

Johann Sebastian Bach

Air from Suite #3 for Orchestra

Arranged for 14-piece brass by Klaus Smedegaard Bjerre 2013

One of the best pieces in the brass band repertory of my youth was Dr. Denis Wright's arrangement of Bach's famous Air from his Suite #3 for orchestra. The stroke of genius in that arrangement was the choice of key, Bb major over the original D major, with the melody line taken down a 10th and given to the full section of 3 Eb alto horns supplemented by the flugelhorn and partially also by the 1st baritone. In some performances I on baritone joined in on the melody all the way. A great experience as this wonderful tune fits the baritone and the euphonium very well in the key of Bb major.

Since then I worked quite a bit with baroque music in other contexts and combined with my recent interest for the 14-piece brass ensemble I took a new look at the score for the whole Suite #3. The plan was, and still is, to issue settings of the Air as the opener for the sequence of baroque dances ending the suite, but I am not yet happy with my settings of the dances with their wonderful scoring for the 3 baroque trumpets (which are not playing in the Air).

The full horn section and the euphonium have been chosen as the soloists in this arrangement allowing for a very warm, yet clear, sound. The soloists also have the option of planning their own staggered breathing when phrases get long. The ornamentations have been written out according to baroque performance traditions. These traditions also call for embellishments of the repeats. Here both repeated sections have been written out in full. The score gives the embellishments to the euphonium to let it stand out as the primus inter pares among the soloists. Alternative parts allow for this function being given to one of the horns, if that would be the obvious choice in a given ensemble constellation.

The bass line is carried by the bass trombone in the bass octave and by the tuba in the contrabass octave. The latter may be uncomfortably low for some constellations of player and instrument, so there are modified parts directed towards a number of common tuba types.

The crisscrossing 2nd violin and viola lines have been given to the upper trumpets and trombones in various constellations. Not written in the original score, but implied by tradition, are the progressing chords as played by the harpsichord or by the lute. These have been given to two different permutations of the lower trumpets and the 3rd trombone to be played in a detached fashion. Where the melodic lines and the chord lines happen to play the same sequence of notes, their articulations should not be made uniform. The continuo chord function may be enhanced by the addition of the optional guitar part provided. May be played discretely amplified or unplugged on a classical or on a western guitar

The trumpets are taken into their very low range, which hardly will earn me the love of their players. But then the late Fred Mills, among others, proved that embouchure control and slide management will give wonderful sound and pitch in this range of the trumpet.

Bach did not expect his strings playing in equal temperament. Horn players sometimes remedy their flattish 5th partials by alternative fingerings. The opening note of this setting of the Air might be one of the places where the open 5th partial of the Bb horn (and of the euphonium) would prove itself the best choice.

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