

# La Calisto, or Theatre and Music The Exuberance of the Baroque, Hosted by Francis Colpron

## The Legend of Callisto and Arcas

The nymph Callisto was the daughter of King Lycaon of Arcadia and one of the companions of Artemis. Like all the other female followers of the goddess of the hunt, Callisto took a vow of virginity. But, using one of the many tricks of which only he had the secret, Zeus seduced her and became her lover. Artemis, furious on realizing that Callisto was pregnant, chased her away and herself raised the nymph's child, Arcas.

The nymph's fate was a sad one. Not only was she condemned to wander in the woods, deprived of her son, but then she learned that her divine lover had cheated on her again. Finally, Hera, Zeus's jealous wife, took out her spite on her rival by turning the nymph into a bear.

When he had grown up, Arcas went hunting in the forest and there met his bear-mother. He was about to kill her, thus completing the vengeance of Hera, when Zeus, in a fit of compassion, turned Arcas into a bear and sent the two plantigrades off among the stars, where they are now eternally united as the constellations known as Ursa Major (Big Bear, commonly known as the Big Dipper), and Ursa Minor (Little Bear).

Vexed because she had not been able to fully slake her thirst for vengeance, Hera then asked Poseidon, god of the oceans, to refuse to let the two constellations sink below the horizon. That is why, in our latitudes, the Big and Little Bears are condemned to journey forever in the night sky, without ever being able to cool off with a dip in the sea.

## Les Boréades

In Greek mythology, Les Boréades (the Boreads), Zetes and Calais, were the sons of Boreas, god of the north wind, who himself was the son of Eos (dawn) and Astraeus. They belonged to the race of the Titans, who personified the elementary forces of nature. Zetes, the more mettlesome of the two brothers, is associated with quests, while temperamental Calais personifies the turquoise sea.

In 1991 Francis Colpron founded Les Boréades de Montréal. This ensemble specializes in Baroque music and strives to be authentic both in respecting the performance practices of early music, and in using period instruments. Critics and audiences in Canada and in other countries have unanimously hailed the verve, spontaneity, theatricality, expressiveness, and elegance of the ensemble's playing — all qualities that testify to an intimate understanding of the Baroque spirit.

## The Baroque Style

'Baroque' designates the style that was born in Rome, Mantua, Venice, and Florence at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries, and that quickly spread through most of the countries of Europe. It affected all artistic fields — sculpture, painting, literature, architecture, and music — and was characterized by exaggerated gesture, heavy decoration, dramatic effects, tension, exuberance and, sometimes, pompous grandiosity. It followed the artistic movement of the Renaissance and, from the second half of the 17th century onwards, was itself supplanted by Neoclassicism.

## Baroque Music

The 150-year long Baroque period is usually divided into three stages: the early Baroque, marked by the birth of the opera (on secular subjects) and the oratorio (on religious subjects); the middle Baroque, from 1640 to 1690, when *bel canto* and the *concerto grosso* were all the rage; and finally the late Baroque, when the combination of harmony and counterpoint was brought to perfection, particularly by Johann Sebastian Bach. The Baroque period is often referred to as the *basso continuo* period. Unlike Renaissance music, in which each voice is of equal importance, Baroque music is supported by a *basso continuo* or *figured bass*, which provides harmonic structure. The performer of this part is responsible for freely realizing the figured chords so as to accompany the melody and any inner voices. This new technique both enhanced the importance of polyphonic instruments (lute, harpsichord, organ), and encouraged instrumentalists and singers to express themselves by improvising, over a repeating figure in the bass, virtuosic variations and free ornamentation of the melody.

Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi are the first composers who come to mind when we think of this period. Though Johann Sebastian Bach was well known in his day, it was more as a virtuoso organist and brilliant improviser than as a composer. Besides these, many other composers made their mark in this style, including Johann Pachelbel and G. P. Telemann in Germany, and Henry Purcell in England.

What distinguishes works of this period from those that came before, in the Renaissance, and those that came after? Harmonic mobility, melodic variation, the use of melodic figures as symbols of the meaning of the text, dynamic rhythms, contrasts in sound, fluidity, counterpoint, imitation — these are some of the characteristic features of Baroque operas, oratorios, motets, cantatas, passions, concertos, sonatas, suites, toccatas, and other musical forms.

Johann Sebastian Bach died in 1750. Mozart was born in 1756, six years later. Baroque works were rapidly forgotten, supplanted by those of Viennese Classicism. Like others of their generation, the sons of Johann Sebastian Bach made a kind of stylistic transition between these two great periods in the history of music. The neglect of Baroque music, however, was neither total nor permanent. Many composers, including Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Liszt, greatly admired the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, especially his keyboard pieces. The proof is in the number of works composed in homage to Bach and musically citing the four letters of his name: in German the letters B, A, C, and H designate the notes B flat, A, C, and B respectively. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, Baroque music has blossomed in a way that could not have been predicted. Original scores have been discovered, and great performers and musicologists have set to work recreating them on period instruments, respecting as closely as possible the performance practices of the period, as revealed by research. Baroque music has now become very popular. Who does not know Pachelbel's *Canon*, Bach's *Prelude in C Major* (on which not only Gounod's *Ave Maria* but also a song by Maurane is based), the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*?

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