F major, the "Trumpet" Suite No. 2 in D major, and the "Flute" Suite No. 3 in G major.

The Suite No. 1 begins with a French overture whose stately opening introduces a more aggressive and contrapuntal section. The second movement *Adagio e staccato*, with an extended oboe solo, has an improvisatory feeling. Many of the movements of the *Water Music* are in a ternary, A-B-A form, such as the brilliant third movement here, with its fanfare figures, celebratory tone, and powerful writing for the horns. The horns also introduce the following Menuet.

One of the more famous movements of this Suite is the Air, which is still today often heard at weddings. Another Menuet, this one featuring a duet for the horns, follows. Like the Air, the Bourrée is played three times – the first statement featuring the violins, the second the oboes, and the third the two joining forces. (Public television viewers of years ago will recognize this Bourrée as having been the theme for the show *The Frugal Gourmet*.) After a

Hornpipe, also a familiar piece, Handel concludes the Suite No. 1 with a substantial movement in the minor key. Having no tempo marking, it is usually played at a moderately fast pace, giving the Suite a grand conclusion.