GEORG PHILIPP TELEMANN has been cursed by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's 'most prolific composer,' It is hard to imagine that this is true, and it is still harder to imagine that any pub brawls were averted by the inclusion of this dubious assertion in the world's beeriest encyclopedia. However, in the spirit of the (also dubious-but-attractive) maxim that there is 'no such thing as bad publicity,' we can at least see the shadow of Telemann's fantastic facility with composition. He did not just write and write; he wrote complex and beautiful music with legendary ease. It is perhaps enough to say that his abilities were admired by his contemporary J.S. Bach, who was not easy to impress. The sonata for this evening's concert belongs to the rich and serious tradition of the *sonata da chiesa*, or 'church-sonata,' whose movements run slow-fast-slow-fast and contain learned fugal writing in the fast movements set against forcefully expressive writing in the slow. The sonata's exceptional scoring for five voices, including an unusually independent cello line, gives Telemann rich soil for his ingeniously fluid musical exploration.

For a non-royal personage of William Shakespeare's time, **JOHN DOWLAND** is quite well documented. He was indeed well known in his time, and he wrote about himself quite a bit. That said, Dowland lived a long time ago, in an age as distant from Bach's as Bach's to Beethoven's, or Beethoven's to Schoenberg's, or Schoenberg's to ours, so reliable details are sketchy. But it was known that he was a fairly successful composer in various courts; that he was Catholic in a Protestant country; that he traveled widely; and that he served some time at the Danish court. His settings of text are water-clear, deservedly legendary, and show a profoundly English respect for the force of the Word. He had a particular talent for bringing forth the quality (then fashionable to explore) of melancholy.

(aside) Speaking of Denmark and melancholy: there is an astonishing account of the Danish king whom Dowland served — a man and court who were almost certainly the model for Hamlet's dissolute Elsinore. An account of a pageant gone wrong (!), from Sir John Harrington in 1606, gives an idea of what Dowland was in for:

> *…After dinner the representation of Solomon his Temple and the coming of the Queen of Sheba was… meant to have been made. …The Lady who did play the Queen's part…overset her caskets into his Danish Majesties lap, and fell at his feet, tho I rather think it was in his face…his Majesty then got up and woud dance with the Queen of Sheba; but he fell down…and was…laid on a bed of state; which was not a little defiled with the presents of the Queen…Now did appear in rich dress Hope, Faith and Charity: Hope did assay to speak, but wine rendered her endeavors so feeble that she withdrew. Faith was then all alone… and left the Court in a staggering condition. [Charity] then returned to Hope and Faith, who were both sick and spewing in the lower hall.*

And so on: Victory passes out; Peace gets in a fight; a most lamentable history. Standing up, let alone standing firm against sin, seems to have been a considerable challenge at the real-life Helsingør of John Dowland.

Cantata No. 54 of **J.S. BACH** is short, and its message is clear: stand firm against sin, which is of the devil. It doesn't require much further clarification. It was almost certainly composed in Weimar, fairly early in Bach's career, likely for the 4th Sunday in Lent (during which time the need to resist sin could probably use a bit of reinforcement). Some elements of tone-painting might benefit from a bit of spotlighting: the 'curse' showing itself in the violas in the first aria; the 'sword' driving to the end of the recitative; the snaky 'devil' of the second aria. These are fairly conventional elements of enriching text and meaning with music.

There is one underlying question which deserves commentary, however inconclusive or cursory: is the cantata itself beautiful, and, if so, is it straitened enough by its own 'right devotion'? The question of whether the cantatas were too theatrical to be devotional was not a casual one for an iconoclastic time: the cantata must rectify itself. But as in most representations of temptation, sin gets the most interesting

bits. This may be too sophisticated a reading; the message seems clear enough: stand firm, like the resolute tonic bass line at the opening, against sin. That the dissonant tension is beautiful need not be dwelt upon.

Balanced though it may seem from the outside, with two violins, two violas, and two cellos, the string sextet can become dangerously bottom-heavy. The most organic balance for stringed instruments, seen both in string quartets and symphony orchestras, is to have two violin voices, and one each for violas and cellos. String quintets, with notable exceptions, usually are written for two violas, and can ride on soloistic roles for certain players. But in the wrong compositional hands, a string sextet can sound weirdly thick. Two cellos is too often too many.

But **JOHANNES BRAHMS** wrote two fantastic string sextets. Why they work as well as they do is hard to describe, but it certainly arises from Brahms' ability to keep his architecture evident (a bit like the George Washington Bridge in New York — all the more beautiful and light for its exposed beams). His tunes, light though they may seem, are never merely tunes, but always shadows, mirrors, permutations and extensions of one another. There is not only drama, but also a kind of weight-sharing in the interplay of voices. So there is a kind of symphonic lightness in both of the sextets — especially the B-flat sextet, which bears a close resemblance to the serenades he wrote for orchestra — and that makes them enormously interesting to play. Everyone has structural elements; everyone lifts, everyone launches the piece toward friendly enormity.

— *Tim Summers*