

PROGRAM NOTES

Georg Philipp Telemann - Selections from *Tafelmusik II*

Georg Philipp Telemann

Born March 14, 1681, Magdeburg, Germany.

Died June 25, 1767, Hamburg, Germany.

Composition History

Telemann published his *Musique de table*, or *Tafelmusik*, in 1733. The selections from the second volume performed at this week's concerts call for solo oboe and trumpet, with bassoon, harpsichord, and strings (with solo parts for two violins and cello). Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

Performance History

These are the Chicago Symphony's first performances of music from *Tafelmusik II*. The Orchestra's only previous performances of music from Telemann's *Tafelmusik* (a suite from the third volume) were given on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on November 15, 17, and 20, 2007, with Nicholas Kraemer conducting.

Selections from *Tafelmusik II*

During his lifetime, Georg Philipp Telemann was considered the greatest German composer of the time. Neither J. S. Bach nor Handel could compete with the extent of his fame. When his vast *Musique de table* collection—or *Tafelmusik*—was published in 1733, the subscription list included not only wealthy merchants in Hamburg (where Telemann reigned as the leading composer for nearly half a century), but nobility from throughout Europe and music lovers from as far away as London, Copenhagen, Cadiz, and Riga. Fifty-two of the 206 advance subscriptions came from abroad, an astonishing feat in an era when most people rarely ventured far from their birthplace or followed the news in other countries. Handel himself placed an order from London. (Bach ordered a different collection of Telemann's music five years later.) Telemann was a friend of both Handel, with whom he corresponded into his old age, and Bach, and even was godfather to the Bach son who took one of his names, Carl Philipp Emmanuel. (It was C.P.E. Bach who ultimately would succeed Telemann in his Hamburg post after Telemann died in 1767.)

But Telemann's star faded quickly. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, his music rarely figured in concert programs, and a revival of *Der Tod Jesu* in Vienna in 1832 is thought to be the last performance of one of his major

scores until the twentieth century. Although the Chicago Symphony played music by Bach and Handel its very first season, the orchestra waited sixty-two years to program its first work by Telemann.

Telemann was unusually prolific and versatile—it was said he could write in any desired style and he sometimes turned out new works like a short-order cook. He composed more than forty operas, forty-six Passions, some 125 orchestral suites, another 125 concertos, 130 trios, 145 pieces for keyboard, and almost literally countless other works, large and small. (The *Guinness Book of World Records* once listed him as the most prolific composer of all time, a largely meaningless feat that is also hard to pin down, since so many of his and his contemporaries' compositions have been lost. Steve Allen, the late TV star and pop-song writer, is the most prolific composer of the more easily documented “modern times.”)

Musique de table, or *Tafelmusik*, was the most ambitious publication of Telemann's music during his lifetime. The title—literally “table music”—is borrowed from the tradition of issuing collections of background music for feasts, banquets, and large outdoor parties. It was released in three installments in 1733, each large enough to provide a lengthy evening's musical entertainment. Telemann himself supervised the preparation of the engraved printing plates, which were made of pewter rather than the normal (and more expensive) copper—a new process first used in London early in the century and introduced to Germany for this publication. (By 1733, Telemann had seen his works published for two decades, earning him a decent income in the process.)

Each set of *Tafelmusik* includes an assortment of pieces for increasingly smaller performing forces—an orchestral suite, a concerto, a quartet, a trio sonata, and a solo sonata. The set is rounded off with a “conclusion,” scored for the same large forces employed in the opening suite. The three sets were issued as installments—one each in the late spring, early fall, and at Christmas. All three compilations demonstrate not only the ease with which Telemann turned out vast quantities of music, but more importantly his extraordinary versatility and fluency in various forms and styles. As Telemann himself wrote in 1729, shortly before the publication of *Tafelmusik*, “First came the Polish style, followed by the French, church, chamber and operatic styles, and the Italian style, which currently occupies me more than the others do.” The music is uniformly stylish and colorful, imaginatively scored, and occasionally even touched by Telemann's penchant for wildly descriptive writing (one of his most celebrated works depicted the Parisian stock market crash of 1720).

The selections from the second installment of *Tafelmusik* performed at this week's concerts include the overture along with two airs for oboe and trumpet drawn from the suite, and the conclusion to the entire second set. The overture is written in the popular French style, with a stately slow introduction followed by rapid music. The airs—brilliant duets for oboe and trumpet—are dazzling and infectious, inviting solo comments from two violins and cello as well. The final music, is, befitting a conclusion, grand.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Program notes copyright © 2010 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All Rights Reserved. Program notes may not be printed in their entirety without the written consent of Chicago Symphony Orchestra; excerpts may be quoted if due acknowledgment is given to the author and to Chicago Symphony Orchestra. For reprint permission, contact Denise Wagner, Program Editor, by mail at: Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 220 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60604, or by email at wagnerd@csso.org.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs and artists subject to change without notice.