

## BACH 717 - J. S. BACH (1685-1750): Instrumental Concertos

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian 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, at barely 25 a relative youngster like Bach and indeed seven years Bach's junior.

The Prince was the son of a Calvinist, and 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 where he studied Italian secular music with great interest, returning by way of Vienna. He had well-developed musical tastes, and he returned from his *Grand Tour* determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level, to which end he 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. In fact it was during the Prince's Grand Tour in 1713 that news came to him of a golden opportunity: when Wilhelm I of Prussia came to power, he dismissed his father's Court Capelle, and Prince Leopold was able to tempt many of the best musicians from Berlin to Cöthen.

During this period Bach wrote and performed much of his chamber music; Violin Concertos, Flute, Violin, and Trio Sonatas, solo keyboard music, the Sonatas and Partitas for unaccompanied Violin, the Suites for unaccompanied Violoncello, the Six Brandenburg Concertos, and probably the Orchestral Suites. Nor were Bach's instrumental works to be heard only in Court performance. When the Prince traveled, Bach and some of the best Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding harpsichord) would accompany him on his extensive journeys.

Twice they visited the Spa town of Carlsbad in Bohemia, the meeting place of the European aristocracy, in 1718 and 1720. These were dazzling aristocratic gatherings of Counts, Princes and Noblemen, where musical concerts were organized daily in which resident and visiting musicians participated. Here Prince Leopold was able to show off the talents of his small orchestra under its brilliant Capellmeister, J.S. Bach.

In December, 1721, however, the Prince married. And for Bach this was to be an unfortunate event, as the new Princess disapproved of and actively discouraged her husband's musical activities. Thus it was that just over a year later Bach took up a new position as Cantor of St. Thomas' Church, Leipzig. A major advantage of this new post was the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Leipzig itself, a stimulation for Bach himself and for his growing sons.

At the beginning of the 18th century Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state, with Leipzig as its economic capital. The city's three-times-yearly Fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life. The city itself was famous for its beauty and cleanliness, set in rolling countryside by the Pleisse River, the city walls surrounded by elegant treed walks and formal pleasure gardens.

A major source of musical entertainment was provided by the Collegia Musica - secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed University. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. Various such groups came and went. One was established in 1702 by the redoubtable Georg Philipp Telemann. After Telemann left Leipzig the leadership of his Collegium was taken by Balthasar Schott, the Neukirche Organist. In the spring of 1729, Schott moved to a new position in Gotha, and Bach himself took over directorship of the Collegium.

The story of Bach's *Collegium Musicum* is closely bound to a Leipzig coffeeshop-proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann. The concerts were given on Zimmermann's premises, probably under his auspices. During the winter, the group played every Friday night, from 6 to 8pm, in Zimmermann's Coffee House on the fashionable Cather Strasse, close to the centrally placed Marktplatz. In the warmer months, the music was moved outdoors, to Zimmermann's Coffee Garden "*in front of the Grimma Gate, on the Grimma Stone Road*" - so the address was given in contemporary reports, with Summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm.

That Gottfried Zimmermann was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a competent musician, is indicated by the fact, as confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the *Collegium* and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was "*a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity*" which made it a Leipzig attraction in itself. An "*even finer instrument*" was obtained in 1733.

Two types of concerts were given: *Ordinaire*, the normal regular performances and *Extraordinaire* for special celebrations (King's Birthdays, etc), and were usually marked by elaborate festive Cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor.

At the regular concerts Bach provided mainly instrumental music, including Clavier Works drawn from his *Clavierübung* and the "48". The need for instrumental pieces provided Bach with the opportunity to revive much of his Cöthen and Weimar work; though his Concerti for one or several Harpsichords were receiving their first performances, they were in fact adaptations of earlier (eg violin) concertos, or from concertos by other composers (eg Vivaldi). Occasionally, too, vocal music might be given; such an example is the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211, first presented in 1732.

It is also on record that works of Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were performed here. Admission was charged for the *Extraordinaire* Concerts, and also for those occasional "*Special Concerts*" (*Sonder-konzerte*) which featured distinguished visiting artists. The regular Concerts were probably free.

The schedule of weekly performances, the composition of new works, rehearsing them, arranging programs, etc., reveals that the *Collegium Musicum* was no mere diversion for Bach. The performance schedule was fairly demanding, and it is not surprising that Bach should look to his earlier concerted works with an eye to conversion. Bach remained as the *Collegium's* director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741, so these "conversions" would date from this period.

While the Concertos to be heard on this disc were in all probability prepared specifically for the *Collegium* concerts, derived from earlier, mostly Cöthen-composed material, the first Concerto, however, offers a more devious lineage. Bach's **Harpsichord Concerto BWV 1053** was derived from two of his Cantatas. The first and second movements were first heard, according to the latest dating, on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1726 as the Sinfonia and Aria 5 respectively of Cantata 169, while for the last movement Bach used the opening Sinfonia from Cantata 49, first performed on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, again in 1726. Our present Concerto is a contemporary Oboe version of the Harpsichord Concerto. Since both outer movements feature the oboe in their original cantata versions, transcription for the oboe as a solo instrument would seem quite appropriate. While the present transcription follows the harpsichord and string scoring exactly, it nonetheless shows the Concerto in a new light and can be enjoyed by those familiar with Bach's own Harpsichord version.

Of the next three Concertos, **BWV 1054, 1055 and 1056**, the first is a transcription by Bach of his Violin Concerto in E Major BWV 1042, and it may be supposed that the other two are also transcriptions of Cöthen works, most probably lost Violin Concertos.

Bach's **Concerto for 3 Harpsichords & Strings, BWV 1064**, is most probably an arrangement by Bach of an unidentified 3-Violin Concerto by an Italian composer. Our version heard on this disc is a reconstruction of that supposed original, but here scored for oboe, flute and violin. Those accustomed to the Three- Harpsichord Concerto will find that the contrasting instruments heard in this present version give extra clarity allowing the individual parts to be more clearly identified.