The year 1685 is luminous in the history of European music because it witnessed the birth of three of the composers whose works long formed the bedrock of the standard performing repertoire: Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), and Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757). For this reason the date 1685 took on the aspect of a marker, separating the music of common listening experience from a repertoire called “early music,” known and of concern mainly to specialists.

“Pre-Bach music,” as it was also once actually called, is now much more available and familiar. Concert life has been enriched by many performers and ensembles who concentrate on music composed earlier than that of the class of 1685, as well as by those who perform Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti on resurrected instruments of their time, not the modern instruments usually used today. These musicians have studied the conventions that governed the performance practices of the early eighteenth century and are keen to emphasize the differences between those conventions and those to which listeners have since become accustomed.

The elevation of Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti began happening in the nineteenth century, for the reasons we will consider when dealing with the history of that time. And yet there were good reasons why the music of the class of 1685 became the foundation stone of the standard repertory and why even today their works, plus a few special cases like Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons, remain the earliest music that non-specialist performers and performing organizations routinely play. Theirs is also the earliest music that today’s concertgoers and listeners are normally expected to “understand” without special instruction, in part because general music pedagogy is still largely based on exactly this foundation. No child learns to play the piano without encountering Bach and, if one gets serious, Scarlatti. As soon as one is old enough to participate in community singing, one is sure to meet Handel.
These composers were among the earliest to inherit from the Italian string players of the seventeenth century, explored in the previous chapter, a fully developed tonal idiom and to enlarge on it magnificently. From the same Italian virtuosos, Bach and Handel also inherited a highly developed instrumental medium—the *ripieno* string orchestra, to which wind and percussion instruments could be added as the occasion demanded. The new harmonic idiom and the new instrumentation together fostered the growth of musical forms of greater size, complexity, and lasting influence.

Unsurprisingly, the works of the class of 1685 that loom largest today will be those that coincide with or can be adapted to our now standard performing forces and aesthetic purposes. Yet these familiar works represent only a portion of their outputs, and not necessarily those portions considered most important or most characteristic by the composers themselves or by their contemporaries. Opera seria, the reigning genre for most of the eighteenth century, long dropped out of the repertoire, and only late in the twentieth century did it begin to enjoy some revival. Much of the music that both Handel and Scarlatti rightly regarded as their most significant has also perished from active use, while a lot of music that they regarded as quite secondary, such as Scarlatti’s keyboard music and Handel’s suites for orchestra, is standard fare today. Bach, who never even wrote an opera, was a marginal figure in his own time. Seeing him as a pillar of the standard performing repertory means seeing him not as his contemporaries did but, rather, in the way that later generations would. Relatively unimportant in life, Bach gradually became a musical god in death. Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767), a phenomenally prolific composer of over 3,000 works whom we will consider only in passing, enjoyed greater fame at the time than Handel or Bach, both of whom he knew personally.

We will consider these figures in their own historical context and examine the relationship between their living fame and their posthumous fame. The most surprising aspect of the comparison will be the realization that Bach and Handel, whom we regard from our contemporary vantage point as a beginning, were seen more as enders in their own day: outstanding late practitioners of styles and genres that were rapidly dying in their time. Scarlatti, viewed as a secondary figure today, was arguably more “cutting edge,” exploring new trends that came to be associated with the Enlightenment. Ironically, it was the very conservatism of Bach and Handel that later made them so well established. The styles that supplanted theirs were destined to be fleeting. Meanwhile, Handel’s conservative idiom appealed to conservative members of his contemporary audience—and these members constituted the particular social group that inaugurated the very idea of a standard repertory.

With Bach the situation was more complicated. His music came back into circulation and achieved a posthumous status it never enjoyed during his lifetime because the conservative aspects of his style—in particular, his very dense contrapuntal textures and his technique of spinning out melodic phrases of extraordinary length—made his music seem weighty and profound at a time when the qualities of weightiness and profundity were returning to fashion, in the early nineteenth century. His elevation eventually served political, nationalistic, and musical purposes. A mythology grew up around Bach according to which his music had a unique quality that lifted it above and beyond the historical flux and made it a timeless standard. It has been considered the greatest music ever written and, with still greater ideological
significance, the greatest music that ever would or could be written. It was another instance of musical perfection, but in this case applied to a brilliant individual composer rather than to an ingenious style shared by many composers that marked an older era, the *ars perfecta*.

Bach’s later sanctification in turn gave birth to a myth of music history itself. As we leave what is traditionally considered the Baroque era with the class of 1685, we see the beginning of the end of Italian dominance in music. Germany, which for various reasons had seemed so often to lag behind, became the site of synthesis, of the mixing together of genres and styles originally associated with Italy, France, England, and even Poland and places farther afield. German historians would later mold the story of Germany’s place in history in the most consequential ways. The *history* of any art is the concern—and the creation—of its receivers, not of its producers.

**Careers and Lifestyles: Handel First**

Bach and Handel were born within a month of one another, in adjoining eastern German provinces about 100 miles apart (Fig. 10-1). Handel, whose baptismal name was Georg Friederich Händel, was born on 23 February, in Halle. Bach’s birth on 21 March was a little to the south and west, in the town of Eisenach in Thuringia, a province of Saxony. Because of their nearly coinciding origins and their commanding historical stature, Bach and Handel are often thought of as a pair. They never met, however, and in most ways their lives and careers are a study in contrasts.

Handel (Fig. 10-2) spent only the first eighteen years of his life in his native city, where he studied with the local church organist and attended the university. In 1703 he moved to Hamburg, which had a thriving opera house, where he played violin and harpsichord in the orchestra and composed two operas for the company. Having found his calling in musical theater, he naturally gravitated to Italy, the operatic capital of the world. He spent his true formative years—from 1706 to 1710—in Florence and Rome, where he worked for noble and ecclesiastical patrons and met Alessandro Scarlatti, Corelli, and other luminaries of the day. He was known affectionately as *il Sassone*, “the Saxon,” meaning really “the Saxon turned Italian,” in the musical sense. In 1710 he became the music director at the court of George Louis, the Elector of Hanover, one of the richest German rulers. There Handel had to assimilate the French style that all the German nobles affected in every aspect of court life, including language and music.

The great turning point in Handel’s life came in 1714, when his employer, without giving up the electoral throne in Hanover, became King George I of England, although he never learned to speak English and was personally unpopular in England. Handel had actually made his English debut as an opera composer before George’s accession to the throne. With the king a virtual absentee ruler—George continued to spend most of his time in Hanover—Handel was left remarkably free of official duties and gained the right to act as a free agent, an independent operatic entrepreneur on the lively London stage. He lived in England for the rest of his life. Over the rough quarter century between 1711 and 1738, Handel presented some three dozen operas at the King’s Theatre in the London Haymarket, with a
few, toward the end, at Covent Garden. Acting at once as composer, conductor, producer, and, eventually, his own promotional agent, he made a legendary fortune, the first such fortune earned by musical enterprise alone in the history of the art. (Palestrina also died a very rich man, but his fortune came from his wife’s first husband’s fur business.)

Beginning in the 1730s, a new generation of opera composers arrived in London. A rival company, the so-called Opera of the Nobility, engaged the latest Italian composers and, more importantly, the services of the great castrato Farinelli, around whom a virtual cult had formed. After a few seasons of cutthroat competition, both Handel and his competitors were near bankruptcy, and Handel was forced out of the opera business. With his keen business sense he divined a huge potential market in English oratorios: biblical operas presented without staging, along lines already familiar to us from the Lenten work of the Roman composers, such as Giacomo Carissimi. Handel’s adaptation of this old-fashioned genre—he produced nearly two dozen between 1732 and 1752—was something quite new: full-length works in English rather than in Italian or Latin, with many thrilling choruses.

Handel’s was the exemplary cosmopolitan career of the early eighteenth century, a career epitomized by his operatic middle years, in which a German-born composer made a fortune by purveying Italian-texted operas to an English-speaking audience. Handel’s style was neither German nor Italian nor English but a hybrid that blended existing national genres and idioms, mixing in the French as well. France was the one country where Handel, although an occasional visitor, never lived or worked; but French music, as the international court music, informed not only the specifically courtly music that he wrote for his kingly patron but the overtures to his operas and oratorios as well. Handel, the quintessential musical synthesizer and consummate musical entrepreneur, commanded pan-European prestige.

Bach’s Career

Johann Sebastian Bach (Fig. 10-3), on the other hand, never once left Germany. Indeed, except for his student years at Lüneburg, a town near Hamburg to the north and west, his entire career could be circumscribed by a small circle that encompassed a few east German locales, most of them quite provincial: Eisenach, his birthplace, where he was orphaned at age nine and moved to Ohrdruf to live with his older brother, Johann Christoph, an organist; Arnstadt, where he served between 1703 and 1707 as organist at the municipal Church of St. Boniface; Mühlhausen, where he served at the municipal Church of St. Blasius for a single year; Weimar, where he served the ducal court as organist and concert director from 1708 to 1717; Cöthen, where he served as music director to another ducal court from 1717 to 1723; and finally Leipzig, where he served as music director at the municipal school attached to the St. Thomas Church (Fig. 10-4) from 1723 until his death.

One of the larger German commercial cities even in Bach’s day, Leipzig was nevertheless only a fraction of London’s size and far from a cosmopolitan center.
Still, it was a big enough town to have sought a bigger name than Bach as its municipal cantor (the name given to music directors of German Protestant churches). He was chosen only after more famous musicians, including Telemann, had declined the town’s offer. Bach, for his part, felt he had been forced to take a step down the social ladder by going from a Kapellmeister’s position at Cöthen to a cantorate at Leipzig. Until age put him out of the running, he sought better employment elsewhere, including the electoral court at Dresden, the Saxon capital. Leipzig was the best he could do, however, and Bach was the best that Leipzig could do. Neither seems to have been very happy with the other.

Bach’s, then, was the quintessential “provincial” career—humble, unglamorous, businesslike. What he wrote at any given time was in large measure determined by who was then employing him and what his assigned duties were, whether as an organist, a court musician, or a church composer. No one needed an opera from him, and nor did the opportunity arise to write one. While most of his greatest sacred vocal works date from the later Leipzig years, Bach did not ignore instrumental music during that time. He continued, for example, to produce enjoyable and instructive pieces for family use. Bach married at age twenty-two and became a father the next year. After his first wife died in 1720, he remarried the next year and eventually fathered twenty children, twelve of whom survived childhood. A number of them went on to be celebrated composers, more famous at the time than their father. It is hardly surprising that over the years Bach wrote compositions for the private enjoyment of his family and the instruction of his children. Such works continue to help young musicians learn their craft. Some of Bach’s later instrumental pieces were written for the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig, a society of professional instrumentalists and students, founded by Telemann in 1702, that gave weekly afternoon concerts at a popular local coffee garden and that Bach took over in 1729.

Bach’s most significant instrumental works during the Leipzig years originated for more esoteric and speculative reasons. He produced a few masterworks of an old-fashioned, abstract nature in which he gave full rein to his unrivaled contrapuntal virtuosity. It may be fair to say that the sheer technical dexterity in the art of composition that Bach exhibits here has never been surpassed. In addition, he seems to have enjoyed esoteric or symbolic practices, such as spelling his name musically. The German naming of pitches is somewhat different than English practice. With the note B natural being called H, Bach could notate his name using the pitches B♭, A, C, B natural. The number 14 seems to have held some importance for him because the name Bach, if translated into numbers according to the positions of its constituent letters in the alphabet—a practice that goes back to Hebrew cabalistic lore—comes out 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 = 14. Bach’s numerological virtuosity has only begun to be investigated. Some scholars suspect that it may rival his musical skills; others remain skeptical.
Elaborate technical experimentation came increasingly into play in his late works, including the “Goldberg” Variations, a huge cycle of thirty keyboard pieces, among them a series of intricate canons, all based on a single ostinato bass line. Another exhibition of contrapuntal skill was the *Musikalisches Opfer* (Musical Offering), a miscellany of canons, complicated ricercars (old-fashioned fugues), and a trio sonata. It was all based on an unusually chromatic “royal theme” given Bach as a subject for improvisation by none other than Frederick the Great, the Prussian king, during a visit by Bach in May 1747 to the Prussian court at Potsdam, where his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was employed.

Bach’s ultimate speculative composition, his intended final testament, was *Die Kunst der Fuge* (The Art of Fugue), a collection of twenty-one contrapuncti, including canons, double fugues, triple fugues, fugues with answers by augmentation and diminution, inversion, and *cancrizans* (“crab motion,” or retrograde), all based on a single D-minor subject. (We will look at some Bach fugues later in this chapter.) Bach was working on this collection at the time of his death, leaving seemingly unfinished (or perhaps the ending was later lost) the final fugue, in which the musical anagram of his name was to be worked in as a chromatic countersubject. The B–A–C–H cipher has been a potent musical emblem ever since *The Art of Fugue* was published, in 1751, in an edition supervised by Carl Philipp Emanuel, who refrained from finishing the last fugue, letting it trail off into a sketch, followed by a note explaining the reason (Exs. 10-1a and b).

**Example 10-1** (a) The B-A-C-H cipher; (b) B-A-C-H cipher at the end of *The Art of Fugue*

Bach, who came from a long line of musicians, remained in the musical environment to which he had been born—the same environment that Handel had quit at his earliest opportunity. Handel had an unprecedented, self-made, entrepreneurial
career that brought him unexpected glory. Bach’s career, by contrast, was entirely predefined: It was completely traditional for a musician of his habitat and class. For a musician of exceptional talent, it was positively confining. We will begin by examining instrumental music by these two composers (with a few detours along the way) and turn, in the next chapter, to their vocal compositions. In both cases we will encounter traditional or conservative features as well as path-breaking new ones. And although Handel’s career was so notably cosmopolitan and Bach’s so thoroughly provincial, both composers were great synthesizers of different national styles. That would emerge, in fact, as the German path to musical dominance: drawing on the most successful of competing styles, the best of the rest.

The Chorale Prelude

J. S. Bach hailed from an enormous clan of Lutheran church musicians dating back to the sixteenth century. So firmly associated was the family with the profession they plied that in parts of eastern Germany the word “Bach,” which means “brook” in German, was slang for musician. The *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* lists no fewer than eighty-five musical Bachs, from Veit Bach (ca. 1555–1619) down ten generations to Johann Philipp Bach (1752–1846). Fourteen members of the family were distinguished enough as composers to earn biographical articles in the dictionary, including two of Johann Sebastian Bach’s uncles, three of his cousins, and four of his sons.

Most of the elder Bachs were trained as church organists and cantors. That training included a great deal of traditional theory and composition, and as church musicians they were expected to turn out vocal settings in quantity to satisfy the weekly needs of the congregations they served. The greatest composers of this type in the generations immediately preceding Bach—or at least the ones Bach sought out personally and took as role models—were three: Georg Böhm (1661–1733), who taught him during his student years at Lüneburg; the Dutch-born Johann Adam Reincken (1643–1722), a patriarchal figure who had studied with a pupil of Sweelinck; and, above all, Dieterich Buxtehude (ca. 1637–1707), a Dane who served for nearly forty years as organist of the Marienkirche in Lübeck (Fig. 10-5), one of the most important musical posts in Lutheran Germany. Within that cultural sphere Buxtehude’s fame was supreme, and he received numerous visits and dedications from aspiring musicians, including both Handel, who came up from Hamburg in 1703, and Bach, who made the nearly 300-mile pilgrimage on foot in the winter of 1705–06.

According to a story related by one of his pupils, the aged Reincken, having heard Bach improvise on a chorale as part of a job audition, proclaimed the younger man the torchbearer of the old north-German tradition: “I thought this art was dead,” the patriarch is said to have exclaimed, “but I see that in you it lives!” The story may well be made up (as we know these kinds of benedictions often are), but it points to an important truth: Bach did found his style on the most traditional aspects of north German Lutheran musical culture. The keyboard works he composed early in his career while serving as organist at Arnstadt and Weimar show this retrospective side most dramatically.

One traditional genre that Bach inherited directly from his Lutheran organist forebears and from Buxtehude most immediately was the chorale setting. A protean genre,
it could assume many forms, anywhere from a colossal set of improvised or composed variations, the type with which Bach enraptured Reincken, to a minuscule Choralvorspiel, or "chorale prelude," a single-stanza setting with which the organist might cue the congregation to sing or provide an accompaniment to silent meditation. Toward the end of his Weimar period, Bach set about collecting his chorale preludes into a liturgical cycle that would cover the whole year’s services. He had only inscribed 46 items out of a projected 164 in this manuscript, called the Orgelbüchlein (Little Organ Book), when he got his new position in Cöthen. But in their variety, the ones entered fully justify Bach's claim on the manuscript’s title page that in his little book "a beginner at the organ is given instruction in developing a chorale in many diverse ways."

We can compare Buxtehude and Bach directly by putting side by side their chorale preludes on Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt (Through Adam’s Fall we are Condemned). The first line makes reference to what for Christians was the first and greatest catastrophe in human history: Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge that led to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden and mankind's fall from grace. The ultimate subject of the chorale's text is God's mercy, by which man may be redeemed from Adam's original sin through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the stark opening line, however, that establishes the tone for the setting, since the first verse would typically have been the one directly introduced by the prelude. Both Buxtehude's prelude and Bach's, therefore, are tinged with grief. The chorale melody, unadorned by Bach, embellished slightly by Buxtehude, is surrounded by affective counterpoints. In Buxtehude's case the affect is created by chromatically ascending and descending lines that enter after a curious suppression of the bass. In Bach's setting, the most striking aspect is surely the pedal part. This in itself is no surprise: Spotlighting the pedal part was one of Bach's special predilections, and fancy footwork was one of his specialties as an organ virtuoso.

What is a powerful surprise and further evidence of Bach's unique imaginative boldness is the specific form the obbligato pedal part takes in this chorale setting: almost nothing but dissonant drops of a seventh—Adam's fall made audible! And not just the fall, but also the attendant pain and suffering are depicted, one might say evoked, since so many of those sevenths are diminished. A blatant "madrigalism," the fall, is given emotional force through sheer harmonic audacity and is then made the primary unifying motive of the composition.

Structure and signification, "form" and "content," are thus indissolubly wedded, made virtually synonymous. That was the expressive ideal at the very root of the humanism that had given rise to what Monteverdi called the seconda pratica a hundred years before. Monteverdi could only conceive its realization in the context of vocal music, where the text will determine the music,
and never dreamed that such an art could flourish in textless instrumental music. That was what Bach, building on a century of musical changes, would achieve within an outwardly old-fashioned, even backward-looking career. Clearly, Bach’s art had a Janus face, looking forward as well as back. Formally and texturally it looked back to what were even at the time archaic practices. In terms of harmony and tonally articulated form, however, it was at the cutting edge. That cutting edge still pierces the consciousness of listeners today and calls forth an intense response, while the music of every other Lutheran cantor of the time has perished from the actual repertory.

The Fugue

Bach inherited from the south German composer Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706) a process whereby the “strict” and “free” sections of a toccata—that is, the rigorously imitative versus the improvisatory passages—became increasingly separate from one another and increasingly regular in their alternation, with the improvisatory passages serving as introductions to the lengthy contrapuntal ones. By the early eighteenth century these sectionalized toccatas had developed into pairs of discrete pieces, the free one serving as prelude to the strict. Such a pair, although still called “toccata and fugue” or “fantasia and fugue,” was by Bach’s time most often simply designated “prelude and fugue.” Bach was the greatest exponent of the prelude-and-fugue form, to which he contributed more than two dozen examples for organ, along with works for the instrument in even more traditional genres, such as his famous organ Passacaglia in C Minor. Most of these are early pieces, the bulk of them composed at Weimar, where he was employed primarily as an organ virtuoso.

Let’s explore in some detail the elaborate contrapuntal device known as the fugue, which we have already mentioned in passing a number of times. Many more fugues will be encountered in the chapters to come, as well as fugal sections within other kinds of works, ranging from choral pieces to symphonies, string quartets, and even operas. Fugues can thus be self-standing, individual pieces as well as a texture or procedure found within compositions. In the description that follows, the standard modern terminology for the fugue’s components and events will be employed, even though—like the word fugue itself—they are not strictly contemporaneous with the piece at hand.

The Fugue in G Minor is one of Bach’s earliest organ works, apparently written when he was in his early twenties and employed in Arnstadt, his first full-time position. While it does not have the complexity of his later fugues (one of which we will shortly explore), it is a particularly straightforward example of fugal techniques and a particularly attractive one. A fugue begins like a single colossally elaborated point of imitation from the older motet. There is a single main theme, called the subject, on which the whole piece is based. In the opening section of a fugue, known as the exposition, the subject is introduced in every “voice.” No one is singing, of course, in instrumental fugues like this one for organ, but it is still standard to refer to the different voices. A fugue must by definition have at least two voices, with three or four more common; more than that and there is the risk that one’s head will burst at the complexity.

The subject in the G-Minor Fugue begins in the soprano (mm. 1–5). Next the second voice, in the alto range, comes in playing the subject “at the fifth” (meaning a fifth up or, as here, a fourth down); when played at this transposition, the theme is called the answer (mm. 6–10). The counterpoint with which the original voice accompanies the answer is called the countersubject. Next to enter is the tenor (mm.
12–17), playing the subject in its original form, though down an octave, followed by another answer a fourth lower (Ex. 10-2). After this exposition of the voices, there is what is called an *episode*, which simply means a stretch of music in free counterpoint during which the subject is withheld. The subject returns at m. 25; the entire piece alternates between fugal expositions (six in all) and five episodes. To end, Bach pulls one last contrapuntal stunt: The voices now pile in with overlapping entries on the subject and answer. This foreshortening device is called the *stretto* (Italian for “straitened”—tightened or made stricter) and is a common way of bringing fugues to a close.

**Example 10-2** J. S. Bach, Fugue in G Minor, BWV 578, mm. 1–19
The Well-Tempered Keyboard

To return to the pairing of the free prelude with the strict fugue, we will briefly consider a pair from Bach’s most systematic statement, an enormously influential body of music, sometimes even referred to as the “Old Testament” of the keyboard, that was known to later composers such as Mozart and Beethoven at a time when little else of Bach’s music was. A monumental cycle of forty-eight paired preludes and fugues, Das wohltemperirte Clavier is divided in two books, the first assembled in Cöthen in 1722, the second in Leipzig between 1738 and 1742. The title means “The Well-Tempered Keyboard,” and its subtitle reads “Preludes and Fugues through All the Tones and Semitones.” Each of the books making up Bach’s famous “Forty-Eight” consists of a prelude-and-fugue pair in all the keys of the newly elaborated complete tonal system, alternating major and minor and ascending by half steps from C major to B minor (thus: C, c, C♯, c♯, D, d, and so on). To play fugues in all keys required a keyboard instrument tuned in such a way that the twelve half steps of the octave sounded equally well in tune no matter what the tonality.

Bach also greatly expanded the scope and the contrapuntal density of such preludes and fugues. Something of the range of technique and intensity of style of the WTC may be gleaned by juxtaposing the very beginning and the very end of the first book: the opening C-major prelude and the closing B-minor fugue. These are both famous pieces, although for very different reasons. The C-major prelude is a piece that every pianist encounters as a child. It is in a classic “preludizing” style that goes back to the lutenists of the sixteenth century, kept alive through the seventeenth century by the French court harpsichordists. The French called it the style brisé, or “broken [chord] style.” Thus, descending from a literally improvisatory practice, the C-major prelude is cast in a purely harmonic, “tuneless” idiom, although with a very clearly delineated form articulated by its harmony (Ex. 10-3a).

The B-minor fugue is instead famous for its chromatic saturation and its attendant sense of pathos—a pathos achieved by harmony alone. The three-measure subject is celebrated in its own right for containing within its short span every degree of the chromatic scale, which at the same time symbolically consummates the progress “through all the tones and semitones” as announced in the subtitle of the whole cycle. What gives the subject and the entire fugue their remarkably poignant affect is not just the high level of chromaticism but also the way in which that chromaticism is coordinated with what, even on their first “unharmonized” appearance, are obviously dissonant leaps—known technically as appoggiaturas (“leaning notes”). The two leaps of a diminished seventh in the second measure are the most obviously dissonant: The jarring interval is clearly meant to be heard as an embellishment “leaning on” the minor sixth that is achieved when the first note in the slurred pair resolves by half step: C natural to B, D to C♯. But in fact, as the ensuing counterpoint reveals, every first note of a slurred pair is (or can be treated as) a dissonant appoggiatura (Ex. 10-3b).

It will come as no surprise to learn that these slurred descending pairs with dissonant beginnings were known as Seufzer—“sighs” or “groans”—and that they had originated as a kind of madrigalism. The transfer of vivid illustrative effects, even onomatopoeias, into abstract musical forms shows that those forms, at least as handled by Bach, were not abstract at all but fraught with a maximum of emotional baggage. What is most remarkable is the way Bach consistently contrives to let the illustrative idea that bears the “affective” significance serve simultaneously as the motive from...
which the musical stuff is spun out. Indeed, he heightened the pathos of this material by fashioning episodes—the passages in which the subject is absent—that contrast with it in the strongest way possible.

Example 10-3  J. S. Bach, *Das wohltemperirte Clavier*, Book I: (a) Prelude No. 1 (C major), mm. 1–6; (b) Fugue No. 24 (B minor), mm. 1–16
Bach’s Imported Roots: Johann Jacob Froberger and Others

Although Bach never left Germany, in a sense musical Europe came to him in the form of manuscripts and publications. And so, despite the relative insularity of his career, Bach nevertheless mastered a great range of contemporary musical styles and idioms. In part this was simply a matter of being German. At a time when French and Italian musicians were mutually suspicious and much concerned with resisting each other’s influence, German musicians tended to define themselves as universal synthesizers. Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773), a colleague of C. P. E. Bach’s at the Prussian court, noted how the Germans were able “to select with due discrimination from the musical tastes of various peoples what is best in each,” thereby producing “a mixed taste which, without overstepping the bounds of modesty, may very well be called the German taste.” Bach became the ultimate exponent of this “German taste.”

But he had many predecessors. We know how eagerly Heinrich Schütz, born exactly a hundred years before Bach, had imported the Italian styles of his day to Germany. A younger contemporary of Schütz, the sometime Viennese court organist Johann Jacob Froberger (1616–67), a native of Stuttgart in southern Germany, traveled the length and breadth of Europe, soaking up influences everywhere. After a period studying with Frescobaldi in Rome in the late 1630s, he visited Brussels, Paris, and England and died in the service of a French-speaking German court in the German Rhineland. His most influential publication was entitled Dix suites de clavessin (Ten Suites for Harpsichord), written in a style that conformed perfectly with the language of the title page. By century’s end, the French style had become a veritable German fetish. Envy of the opulent French court on the part of the many petty German princelings led to the wholesale adoption of French manners by the German aristocracy. French actually became the court language of Germany, and French dancing became an obligatory social grace at the many mini-Versailleses that dotted the German landscape (Fig. 10-6).

With dancing, of course, came music. Demand for French-style dance music and for instruction in composing and playing it was so great that by the end of the seventeenth century a number of German musicians had set themselves up in business writing such pieces. One was Georg Muffat (1653–1704), an organist at the Episcopal court at Passau, who as a youth had played violin under Lully in Paris. In 1695 he published a set of dance suites in the Lullian mold, together with a treatise on how to play them in the correct Lullian “ballet style.” His rules, especially those concerning unwritten conventions of rhythm and bowing, have been a goldmine for understanding the performance practices of the time.

Froberger helped to establish a standard suite format that provided the model for his German successors. Bach adopted a specific sequence of four dances—allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue—as the essential nucleus in all his suites, setting a precedent that governed the composition of keyboard suites from then on. Some composers, like J. C. F. Fischer (1656–1746), prefaced suites with preludes, which also became an important precedent, although not quite as universally

Germans selected “with due discrimination from the musical tastes of various peoples what is best in each,” producing “a mixed taste which, may very well be called the German taste.”—Johann Joachim Quantz
observed later. Bach, for example, composed suites both with and without preludes, but he always included Froberger’s core dances. (Froberger’s own order in his four-movement suites was allemande, gigue, courante, sarabande; his posthumous editors moved the gignes to last place.) It is worth emphasizing that these dances had, by the time Froberger adapted them, pretty much gone out of actual ballroom use. They had been sublimated into elevated courtly listening-music by the master instrumentalists of France, which meant slowing them down and cramming them full of interesting musical detail more intended for listeners than for dancers. The four dances were chosen for their contrasting tempos, meters, and moods:

1. Allemande. As its name suggests, this dance originated in Germany. But by the time German composers borrowed it back from the French, it had changed from a quick dance to a slower, stately movement in a broad quadruple meter (\(\frac{4}{4}\)).

2. Courante. This is a grave triple-meter, notated in \(\frac{3}{2}\) with many lilting hemiola effects in which \(\frac{3}{4}\) patterns cut across the \(\frac{3}{2}\) pulse.

3. Sarabande. It originated in the New World and was brought back to Europe, as the zarabanda, from Mexico. In its original form it was a breakneck, sexy affair, accompanied by castanets. Banned from the Spanish ballroom by decree for its alleged obscenity, it became a
majestic triple-metered dance for the ballet stage, often compared to
a slow minuet, typically with an emphasis on the second beat. The
most common rhythmic pattern is a half note followed by a dotted
half and quarter.

4. Gigue. Imported to Europe from England and Ireland, the jig was a fast
dance, usually in $\frac{6}{8}$ meter. In its idealized form, the gigue usually began
with a point of imitation.

A “binary” form (AABB), supported by a there-and-back harmonic plan, was a
universal feature of stylized dances, particularly as adopted by Germans. That shape
will henceforth serve as paradigm for a fully “tonal” binary form. The new elements
include the care with which the tonic is established and the determined movement
to some harmonic “far-out point” in the second half of the piece before redirecting
the harmonic motion home with renewed force. In the hands of Bach and his con-
temporaries, the binary dance became another important site for developing the
kind of tonally articulated form that conditioned new habits of listening and formed
the bedrock of the standard performing repertory.

Bach’s Suites

As we know, Bach never went to France, but through musical publications that circu-
lated widely in Germany he was exposed to French music. Bach made his most thor-
ough assimilation of the French style when he was professionally required to do so.
That was in 1717, when he left Weimar to become kapellmeister in Cöthen. There
he had an entirely secular job, the only such position he ever occupied. His new
employer, Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, was a passionate musical amateur, who
esteemed Bach highly and related to him practically on terms of friendship, even be-
coming the godfather to one of Bach’s children. Leopold not only consumed music
avidly but played it himself and had studied composition for a while in Rome with
Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729), a notable German musician of the day. He
maintained a court orchestra of about sixteen instrumentalists, including some very
distinguished ones. And he was a Calvinist, which meant he had no use for elabo-
rate composed church music or fancy organ playing. So Bach had no
reason to compose or play in church and could devote his time to
satisfying his patron’s demands for secular musical entertainments.

Thus for six years Bach wrote mainly instrumental music. The
first book of The Well-Tempered Keyboard dates mainly from the
Cöthen period, but Bach did that on the side. The kind of entertain-
ments demanded of him as part of his official duties would have taken
the form of sonatas, concertos, and, above all, suites. Bach turned out
several dozen of the latter, ranging from orchestral suites (which he
called overtures), through various sets for keyboard, to astounding
ingeniously and demanding suites for unaccompanied violin and for
cello, the latter unprecedented as far as we know. Most of his suites
are grouped in sets of six. The earliest are six large ones for keyboard with elaborate
virtuoso preludes and highly embellished sarabandes, probably composed in Wei-
mar around 1715. They were published posthumously as “English Suites” and have
been called that ever since, although no one really knows why. Also published post-
humously were six “French Suites,” which were close to the Froberger model.
A quick look at Bach's French Suite No. 5, in G major, will highlight some crucial stylistic features that are symptomatic of a fundamental shift in taste, one that would eventually mark the eighteenth century as a kind of aesthetic battleground. The nucleus of the suite consists of the Frobergerian core of allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue, augmented by a trio of slighter dances (a gavotte, a bourée, and a loure) inserted before the gigue. Bach himself used the term *galanterien* (from the French *galanteries*) on the title page to classify these extra dances and distinguish them from the core, describing his suites and partitas, the term he later used for a set of six suites written in Leipzig, as consisting of “Präludien, Allemanden, Couranten, Sarabanden, Gigue, Menuetten, und anderen Galanterien.” Note that the obligatory dances are listed in order after the Prelude, while the variable category of “minuets and other galanteries” is mentioned casually, as if an afterthought.

Even though the word *galanterie* can be translated as a “trifle,” it denotes an important aesthetic category. It is derived from what the French called the style *galant*, from the old French verb *galer*, which meant “to amuse” in a tasteful, courtly sort of way, with refined wit, elegant manners, and easy grace. It was a quality of art—and life—far removed from the stern world of the traditional Lutheran church. With Bach, the *galant*, while certainly within his range, is nevertheless the exceptional style—the sauce rather than the meat. With most of his contemporaries and later with his sons, the balance had rather decisively shifted to the opposite.

**Agréments and Doubles:**
**The Art of Ornamentation**

Thus far more typical of Bach’s German affinities is the concluding gigue, with its fugal expositions in three real parts. For this dance, the most elaborate in the set, it is instructive to contrast it not with one of Bach’s own concocted galanteries but with the work of his greatest keyboard-playing contemporary, François Couperin (1668–1733; Fig. 10-7), royal organist and chief *musicien de chambre* to Louis XIV. We will consider the piece that opens the fourteenth *ordre* or “set,” of harpsichord compositions that Couperin had published in 1722. Couperin’s is a set rather than a suite because, following traditional French practice, the pieces in it, while related by key, are too numerous to be played or heard in one sitting and are not placed in performance order. Altogether he released four books of his harpsichord pieces, encompassing twenty-seven sets and totaling some 220 pieces.

Couperin’s gigue is in a rocking $\frac{6}{8}$, the normal gigue meter; Bach’s $\frac{12}{8}$ is a diminution, indicating a faster tempo than usual. None of the dances in Bach’s suite carry any verbal marking as to their tempo. No such indications were needed—the name of the dance, the meter, and the note values conveyed the essential information (Ex. 10-4).
Example 10-4 (continued)

But the situation with Couperin’s gigue, one of his most famous pieces, is just the opposite. In fact it is called not “gigue” but *Le Rossignol en-amour*, “The Nightingale in Love”! It is not really a dance at all but what would later be called a “character piece” or, to use Couperin’s own word, a sort of “portrait” in tones, cast in a conventional form inherited from dance music. The subject portrayed is ostensibly a bird, and the decorative surface of the music teems with embellishments that seem delightfully to imitate the bird’s singing. But since, according to the title, the bird in question is incongruously experiencing a human emotion, the musical imitation is simultaneously to be “read” as a metaphor—a portrait not just of the bird but of the emotion, too, in all its tenderness (Ex. 10-5a).

Since the conventional tempo of a gigue contradicts tenderness, Couperin had to countermand it with a very detailed verbal indication, directing the performer to play “slowly, and very tenderly, although basically in time.” At the stipulated tempo there is room for a great wealth of embellishment, all indicated with little shorthand signs that Bach also used and that are largely still familiar to keyboard students today. Couperin provided many ornaments, called “graces” in English at the time and *agrément* in French. Although such ornaments were learned “orally” (by listening to one’s teacher and imitating) and deployed improvisationally, Couperin fought against both tendencies. He published tables of ornaments in his First Book of harpsichord pieces in 1713 (Fig. 10-8) and three years later published a treatise *L’art de toucher le clavecin* (The Art of Playing the Harpsichord) that indicated precisely how to execute the embellishments. More notably, in the preface to his Third Book (1722), in which *Le Rossignol en-amour* appears, he described himself “surprised” by those who disregarded his ornamentation in favor of their own: “It is unpardonable negligence, all the more so as the placement of such agréments is not arbitrary. I declare then that my pieces must be played as I have marked them, and that they will never make a real impression on people of true taste unless one observes exactly what I have marked, without adding or subtracting.”

For an even more intense expression, Couperin resorted to specifically composed embellishments, turns and runs that have no conventional shorthand notation. That is what he does in his coda, where he notes that the speed of the written-out trill is to be “increased by imperceptible degrees” for an especially spontaneous burst of feeling. And then he follows the whole piece with a fancy version called a *double*, in which the surface becomes a real flurry of notes and where it becomes the supreme mark of skillful performance to keep the distinctive features of the original melody in the foreground (Ex. 10-5b).

Miniatures that display the kind of exquisitely embellished, decorative veneer Couperin knew so well how to apply are often called *rococo*, a word that derived from folding together the French *rocaille* and *coquille*, the “rock work” and
“shell work” featured in expensively textured architectural surfaces of the period (Fig. 10-9). If the decorative surface were stripped away from Couperin's piece, the simplest of shapes would remain: Cadences come every four measures, the last one delayed, describing a bare-bones tonal trajectory of I–V/V–I. Nor is the emotion expressed one of great vehemence or intensity. Rococo art expressed the same sort of aristocratic sentiments, including the sort of amorous or melancholy ones that can be aired in polite society and identified as *galant*. The strong pathos of so much of Bach's instrumental music would have been out of place in such company.

Example 10-5  François Couperin, *Le Rossignol en-amour* (14th Ordre, No. 1): (a) mm. 1–8; (b) “Double du Rossignol,” opening
Figure 10-8 “Explication des Agréments, et des Signes,” from François Couperin’s first book of *Pieces de clavecin* (Paris, 1713).

Figure 10-9 Rococo decoration. Empress Maria Theresa furnished this Rococo room of the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, Austria, in 1760. The walls are covered with Indo-Persian miniatures in gilded rock-work frames.
Stylistic Hybrids:
Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos

There was a place for such emotion, of course, and for a style of embellishment that expressed it, in the Italian art associated with the opera. Even though Bach wrote no operas, he was well acquainted with the music of his Italian contemporaries and much affected by it. By Bach’s time a great deal of Italian instrumental music aspired to an operatic intensity of expression; recall some of the intense, even frightening, work of Corelli and Vivaldi mentioned in the previous chapter. And there was an associated style of instrumental embellishment, allied to, and perhaps in part derived from, the ornamentation provided by the castratos and the other virtuosos of the Italian opera stage.

Bach knew the Italian instrumental tradition well. While at Weimar, he arranged some nineteen concertos (most for harpsichord, the rest for organ). The majority was based on pieces written by Italian composers, including ones by Vivaldi and Benedetto Marcello (1686–1739), and four were by the German composer Johann Ernst (1696–1715), the short-lived Prince of Weimar. Making these arrangements is largely how Bach gained his mastery not only of the trappings of the Italian style but also of the driving Italianate harmonic practices that he took so much further than his models. By the time he reached creative maturity, he had thus assimilated the leading national idioms of his day. Like many Germans he made a specialty of commingling them; but his amalgamations were singular, even eccentric. They disclosed what can seem an unrivaled creative imagination, but one that was uniquely complicated, masterfully crafted, even at times disturbing. By fusing Italian, French, and German elements into unique configurations, Bach uncovered unsuspected affinities between forms and genres of diverse parentage and customary function. By doing so he made the familiar newly strange. As a self-conscious artistic tendency, such an aim is usually thought to be typically modern; it sits oddly with Bach’s reputation, in his own day as well as ours, as an old-fashioned composer. And yet his way of uniting within himself both the outmoded and the unheard-of was perhaps Bach’s crowning synthetic achievement.

This applies particularly well to Bach’s most familiar body of instrumental music. In 1721, while serving at Cöthen, he gathered up six instrumental concertos composed over the past few years, wrote them out in a new presentation manuscript, and sent them off with a suitably flattering dedication page, elegantly composed in French, to Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg (Fig. 10-10). He did so in the hope of obtaining an appointment to the Margrave’s court in Berlin. The rest of the story is well known: The hoped-for patron never acknowledged receipt of the manuscript and seems never to have had the concertos performed. The fame of the Brandenburg Concertos has hidden some of their strangeness. Perhaps the most absorbing exercise of the historical imagination, where Bach’s music is concerned, is the recovery of the hidden strangeness of the challenges he continually set himself.

The works are written for unusually scored ensembles. The First Concerto, in F major, has for its concertino, or solo group, an assorted combination of two horns, three oboes, a bassoon, and a violino piccolo, a smaller, higher-pitched type of violin.
then rare, now altogether obsolete. The movements are an equally strange assortment, mixing ritornello movements and courtly dances. The Second Concerto, also in F major, uses four soloists, their instruments starkly contrasting in their means of tone production and strength of volume: In order of appearance they are violin, oboe, recorder, and clarino trumpet, a piercingly high natural version of the instrument. Balancing the recorder’s whisper against the trumpet’s blast must have been as daunting a prospect then as it is now. The Third Concerto, in G major, has no concertino group at all; it is scored for a unique ripieno ensemble comprising nine string soloists: three violins, three violas, and three cellos, plus a continuo of bass and harpsichord. The Fourth, also in G major, uses a violin and two unusual recorders pitched on G.

The last two concertos are the most bizarrely scored of all. The Fifth, in D major, has for its concertino a violin, a transverse flute (the wooden ancestor of the modern metal flute), and—of all things!—a harpsichord in a fully written-out, soloistic capacity, not just a continuo filler. This is apparently the earliest of all keyboard concertos. To us it seems the beginning of a long line, but no one could have foreseen that when Bach had the idea. The Sixth Concerto, in B♭ major, finally does away with the otherwise ever-present solo violin. Indeed, it banishes the violin from the orchestra altogether—something for which there seems to be no precedent in the history of the concerto—and instead promotes two violas, normally the least conspicuous members of the ripieno, to soloist position. Were these bizarrely fanciful and colorful scorings the product of sheer caprice? Were they the product of immediate need or personal convenience? Or were they somehow meaningful, in a way that more normally scored instrumental music was not, and if so, to whom? These are questions to which answers can only be speculative. Such questions, to the historian, are in one sense the most frustrating kind but in another sense the most fascinating.

Recent research on the history of the orchestra shows that, from the very beginning, this most complex of all musical ensembles was often regarded as a social microcosm, a mirror of society. The orchestra, like society itself, was assumed to be an inherently hierarchical entity. This assumption was already implicitly invoked in the previous paragraph when the violas were casually described as the “least conspicuous
members of the ripieno.” Their inconspicuousness was the result of the kind of music they played: harmonic filler, for the most part, having neither any substantial tunes to contribute nor the harmonically defining function of the bass to fulfill. Musically, their role could fairly be described as being, while necessary, distinctly less important than those of their fellow players above and below. Even today, the violas and the second violins in an orchestra—the inner parts—are proverbially subordinate players, by implication social inferiors. Our everyday language bears this out whenever we speak of “playing second fiddle” to someone else.

Recent research on the history of the orchestra shows this most complex of all musical ensembles was often regarded as a mirror of society.

And if second fiddle implies inferiority, then first fiddle tacitly implies a superior condition. In Bach’s day, before there were conductors wielding batons, the first violinist was in fact the orchestra leader. Today, when the leadership role has long since passed to the silent dictator with the stick, the first violinist is still called the “concertmaster.” So when Bach banishes the violins from the ensemble, as he does in the Sixth Concerto, and puts the violas in their place, it is hard to avoid the impression that a social norm—that of hierarchy—has been upended.

The Fifth Brandenburg Concerto

Our principal example from this collection is the extraordinary Fifth Concerto in D Major, a work of enormous scope and ambition. The first movement begins with a three-part ritornello, a fiery tutti played by every instrument in the ensemble except the flute (Ex. 10-6). For one actually watching the performance as well as listening to it, the clear implication is that the flute is to be the protagonist and that the rest of the instruments belong to the ripieno. So the fact that the violin and the obbligato harpsichord continue to play after the first tutti cadence is already a surprise. Throughout the movement the flute and violin imitate one another, playing duets, with one chasing or responding to the other. We might now assume this is a double concerto for flute and violin. At first it is not entirely clear that the harpsichord part in the solo episodes is a full equal to these upper melodic instruments; continuo players often improvised elaborate right-hand parts in chamber music, and Bach himself was known to be especially adept at doing so. The triplets in m. 10, unprecedented in the opening tutti but later much developed by the other soloists, can be read in retrospect as the first clue that the harpsichord will not be content with its usual service role, that it is to be no mere accompanist. The concertino group in this concerto is therefore flute, violin, and harpsichord.

By the time the first remote modulation gets made (to B minor), the harpsichord seems determined to dominate the show. It abandons the bass line and launches into a toccata-like riff in thirty-second notes that lasts for only three measures but succeeds in dazzling. And so things continue, the harpsichord exerting itself ever more as the movement goes on, far beyond the length of a typical concerto. About two-thirds of the way through, the harpsichord, as if seizing its moment, launches once again into the toccata riff it had initiated some ninety or so measures earlier, and this time it proves to be truly irrepressible. The thirty-second notes continue for fifteen
measures, changing in figuration from scales to decorated slow arpeggios, to very wide and rapid arpeggios. With every new phase in the harpsichord’s antics comes a corresponding loss of energy in the other instruments, now clearly their former accompanist’s accompanists, until they simply drop out altogether, leaving their unruly companion alone to play.

Example 10-6 J. S. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, I, mm. 1–12
What follows is something no eighteenth-century listener would have anticipated. The unimaginably lengthy passage for the *cembalo solo senza stromenti*, as Bach puts it (“the harpsichord alone without [the other] instruments”), is an absolutely unique event in the “High Baroque” concerto repertory. It is often called a cadenza, on a vague analogy to the kind of pyrotechnics that an opera singer like Farinelli would indulge in before the final ritornello in an opera seria aria. And perhaps Bach’s listeners might eventually have made such a connection as the harpsichord’s aberration wore on and the remaining instruments sat silent for an unheard-of length of
time. But the actual style of the solo is more in keeping with what Bach's contemporaries would have called a capriccio—a willfully bizarre instrumental composition that made a show of departing from the usual norms of style. By the time it has run its course and allowed the tutti finally to repeat its opening ritornello one last time and bring the movement to a belated close, the harpsichord's cadenza/capriccio/toccata has lasted sixty-five measures, close to one-third the length of the entire movement, whose shape it has completely distorted.

The remaining movements in the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto have nothing to compare with this disruption. By now the harpsichord has made its point, and its status as a full partner to the other soloists is something the listener will take for granted, so there is no need to insist on it. A singlemindedness of affect that we saw in the first movement characterizes the next two, but in contrasting ways. Unlike later instrumental music that tends to explore contrast within a single movement, the music of this time tends to favor contrast between movements. In this case, the first one was fast, loud, and in a major key, scored for the full band. The middle movement, explicitly marked affettuoso, is slow and in the relative minor key. It is actual chamber music, scored for the soloists alone, in essence a trio sonata. Although played by three instruments, it is really a quartet, since the left and right hands of the keyboard have differing roles. The left hand, as always, is the continuo part, sometimes joined in this function by the right hand, where figures are marked, to accompany the other soloists at the imitative beginnings of sections. Elsewhere, the right hand takes part on an equal footing with the flute and violin, sometimes participating in imitative textures along with them, at other times alternating with them in a kind of antiphony.

The mood changes again for the third and final movement, which is another excellent example of fused genres. It seems to have a hard time deciding whether it is a fugue, a gigue, or a concerto. But of course it is all of those things at once. We have already seen in Bach's French Suite No. 5 how the two sections of a gigue often begin with little fugal expositions. In the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, the opening is extended into quite an elaborate affair—in four parts, two of them assigned to the harpsichord—that lasts twenty-eight measures before the ripieno joins in to second it with another extended exposition of fifty measures' length, the whole seventy-eight-measure complex in effect making up one huge ritornello. This returns after a longer middle section, making the overall form a strict ABA.

Here, too, there is significant role reversal: Rather than an opening orchestral ritornello, the soloists begin alone and the ripieno follows. Once again a breach of traditional social hierarchies is suggested, although nothing on the scale of the colossal trespass or transgression committed by the harpsichord in the first movement. What do all these reversals, mixtures, and transgressions signify? For a long time they were thought to signify only the fertility of Bach's composerly imagination. And yet, without wishing to slight that imagination in any way, interpreting them so may not do their strangeness justice. Historians have lately begun to wonder whether, given the frequency with which the orchestra was compared with a social organism and described in terms of social or military hierarchy, Bach's musical transgressions might not resonate with ideas of social transgression or perhaps with some more personal kind of self-assertion. Little is known of the genesis of the Brandenburg Fifth Concerto or of its early performance history, but it does not seem entirely fanciful to identify Bach himself, a brilliant keyboard player, with the dominating harpsichordist. Its (his?) gradual emergence from the crowd and
eventual show-stopping triumph in the first-movement cadenza may carry some larger meaning and significance.³

Handel’s Instrumental Music

If we return briefly to Handel by way of comparison with Bach, we are faced with something of a paradox. Handel, of Bach’s German leading contemporaries perhaps the most secular in inspiration and expression, was a worldly spirit and a consummate man of the theater. It is thus odd that he is most characteristically represented in today’s repertory by his vocal music on sacred subjects, above all by his oratorio Messiah, while Bach, the quintessential religious spirit, is largely represented by secular instrumental works. And yet this may be less a paradox than a testimonial to the thoroughly secular, theatrical atmosphere in which all music is now patronized and consumed and the essentially secular, theatrical spirit that informs even Handel’s ostensibly sacred work—a spirit that modern audiences instinctively recognize and easily respond to. The modern audience, in short, recognizes and claims its own from both composers; and in this the modern audience behaves the way audiences have always behaved. Handel, not Bach, was present at the creation of “the modern audience.” His oratorios helped create it.

Nonetheless, Handel’s secular instrumental output was by no means inconsiderable or obscure. He wrote two dozen concertos grosso, works that, simply because they were published, were far better known in their day than were the Brandenburg Concertos or any other instrumental ensemble work of Bach. Handel also composed a number of solo organ concertos for himself to perform between the acts of his popular sacred oratorios. In their origins they were thus theatrical works, but they too were published and became every organist’s property. In addition, more than three dozen solo and trio sonatas by Handel survive, of which many also circulated widely in print during his lifetime.

Handel’s largest instrumental compositions, like Bach’s, were orchestral suites that arose directly out of his employment by the Hanoverian kings of England. One was a kind of super-suite, an enormous medley of instrumental pieces of every description, but mostly dances, composed for performance on a barge that kept abreast of George I’s pleasure boat during a royal outing on the River Thames on 17 July 1717, later published as Handel’s Celebrated Water Music. A whole day’s musical entertainment, it furnished enough pieces for three separate sequences (suites in F, D, and G) as arranged by the publisher. The other big orchestral suite was composed for an enormous wind band of twenty-four oboes, twelve bassoons, nine trumpets, nine horns, and timpani, to which strings parts were added on publication. Later published as The Music for the Royal Fireworks, it was first performed on 27 April 1749 as part of the festivities surrounding the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle that ended the War of the Austrian Succession, a great diplomatic triumph for King George II.

In later arrangements for modern symphony orchestra, Handel’s Water Music and Royal Fireworks were for a while staples of the concert repertoire—especially in England, where they served as a reminder of imperial glory. They are the only Handelian instrumental compositions ever to have gained modern repertory status comparable to that enjoyed by Bach’s “Brandenburgs.” Handel’s instrumental music
was always a sideline, for Handel was first and last a composer for the theater, the one domain where Bach never set foot.

Summary

This chapter has explored the careers and instrumental music of the first composers whose works are included in the modern standard repertory: Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), and Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757).

Bach and Handel, the primary focus of this chapter, took utterly different career paths. Handel was widely traveled, living and working in Germany, Italy, and London. Following in a family tradition of church organists and cantors, Bach spent his career in a few eastern German towns, never traveling outside Germany. Their modern reputations are quite different from what they were in their own day. Handel was best known for his operas and oratorios, which enjoyed an enormous public success, whereas Bach was known primarily as an organist; most of his works were intended for church services rather than for public consumption.

Much of Bach’s work was written to fulfill the requirements of his jobs. Except for his six years in Cöthen (1717–23), he was employed as a Lutheran church musician. Many of his organ pieces are thus chorale-based works, which could take the form of a fugue, variations, or the single-verse setting called a chorale prelude. Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt (Through Adam’s Fall We Are Condemned) is from Orgelbüchlein, a collection of chorale preludes for the liturgical year. In the Baroque tradition of madrigalism, Bach depicts Adam’s fall into sin with descending diminished sevenths. A comparison to a setting of the same chorale by the earlier composer Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707) shows Bach to be solidly rooted in longstanding German Protestant tradition. Bach particularly excelled at the contrapuntal procedure known as the fugue, which was often paired with a prelude or toccata. His “Little” Fugue in G Minor, BWV 578, illustrates how the fugal process unfolds through a series of imitative entries on a point of imitation in the tonic (called the subject) and on the dominant (called the answer). The forty-eight preludes and fugues in the two volumes of Das wohltemperirte Clavier (The Well-Tempered Keyboard, 1722 and 1738–42) were written in each major and minor key, beginning with C and proceeding through the keys by half step.

German composers in Bach’s day thought of themselves as cosmopolitan musicians, absorbing the styles and genres of French and Italian music. The popularity of French musical styles reflected the German aristocracy’s wish to adopt French culture and manners. Johann Jacob Froberger (1616–67) composed many keyboard suites modeled on French dance types, which later came to be arranged in the standard order allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. The allemande was a slow dance in quadruple meter, the courante in 3/2 meter with hemiola, the sarabande a slow triple-meter movement, and the gigue a fast movement, usually in 6/8, often featuring imitation. Bach’s knowledge of Froberger’s work is evident in the keyboard suites he composed while at Cöthen. The French Suite No. 5 shows his engagement with the galant style associated with elegant manners and grace. The fugal gigue, however, provides a contrast to that of François Couperin’s Le Rossignol en-amour (The Nightingale in Love), with its highly ornamented surface texture.
Many of Bach’s concertos reflect his familiarity with Italian music, which grew during his time in Weimar (1708–17). As his Brandenburg Concertos show, Bach fused French, Italian, and German elements and put his own twist on these styles. Compiled in 1721 from works he had written earlier, the Brandenburg Concertos are particularly strange in their instrumentation. In the first movement of the Fifth, for example, the harpsichord, normally a continuo instrument, emerges as the main soloist, with a long cadenza. In the final movement of the Fifth, Bach eloquently fuses elements of the gigue, Italian concerto, and fugue.

Handel’s instrumental works, though less well known today than Bach’s, include organ concertos (the earliest known for that instrument), concerti grossi, and solo and trio sonatas. His largest and most popular instrumental works were two orchestral suites written for civic occasions, today known as Water Music and The Music for the Royal Fireworks.

Study Questions

1. Compare and contrast the biographies and careers of J. S. Bach and G. F. Handel. What influences did their career paths have on the types of works they composed?

2. Compare and contrast the reputations that Bach and Handel had among their contemporaries and their reputations in modern times. What aspects of the music by the “class of 1685” still seem familiar or “modern” today?

3. Using Bach’s and Dietrich Buxtehude’s settings of Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verdorben, discuss the chorale prelude. How does Bach depict Adam’s fall into sin, and how is this related to Baroque conventions of madrigalism?

4. Describe the contrapuntal procedure known as the fugue, including definitions of the following terms: subject, answer, countersubject, episode, stretto.

5. Describe the tempo and metrical characteristics of the following dances, as reflected in Johann Jacob Froberger’s suites: (a) allemande, (b) courante, (c) sarabande, (d) gigue. In what ways was Bach influenced by Froberger’s suites? How do Bach’s French-style works differ from those of François Couperin?

6. In what ways are Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos a fusion of Italian, French, and German elements?

7. Describe some examples of unusual instrumentation and uses of instruments in Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos. How might these unusual uses of instruments be interpreted? What do these concertos suggest about the eighteenth-century relationships between the individual and society, the soloist(s) and the ensemble?

Key Terms

allemande  gigue
answer  prelude
chorale prelude  rococo
countersubject  sarabande
courante  stretto
episode  subject
fugue  suite
galant