

ARE YOU READY TO BACH?

U OF T HOSTS FESTIVAL

Why his music can still turn any room into a church

BY STEPHEN CERA

His simplest pieces absorb music students in their early years, while his masterpieces pose lifelong challenges to performers at the peak of their powers. Such is the legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) that wherever in the world Western music is loved, studied and taken seriously, his works form its basis and backbone.

The latest homage comes with the third annual International Bach Festival Toronto (IBF) set to occur Oct. 15 to Oct. 22 at the University of Toronto. Conductor Helmuth Rilling, 73, one of today's leading Bach interpreters, will head a roster of distinguished artists and scholars, students and faculty. As before, the festival will focus on Bach's sacred cantatas -- dramatic vocal works with instrumental accompaniment. On three days of the festival (Oct. 18, 19 and 20), Rilling will shepherd young singers and players through a series of lectures, rehearsals and a culminating cantata performance each evening at 6 p.m.

Of course, we need no reminder of Bach's stature, or his universality. During the siege of Sarajevo, a young cellist caught the world's attention by playing Bach cello suites in the streets. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the great Russian cellist Rostropovich went there and played unaccompanied Bach by the breached barrier. NASA embedded Bach's music in the Voyager spacecraft for its journey through the cosmos.

The music is so durable it doesn't even need instruments or voices. Remember the synthesized Switched-on Bach hit recording of the late 1960s?



Though he has become a universal icon, Bach himself was anything but a cosmopolitan. He never left his native German soil, and travelled comparatively short distances. Rather, he was a devout citizen and dedicated craftsman, working all his life as the anonymous artists of the Middle Ages had done -- for no personal fame or fortune, but for the glory of God.

In his own time, word spread that he was the greatest organist of his day (he also played violin, viola, harpsichord and other instruments). But his real significance as a composer wasn't revealed to music lovers until 1829, almost 80 years after his death, when the 20-year-old Felix Mendelssohn discovered and performed the towering St. Matthew Passion in Berlin.

As the devoted parent of no fewer than 20 children (by two wives), some of whom grew up to be renowned musicians, Bach patiently attended to their musical training. The word Bach means "brook" in German, but in his case it meant something closer to "mighty river." Whatever he undertook, Bach carried out to perfection; his mastery of music was encyclopedic. Each and every musical form of his time (except opera) was lifted by Bach to a new pinnacle.

His nearly 300 church cantatas, five of which will be featured at this year's IBF To-

ronto, soar beyond their original modest purposes. Compared to his more famous masterpieces, the cantatas are among Bach's lesser-known works, but their vast quantity implies no diminution of quality.

Picture Bach sitting in his favorite organ loft, listening to the unending stream of counterpoint set in motion by his own fingers

and feet, echoing around an old church in Leipzig. He may have been spurred by the swinging arches of stone to create similarly noble and dynamic designs in sound. Bach's compositions crown the polyphonic masterpieces of the Baroque era with a quality of deep religious feeling. The late Dr. Albert Schweitzer said of the cantatas, "any room in which they are performed is turned into a church."

Helmuth Rilling is a Bach conductor who always comes to grips with the textual meaning of the cantata he is conducting, and never glides over its surface. We may not be 19th-century Lutheran Leipzigers, but Rilling can help persuade us for a time that we are.

Complementing his stature as a Bach interpreter, Rilling is recognized for his humanitarianism. In 1976, he became the first German invited to conduct the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Today he has conducted nearly 100 concerts in Israel and been recognized with awards from the Friends Association of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and UNESCO.

So why gather for a Bach concert at the University of Toronto when we can listen to Bach cantatas on CDs? Because with thoughtful preparation and presentation, and in suitable surroundings, live performances can draw sing-

ers, players and listeners together into the communal experience that these works were meant to provide.

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The 2006 International Bach Festival Toronto runs Sunday, Oct. 15 to Oct. 22. The festival offers concerts as well as public discussions with performers and scholars on the relevance of Bach to the intellectual and social climate of today. Here are some of the key events:

Three-day Cantata Series, Oct. 18, 19, 20

- Bach Talks with scholar Michael Marissen, moderated by William Littler, noon, free
- Discovery Series (working rehearsals and master classes with Helmuth Rilling), 2 p.m.
- Cantata Cafes (meet the artists), 5 p.m., free
- Intimate Evening Lecture-Concerts (lecture-demonstration on the day's Cantata, followed by a full performance of it), 6 p.m.

All events at Walter Hall, Edward Johnson Building, University of Toronto, 80 Queen's Park

Organ Recitals, Oct. 17, 18, 19 at 8 p.m.

Church of the Redeemer, 162 Bloor Street West

Celebration Concert, Oct. 21 at 7:30 p.m.

- Bach Cantata and a new cantata by Canadian composer Imant Raminsh, commissioned by IBF Walter Hall, Edward Johnson Building, University of Toronto, 80 Queen's Park
- Sunday Cantata Service, Oct. 22 at 11 a.m., free**
- Trinity St. Paul's United Church, 427 Bloor St. West

For tickets call (416)366-7723 or 1-800-708-6754 or visit www.stlc.com