Nearly 300 years after his death, Johann Sebastian Bach is still the “gold standard” in classical music. A man known for his prolific output of music, Bach was also known for his prolific procreative capacity: with his two wives, His youngest was born when Bach was 23 and the oldest when he was 57. Bach’s intricate harmonies and complex style of composition created music both versatile and timeless. Not only did Bach influence other Baroque composers of his time, but, to this day, the “Bach-effect” can be heard in varied musical styles from rock to hip-hop and everything in between. For proof, just listen to this version of hip-hop Bach: "A Whiter Shade of Pale," lead singer Gary Brooker (of the U.K. rock band Procol Harum) admitted to using a few bars of Bach’s famous Air on a G String in the beginning of the hit tune, confessing, “… it does a bar or two of Bach’s ‘Air on a G String’ before it veers off. That spark was all it took. I wasn’t consciously combining Rock with Classical, it’s just that Bach’s music was in me.” Compare “A Whiter Shade of Pale” with Bach’s original music. The popularity of the rock song was nearly instantaneous: in 1967, “A Whiter Shade of Pale” reached number one on the charts in England and number five in the U.S.

The music of the Beatles also reflects Bach’s influence. In the hit single Penny Lane, Paul McCartney chose to include a “mock-Baroque” style trumpet solo after hearing trumpeter David Mason perform Bach’s second Brandenburg Concerto during a BBC television broadcast. David Mason can be heard performing the trumpet on the Penny Lane recording. The featured instrument, a piccolo trumpet, was specifically chosen to suit the more ornamental baroque style. If plagiarism is the highest form of flattery, Bach is truly revered, for he is among the most copied composers of all time. His compositions are so frequently referenced in multiple genres of music that sometimes, even a modern artist might not immediately recognize Bach’s profound influence. In composing “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” lead singer Gary Brooker (of the U.K. rock band Procol Harum) admitted to using a few bars of Bach’s famous Air on a G String in the beginning of the hit tune, confessing, “… it does a bar or two of Bach’s ‘Air on a G String’ before it veers off. That spark was all it took. I wasn’t consciously combining Rock with Classical, it’s just that Bach’s music was in me.”

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The Bach-effect also inspired the Beatles’ 1968 hit Blackbird. The melody and baseline find their roots in Bach's Bourée in E minor for lute, an instrument which both McCartney and George Harrison learned to play as children. For fun, listen first to the Bourée performed on lute (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xKdb4rNtyk) and then to the recording of Blackbird. McCartney explained, “Bach was always one of our favorite composers; we felt we had a lot in common with him... I developed the melody on guitar based on the Bach piece and took it somewhere else, took it to another level, then I just fitted the words to it.”

Do you remember Switched-on Bach? Released in 1968, it was the first album of American musician and composer Wendy Carlos, performed by two artists using a Moog Synthesizer. It was the first time that synthesizers were used in popular music. The album was on the US Billboard 200 chart for a total of 59 weeks, reached No. 10 at the height of its popularity, and topped its Classical Albums chart from 1969 to 1972. This ground-breaking music, an engaging synthesized version of the Brandenburg Concertos, may be heard at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc51cnV6YJI Carlos’s work was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1968 and several months later, Leonard Bernstein and Leopold Stokowski presented a N.Y. Philharmonic Young People’s Concert featuring Bach’s “Little” Fugue in G minor, arranged for Moog synthesizer, organ and orchestra.

Heitor Villa-Lobos, one of the most influential 20th century Latin American composers, was also influenced by Bach. His work alternated between classical music and native Brazilian folk music, but he was especially fascinated by Bach's music, which led to Villa-Lobos's most famous works, Bachinhas Brasileiras. The work, written between 1930 and 1945, consists of nine suites for small ensembles. The music is unique and intertwines Bach’s classical techniques with the distinct flare of Brazilian folk tunes. The fifth suite is a good example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anxdAcilsM Villa-Lobos’s music can also be heard in Brazilian and Hollywood films.

One of Bach’s most recognized compositions, Toccata and Fugue in D minor, was adapted by famous film composer John Williams’ fusion rock band, Sky, on the release of their second album in 1980. Using Bach’s work, originally composed for organ, Williams rewrote the melody for electric guitar, with a new arrangement for drums, bass, acoustic guitar, and keyboard. Here’s the original version, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nnuq9PXbywA, contrasted with the one created by Williams. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqbgUrpe1a70 Creativity inspires, and, over the centuries, Bach remains a very popular muse. After all, great inspiration has no expiration date.

Heitor Villa-Lobos

Join us!

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for Bach and Beyond, January 18 – 20, 2019. Our Masterworks concert presents the music of Bach and his Baroque contemporaries (including French composers, Jean-Philippe Rameau and Jean-Baptiste Lully, Italian composer, Antonio Vivaldi, and Spanish composer, Juan Arañés), as well as the 20th century composers, Heitor Villa-Lobos and Jacques Ibert, who were all inspired by Bach’s genius.
Rameau’s Overture to Le temple de la Gloire
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdiFbtm3uRQ

Lully’s “Chaccone” from Phaeton, complete with Baroque dancers, similar to those who will appear on the HSO stage during this concert:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVM0IpxAhANeg

Bach’s Violin Concerto in A Minor:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTr8KHDMIVw

Arañés’ Gran Chacona, with vocalists as well as dancers:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCjfVWVWEre

Bach’s Suite No. 3 in D Major:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuMtEof9MWs

Vivaldi’s La Follia:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v8zxoEoA_Q

Villa-Lobos’ recording of Bachianas Brasileiras No. 9, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ccz84743ag

Ibert’s Divertissement:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njZQTavSdks

La Follia may well be one of the most remarkable pieces in musical history, with roots going back to 15th century Portugal. Beethoven, Paganini, Liszt and Rachmaninoff are among more than 200 composers who have written some variation of the piece over the span of more than 300 years. We offer two versions below:

La Follia by Arcangelo Corelli, as studied by Suzuki violin students (Suzuki Book VI):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BECZDIuqEvA

Rachmaninoff’s Variations on a Theme of Corelli:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eVEP1MrG_g

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Whether you’re a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to rsovorsky@hartfordsymphony.org. We’ll make sure you receive Prelude by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!
This issue of Prelude deliberately does not include our usual recording recommendations from Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, who explained that the multiple great recordings of the many pieces on this program made his selections redundant!

REFERENCES

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x. https://www.beatlesbible.com/songs/blackbird/
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