Georg Phillip Telemann, born in the northern German city of Magdeburg, was blessed with a gregarious, warm temperament and a marvelous affinity for music. Together, these gifts enabled him to transcend the boundaries that his professional appointments would otherwise have imposed on his musical activities. Telemann’s musical output was enormous and broad in scope, not restricted to compositions for church use alone although that body of work was simply staggering! He came to Leipzig as a law student and quickly established himself as an essential in the musical life of the city by creating church music and instrumental music, even opera, for a series of public concerts. And because of his abilities to attract a cadre of talented performers and composers and the audiences to support them, his continuing success was assured. Leipzig wanted him back, but he negotiated higher prizes in Hamburg: director of the opera as well as the city church music. He was an entrepreneur par excellence.

Tonight we present a sampling of Telemann’s music, both for church and for secular occasions intimate and grand. We begin with a composition for a reception and banquet to celebrate the centenary in 1723 of Hamburg’s Admiralty, the civic authority that defended the city’s waterways and enabled commerce, an entity akin to a combination of our Coast Guard and Merchant Marine. No stranger to the water, Telemann could be said to paint its textures and colors in music much as Maine poet Harold Clifford did in his poem “The Ocean is a Person,” with allusions to crashing waves, ripples, sparkles, or gentle flow. The so-called Water Music suite has all of this, plus glimpses of a serene horizon and even references to sea birds. In form it is a majestic French overture followed by a number of dances, a patterning well established in the French canon and popular in Hamburg culture. In addition, Telemann pays homage to the mythological, pairing each dance with a particular Greek god associated with water or wind.

Following the opening overture, stately and sweeping, representing the sea all the way from shore (with a huge wave!) to horizon, and the oboes as pelicans in business overhead, we start in with the dances. The Sarabande (somewhat slow, in triple rhythm) and Bourrée (lively, duple rhythm) represent Thetis, mother of Achilles, sleeping (schlaffende) and awakening (erwachende) in turn; the Loure (slow triple, somewhat moody and hesitating) refers to ruler of the oceans and seas Neptune, in love, and his wife Amphitrite, queen of the sea with her Nyads, is depicted in the following Gavotte (duple, graceful). Next comes their mischievous son Triton in the Harlequinade, followed by two wind gods, Aeolus (with an inserted movement not tied to a dance form that represents a wild wind, a tempest, a nor’easter or a North Sea storm – take your pick!) and then the gentle Zephyr of the west wind (Menuet). The Gigue, usually the final dance in a French suite, and in a jolly 6/8 meter, here represents the Hamburg Admiralty’s maintenance of the city canal system, involving a raising and lowering of the water levels (Ebb and Flow). But the Admiralty is also associated with sailors, the “Happy Boat People” of the concluding Canarie, and we hear them kicking up their heels in this final movement.

With the cantata “Nun komm der Heiden Heiland” we enter the season of Advent, preparation for the coming of Jesus, not a re-enactment but a yearly personal reflection before the hustle and secular pressures of Christmas. The chorale “Nun komm der Heiden Heiland,” one of Martin Luther’s earliest hymns, was well known to German congregations by the early 1700s when Telemann and his contemporaries, especially Bach, were students. Only its first verse is included in this cantata. There is no further reference to the tune, and rest of the cantata text comes from a libretto by a pastor-theologian in Hamburg and an eventual promoter of Telemann, Erdmann Neumeister, whose belief in the power of opera to move listeners translated into his many librettos with arias and recitatives (words set to melodies, or to chords, respectively) sung by trained soloists. German cantatas of this sort were differentiated from their Italian counterparts by hymn verses inserted at the opening or conclusion or even midway through the cantata. Here we have chorale verses from two popular Advent hymns at the beginning and end, as planned by Neumeister in his libretto for Advent Sunday.

In Telemann’s day in Leipzig, Advent Sunday was a festival and the only Sunday during the period of Advent when a cantata was sung in the morning and afternoon services. Trumpets and military drums were used during such services; even if they weren’t part of the cantata, they could accompany processions and other vocal music, and were certainly appropriate for a congregation eagerly anticipating the arrival of Jesus after the long season following Pentecost. Both Bach and Telemann wrote Advent Sunday cantatas introduced by a section in the regal French overture style, and both feature bass recitatives at the center, representing Jesus. Emphasis on the individual Christian’s reception of the promised Savior -- excited, anxious, wondering -- is the hallmark of the libretto, most noticeably at the center where Jesus knocks at the door and the tenor, representing the host of Christians, answers and implores Jesus to enter his heart. The collective body of Christians responds with a hearty Amen, “So Be It,” and continues with a portion of the Annunciation chorale “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (How Brightly Shines the Morning Star) ending with the text “bleib’ nicht lange, Deiner wart’ ich mit Verlangen” (don’t delay, I await you with longing), which is all that’s needed: the cantata’s emphasis remains on the individual Christian’s eager anticipation of Jesus. It is worth noting that during just one year, Telemann wrote over 200 French overtures in order to familiarize himself with the style, and perhaps this “Nun komm der Heiland,” one of several cantatas on the chorale that Telemann composed, is the outcome of the French overture-immersion year, probably in the period 1714-1717.

Coming many years later is Telemann’s series of quartets for flute, violin, gamba and continuo. In September 1737 Telemann visited Paris for a period of eight months on the invitation of various instrumental virtuosi, and composed for this group a new series of quartets. In his 1739 autobiography (there was more than one!) Telemann writes, “The admirable manner in which the quartets were played by Messrs Blavet (flute), Guignon (violin), Forcroy jun. (gamba) and Edouard (cello) would deserve to be mentioned here, if indeed words were adequate to describe it. Suffice it to say that they won the attention of the court and the city to an unusual degree, and in but a little while procured me an honorable reception everywhere, accompanied by a multitude of compliments.” The quartet heard tonight is titled “Concerto secondo” because its three movements feature extended and virtuosic solos for each of the instruments, with a particular challenge to the viola da gamba player in the second movement to produce sequential doubled notes. Throughout the mood is supremely French – elegant, refined dialogue – while much remains Italian in spirit, such as the siciliano meter of the second movement, and the rapid, Vivaldi-style passagework in the final movement whose melodies are based on scales and arpeggios.

A master of vocal writing, Telemann set an enormous range of texts for songs running the gamut from drinking songs to moral songs and thousands of cantata arias. His choral output for the church was similarly impressive, a necessary part of his job duties of supplying new music for all the city churches (first in Frankfurt and then in Hamburg) every week, every year. The Song of Mary, also called the Magnificat, would have been performed for Saturday and Sunday vespers and was especially appropriate for the season of Advent. The version heard today, one of many Telemann composed, is in German and features the ancient chant called *Tonus Peregrinus*, the “migrating tone,” in the final movement starting with “Lob und Preis.” Telemann divides the 14-verse Magnificat into 8 sections, interspersing the solos in descending vocal order: soprano and alto representing Mary, tenor and bass representing the people. All culminates in a joyous, fugal dance. Whether choral or solo, Telemann’s mastery of text expression is prominent, as one can hear in extended passages on words like “ewiglich” (forever), or fragmented clips (“zerstreuet” (scattered)), or, most dramatic, determined rhythmic marching (“erstößet die Gewaltigen vom Stuhl” (toppled the mighty from their seat)). The listener comes away from such wonderfully uplifting music knowing well why Telemann’s public was always asking for more.

-- Cheryl K. Ryder