Notes for the Marietta First United Methodist Church 2016 Sacred Spring Concert:

Motets by J.S. Bach, performed by the Chancel and Chamber Choirs

Fürchte dich nicht (BWV 228) (sung in English as “Be not afraid”)

Jesu meine Freude (BWV 227) (sung in English as “Jesu, priceless treasure”)

O Jesu Christ mein’s Lebens Licht (BWV 118) (sung in English as “Jesus Christ, my life and light”)

E Major Concert for cembalo and orchestra (BWV 1053), performed by Brian Parks, harpsichord and virginal, and Sage Strings

J.S. Bach holds the fascination of diverse parties: organists, composers, music-listeners, musicologists, historians, even geneticists (the Bach family spans three centuries of musicians throughout the central German region of Thuringia). He remains a rich subject for scholars and an iconic cultural figure. More plainly, Bach was a church musician. While we would like to separate the notes on the page and the sounds in the air from the boots on the ground, it is those boots that ultimately connect our hearts and minds to the sensations — both glorious and unsettling — that arise when musicians and singers realize his scores.

Tonight, we are singing nothing but hymns – it just doesn’t sound like that. For each of the motets, hymn tunes fuel each piece. In fact, the sparkling counterpoint percolating underneath is just that: a canvas for the hymn melodies to soar over and through. In “Jesus Christ, my life and light”, listen for the sopranos to unwaveringly cast a long melodic line over the stately dialogue in the supporting voices. During “Be not afraid", the conversation is even more pronounced as two choirs exchange rapid-fire questions and answers. Ultimately, these separate voices unify to support a hymn melody that the sopranos again carry above the agitation. "Jesu, Priceless Treasure" is different; the hymn is unadorned and in plain sight. But things happen to the melody and its choral texture, and poetic interludes imbricate themselves upon the suite at-large. It is as if Bach is prying open cracks in the bedrock. He brings us outside the church’s confines and gestures towards a macrocosmic theology interrogating truth, meaning, and the spirit. These ecclesial hymns undergird Bach’s stretched-out vision; they are unflinching structures out of which Bach’s mind and pen take up acrobatic explorations into the nature of faith and fear, love and trust, God and eternity. But Bach is tethered — his art winds and weaves and hangs together fantastically, bound unwaveringly to its guide-post. It is a powerful freedom that comes out of such assurance. It bears mention that the harpsichord concerto movements also derive from chorale melodies – more proof that a strong firmament yields a far-flung bounty.

These pieces are *hard*. They cannot and should not be done every week. Bach was aware of this. The effort required for us to penetrate these labors of faith, and for you to audition that effort, is significant. It is appropriate to celebrate this for what it is: that rarest of occasions where we may test our musical and intellectual limits, where musical text is illuminated and sonified in a sacred space. The composer Milton Babbit once famously wrote, “Who cares if you listen?”, questioning the necessity of an audience for contemporary music. Here, no one is listening. Rather, we travel together, witnessing a creative individual's theomusicological reckoning with God, all between Sundays at his organ bench.

*Brian Parks, AAGO*

NB:

The harpsichord appears courtesy of Ms. Nelda Greene of Roswell Georgia. The virginal was built in 2001 by Dr. Adam Decker of Dallas Georgia. Dr. Decker and Mr. Parks prepared the instruments for performance.