BACH 703 - J. S. BACH (1685-1750): Violin and Oboe Concertos

Johann Sebastian Bach was born on March 21st, 1685, the son of Johann Ambrosius, Court Trumpeter for the Duke of Eisenach and Director of the Musicians of the town of Eisenach in Thuringia. For many years, members of the Bach family throughout Thuringia had held positions such as organists, town instrumentalists, or Cantors, and the family name enjoyed a wide reputation for musical talent.

By the year 1703, 18-year-old Johann Sebastian had taken up his first professional position: that of Organist at the small town of Arnstadt. Then, in 1706 he heard that the Organist to the town of Mülhausen had died. He applied for the post and was accepted on very favorable terms. However, a religious controversy arose in Mülhausen between the Orthodox Lutherans, who were lovers of music, and the Pietists, who were strict puritans and distrusted art. So it was that Bach again looked around for more promising possibilities.

The Duke of Weimar offered him a post among his Court chamber musicians, and on June 25, 1708, Bach sent in his letter of resignation to the authorities at Mülhausen. The Weimar years were a happy and creative time for Bach.... until in 1717 a feud broke out between the Duke of Weimar at the 'Wilhelmsburg' household and his nephew Ernst August at the 'Rote Schloss'. Added to this, the incumbent Capellmeister died, and Bach was passed over for the post in favor of the late Capellmeister's mediocre son. Bach was bitterly disappointed, for he had lately been doing most of the Capellmeister's work, and had confidently expected to be given the post.

Through the help of Duke Ernst August, Bach was then introduced to the Court of Anhalt-Cöthen, and as a result he was offered the post of Capellmeister, which he accepted.

Thus it was that in 1717 at the age of 32 Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, barely twenty-five years old, the son of a Calvinist. As the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendors of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen; however, the young Prince's religious beliefs did not bar him from enjoying a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions. Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the "Grand Tour of Europe", first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy, returning by way of Vienna. So he would have been thoroughly familiar with the latest European fashions in music.

The young Prince stretched the limited budget of his miniature court to provide an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin. He had well-developed musical tastes, having traveled widely, particularly to Italy, where he studied Italian secular music with great interest; he returned from Italy determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level.

Unlike most Princes of his time, Leopold was a player of considerable proficiency on the harpsichord, the violin and the viola da gamba, and contrary to current Court etiquette he played quite freely and informally with his Court musicians, treating them entirely as his equals. He soon became very friendly with his new Capellmeister, having a high regard for him, and would often ask his advice on various matters.

Bach composed most of his Concertos, including the Six Brandenburgs, during his Cöthen years - the Harpsichord Concertos came much later during his time with the Collegium Musicum at Leipzig, and were for the most part arrangements of earlier works or works by other composers: the three Violin Concertos heard on this disc were to become Harpsichord Concertos at Leipzig.

Bach was an accomplished violinist and, according to Albert Schweitzer, "learned from Vivaldi the perfect violin technique, the art of writing singably." In many ways much of Bach's music is not only the culmination of the Baroque era, but also the synthesis of many national styles, in particular, German, Italian and French. Although Bach's Violin Concertos are not virtuoso showpieces as Vivaldi's tend to be, they are conceived completely in violinistic terms and demand great technical skill.

In form, Bach took over the characteristic three-movement, fast-slow-fast pattern that composers Corelli, Torelli and Vivaldi had established. The final movements of both Solo Concertos, as with much of Vivaldi, are gigue-like dances, and the slow movements employ a favorite Vivaldi device - a lyric song accompanied by a repetitive bass figure.

The material in the first movement of the **Concerto in a-minor** seems to grow spontaneously out of the orchestra's initial theme. The beauty of the second movement is unsurpassed in music and is illustrative both of Bach's own genius and his debt to the lyric Italian style of composition. The final gigue movement has a French grace about its endlessly spun-out triplets.

The outer movements of the Violin Concerto in E Major display the solid, commanding style of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. The second movement is a form of a Passacaglia, with variations on a repeated bass-line. In the Concerto in d-minor for Two Violins & and Orchestra Bach took full advantage of the ability of the violin to express melodic beauty. In the soloists' segments, Bach gave the two instruments a dialogue, with the orchestra providing harmonic and rhythmic background. The slow movement is once again the point of gravity of the composition.

The death of Johann Kuhnau, Cantor of the Leipzig Thomasschule in June 1722 opened the possibility of an appointment for Bach at Leipzig. He applied for the post and was duly accepted. Prince Leopold, regretting his departure but not wishing to stand in his way, quickly consented. And so Bach left with his family and belongings for Leipzig, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

For the first ten years of his tenure in Leipzig Bach concentrated on the necessary composition of Cantatas and other church music. During the 1730s, however, he was able to devote more attention to the composition and performance of secular music for pleasure, both at home in his apartments with family and resident students, as well as in Zimmermann's Coffee House and Gardens where public concerts were given by the Collegium Musicum of which Bach became Musical Director.

It would undoubtedly have been for such occasions that Bach would re-write his Violin Concertos as Harpsichord Concertos thus giving them a new lease of life, particularly as Zimmermann had purchased in the late 1720s, for the use of his concert musicians, "a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity" which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by an even finer instrument in 1733.

For the Violin & Oboe Concerto however, we are working "backwards". We have the later, probably Leipzig-adapted Two-Harpsichord Concerto which has long been familiar. The Violin & Oboe Concerto is an attempted "reconstruction" of a supposed original. The evidence for this particular combination of instruments is fairly substantial, and the result certainly makes enjoyable listening.

A similar reconstruction has been attempted in the case of the Harpsichord Concerto in A, BWV 1055, which we hear now in a supposed earlier version, probably for Violin or Oboe. In this case the reconstruction is a little more adventurous in its adoption of the Oboe d'amore, of which Bach was particularly fond, judging by the frequency of its use in his Leipzig cantatas. Basically the Oboe d'amore is the alto or mezzosoprano member of the oboe family. Its appearance is similar to that of the regular oboe, except for the bell, which is pear-shaped with a contracted outlet. This produces a veiled sound, somewhat gentler than that of the oboe, and its lower notes are dark, full, and rich. Our recording provides a rare opportunity to hear this instrument as a featured soloist.