

## BACH & THE HEAVENS

The arts of the Baroque have a strong commitment to the relationship between gesture and feeling. Music theorists compiled lists of figures designed to produce specific passions in the listener: *descensus* or *catabasis*, like the voyage of an Orpheus into the underworld, depresses our spirits with falling notes expressive of grief or despair; *ascensus* or *anabasis*, “through which something ascending to the heights is expressed,” propels us with rising intervals upward toward elevated pitches of feeling. I think of this programme as a parabola framed by such descending and ascending gestures, one whose arc dives down into the depths of emotion and climbs back up into to the space of wonder, joy and spiritual consolation.

One of our guides on this journey is, of course, J.S. Bach, whom Chopin called “an astronomer, discovering the most wondrous stars.” The ancient idea of the music of the spheres—a harmonious proportion in the order of the cosmos akin to that of audible music—was still current in Bach’s day, having found new expression, for instance, in the work of the astronomer Johannes Keppler. It’s a concept that continues to speak to us today; music is a domain—perhaps the only one—in which endless ascent is imaginable, if only as a perceptual illusion (like the overlapping “Sheppard tone” that seems, like a staircase painted by M.C. Escher, to climb and climb infinitely).

Another guide is the contemporary American composer Rebecca Nelson, whose beautiful set of *Consolations* for three baroque violins has been a key inspiration for the Gallo Chamber Players’ forthcoming recording, *Crossroads & Consolations*. Gallo violinist Majka Demcak writes about her introduction to this music: “Rebecca and I met during our studies at Juilliard, during which time she was studying baroque music and began composing and arranging music. The *Consolations* she wrote were debuted in her 2023 album *Do Not Lament*. She wrote them as she was healing from the grief and tragic death of her older sister. I was so inspired by my friend and her music and knew I wanted to play these pieces one day. To me, they represent her gentle spirit, strength in healing, and the beauty of love that lasts through loss. The sonority of three violins performing without a bass line captures the spectrum of sisterly love and friendship.”

Nelson’s blend of baroque, folk and contemporary styles inspired the seamless design of our recent programmes, in which pieces of music are presented less as discrete chunks than as parts of a continuous flow of thought and feeling, linked by snatches of well-known music. The idea was to bring out the resonances and intersections between familiar and unfamiliar, old and new music, all woven together in a continuous emotional journey.

We begin this journey with Bach settings of the Lutheran chorale “Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her” (“From Heaven above to Earth I come”). This popular Christmas hymn speaks in the voice of the angel of Luke 2:9–14, who comes to tell of Christ’s descent into the world through the Incarnation, the descent that will crack the world open to the dimension of the heavenly. We hear again from Bach in the

passionately sorrowful *Adagio* introduction to the G minor solo violin sonata, and again, briefly towards the end of the journey, in a few measures of the serene Sonata of the Palm Sunday cantata *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen* (BWV 182). Bach also has a latent presence for us in the music of Johann Caspar Ferdinand von Fischer (1656–1746), whose attempts to unite the German and French styles had a marked influence on the younger composer. Fischer's *Ariadne musica* (with its preludes and fugues in twenty keys and its symbolism of a thread through the tonal maze) was also a key precedent for the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, for which Bach adapted some of the *Ariadne's* themes. Our programme draws from another classically inspired keyboard collection, the *Musicalischer Parnassus*, whose nine dance suites each represent one of the Greek muses. We have adapted music from the last suite, which belongs to Urania, the muse of astronomy—the most sublime of the sciences and the one that directs the earthly gaze toward higher things.

The grand experiment in virtuosic violin writing achieved by Bach in his solo sonatas and partitas had been initiated, a hundred years earlier, by innovators like Biagio Marini (1594–1663) and continued by the eminent Austrian violinist Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644–1704). Still more closely contemporary with Bach is the intensely dramatic music of Francesco Durante (1684–1755) and the tuneful and engaging trio sonata by our ensemble's namesake, the Venetian Domenico Gallo (fl. mid-18<sup>th</sup> c.), that we will play this afternoon. We invite you to listen also for short cameo appearances by the likes of Handel and Vivaldi.

Finally, the Gallo Chamber Players are thrilled to be presenting the premiere of Métis (Abenaki) composer Gregory Borton's *Concerto A5*. "This is an eclectic piece," Greg writes. "It draws influence from multiple schools, from the baroque, minimalism, and polystylism. Written over the course of the past year, it is a break with my earlier work, and seeks to merge earlier styles with more recent musical developments." After my opening remarks, I can't resist noting that the piece's second movement exemplifies the *passus duriusculus* ("hard" step or passage)—the chromatic, catabatic descent described by baroque theorists as expressive of sorrow. We could ask for no more fitting complement to our own eclectic exploration of the heights and depths of musical imagination across the ages.