

Friday August 3, 7:30pm
Beaver Island Community School
Baroque on Fire

Program Notes

George Frederic Handel (1685-1759) was born the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Both composers were influential in the development of characteristic Baroque elements such as elaborate ornamentation (often improvised in Baroque music) and figured bass. Baroque composers pushed musical instruments to their limit by composing for the full range of the instruments, and also combined vocal and instrumental music into new musical genres such as the cantata and oratorio. Music of the Baroque era was so inventive and influential, those studying Baroque music were (and still are) astonished at the great musical advances occurring during these years. Composers as vastly different as Rodrigo and Stravinsky have drawn from techniques used by Baroque composers and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) said the following of Handel: "Handel is the greatest, the most solid of composers; from him I can still learn something".

While considered a major composer of the Baroque era, Handel was also unique because of his ties to English royalty. Becoming an English citizen himself, Handel served as Kapellmeister for English royalty and held the position of Composer of Music for the Chapel Royal. Handel composed many works while in these positions which were used at royal events. His coronation anthem, *Zadok the Priest* (1727), has been performed at the coronation of every British sovereign since King George II. Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks* is another work composed specifically for a royal event. This composition contains many standard Baroque elements, from the size of the orchestra used to create grand and spectacular sounds to the structure of a typical Baroque instrumental suite with alternating slow and fast dance movements.

Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) was a Spanish composer with a deep appreciation for Spanish music from the Baroque and Classical eras. His own Spanish heritage strongly influenced his compositions, and on many occasions Rodrigo paired his Spanish roots with arrangements of Baroque dances. Rodrigo composed for many different instruments including the piano, cello, and harp. However he was instrumental in establishing the guitar as a major performance instrument, and is best known for his guitar compositions. Rodrigo never played the guitar himself, but had the remarkable ability to orchestrate accompaniments with lighter and more delicate sounds to prevent covering up the softer sound produced by the guitar.

Concierto de Aranjuez is one of Rodrigo's most well-loved compositions for guitar, and also one of his most recognized works. *Concierto de Aranjuez* is a guitar concerto

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inspired by the gardens at Palacio Real de Aranjuez (a Spanish palace dating back to 16th Century). Rodrigo endeavored to use music to depict the beauty of nature and transport the listener to the gardens. Rodrigo described his *Concierto de Aranjuez* as capturing “the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds, and the gushing of fountains”. *Concierto de Aranjuez* displays Rodrigo’s craftsmanship at blending lush and lyrical melodies with the undeniable Spanish influence of spirited flamingo-like rhythms. It wasn’t until many years after the completion of this work that Rodrigo shared the source of inspiration for the heart-wrenching beauty of the second movement; his wife’s miscarriage of their first child.

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Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is best known for his operas. While operas originated in Italy in the 16th century during the Renaissance era, Baroque composers refined the musical style and added elements of comedy and tragedy. Baroque operas were also the first operas to have a plot within a plot, a concept that many opera composers continued to use even after the Baroque era. While Bach never composed any operas, Handel composed over 40 operas, as well as many oratorios (which are often considered operas without costumes and sets, and set to a religious text). Handel’s most famous oratorio is the *Messiah*.

Wagner took many elements of the Baroque opera, and fashioned a new genre of opera by combining music, poetry, and painting to create Gesamtkunstwerk (a “complete work of art”). Wagner also increased the number of instruments in the orchestra to create massive sounds and used new harmonies to stretch the boundaries of tonality accepted at the time. The use of “leitmotifs” (a musical theme associated with a character or idea which returned throughout the musical drama), allowed Wager to connect the listener to the characters and story. All of these elements allowed Wagner to convey emotion and love through the drama of music, a characteristic which is common in much of Wagner’s music, including his opera *Die Walküre*.

The Firebird is one of twelve ballets Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) composed, and was the result of a collaboration between the composer and Russian choreographer, Michel Fokine (1880-1942). Ballet originated in the Renaissance era from court dances, and progressed to a production of dance, costumes, and songs performed for gatherings at the French courts (royal households) in the 16th and 17th Century. The 18th Century brought the advance of ballet as a serious art form, pairing choreographed (designed dance) and music together to tell a story, much like ballet as we know it today. *The Firebird* blends two Russian legends. It tells the story of The Firebird, a mythical bird whose feathers do not cease glowing if they are removed, and Prince Ivan’s quest to use The Firebird’s feathers to break a spell Kashchey the Immortal has placed on thirteen princesses. Stravinsky uses a massive orchestra to create lush and colorful harmony as he transports listeners to the magical world.

~ Laura Schipper