

BACH 718 - J. S. BACH: Two-Harpsichord & Triple Concertos

On December 2nd, 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. He had done the Grand European Tour with particular emphasis on music and on his return 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.

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 performances. 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.

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 tree 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 now 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 Catherinen Strasse, centrally placed close to the 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 is given in contemporary reports, with summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm.

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 splendour.

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.

It would not be inappropriate for today’s listener to visualize Bach, busy in his *Komponierstube*, his Composer’s Study, dusting off, revising and adapting many of his earlier, mainly Cöthen instrumental works, then following them to their performance in Zimmermann’s 150-seat auditorium attached to his Coffee House, or in his pleasant Gardens in the warmth of a Summer’s evening.

We begin, and end our disc with a Triple Concerto. The first, for two recorders/flutes and harpsichord, is a direct descendent of the fourth Brandenburg Concerto. The last, for flute, violin and harpsichord, presents a rather more substantial process of re-arrangement; the two outer movements are orchestrated and expanded versions of the Prelude & Fugue for harpsichord, BWV 894, while the middle movement is derived from one of the Trio Sonatas for Organ/Pedal-Harpsichord which Bach composed mainly for use in practice by his sons.

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. It is also recorded that an even finer instrument was obtained in 1733. This might well have been a three-manual harpsichord, similar to the one illustrated on our cover depicting the Collegium Musicum of Jena “serenading” a respected professor in 1744.

The listener might therefore be fully justified in imagining our two Double-Harpsichord Concertos being proudly performed on the old and new *clavicymbels*, much to the amusement, perhaps even amazement, of the audience. For music-lovers had only just been introduced to the concept of the harpsichord adopting the role of soloist in a concerto – as opposed to its traditional role of continuo and rhythm-keeper. Bach’s Concertos for Solo Harpsichord and Strings had been a pioneering revelation in themselves. And now here were Concertos for two featured Harpsichords and Strings. Bach was indeed always ready to surprise his audiences! It must have been quite a fun-occasion, Bach at one instrument, joined by.... one of his sons – or a student – or possibly even Zimmermann himself...

The origin of BWV 1060 is most probably a Bach Concerto for Violin and Oboe. Though the original is now lost, its reconstruction was long ago attempted and has become popular in its own right. The other Double Concerto on our disc, BWV 1062, will immediately be recognized as an adaptation of the well-known Double Violin Concerto BWV 1043, another Cöthen original.

Bach must have taken great pleasure in these adaptations. Here he was bringing back memories of his time at Cöthen, a period which, as he later wrote in a letter to an old friend, was one of the happiest times in his life. Now he would be composing and playing for a lively and appreciative audience in a most convivial atmosphere.