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Bach and Opera: Is It Possible?

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Devoted to the art and science of technique, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is a celebrated master of the musical genres of the time, except for opera. Based on his musical upbringing and his independent attitude, there exists a possibility that Bach had the propensity to be an operatic composer. An exploration into this perspective leads us to wonder: Why did Bach never become an opera composer? Are there operatic features present in non-operatic works? What factors might have affected his inclination toward operatic composition? An investigation into professional development and influences from his early days in Arnstadt to his mature years in Leipzig, reveals a number of opportunities for Bach to assimilate operatic expressive devices. Such occasions include examples from the monumental *St. Matthew Passion* (BWV 244), the secular cantata BWV 211, "Schwegt stille, plaudert nicht" (recognized as the *Coffee Cantata*), and the *drama per musica* BWV 201, "Der Streit zwischen Phoebus und Pan," with three texts written by Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700-1764), who is known as 'Picander.' Despite having been contracted for work in other genres, these pieces, produced during the greatly prolific time in Leipzig, exemplify Bach's mastery of operatic writing.

Information about the Author:

Hilary Clark is a senior student in music and elementary education. She began considering Bach as an operatic composer in a seminar taken in 2010; this paper extends research from that course. As a VU Chorale member, Hilary has performed in the St. Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Bach spent much of his life. This spring, she will return with the Chorale to celebrate the church's 800th anniversary. She hopes to continue to study Bach, post-graduation.

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