

BACH 741-2-3 - J.S. BACH: Six Brandenburg Concertos & Four Orchestral Suites

Bach's SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS are rightfully regarded as being among the most popular orchestral works of the Baroque period, combining as they do the Baroque arts of counterpoint with a light and tuneful quality making them instantly and universally enjoyable. The four Orchestral Suites, with their pompous *Overtures* followed by light and varied dance movements, make no less pleasurable listening.

The "Brandenburgs" were written around 1721, when Bach was in service at the Court of the young music-loving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Bach enjoyed four years of happy association with the Prince, during which he composed much secular music. However, when the Prince married his un-musical cousin Friederika Henrietta, she gradually persuaded him to spend less time and resources on his musical pursuits. Bach began to look around for a new position where his talents could be put to better use, and seeing the Margrave of Brandenburg as a possible employer and patron Bach sent him the six "Brandenburg Concertos" accompanied by an elaborate dedication.

We know from the opening of this dedication, dated March 24, 1721, that Bach had already met the Margrave, at which time Bach had been invited to provide some orchestral music.

"Your Royal Highness; As I had a couple of years ago the pleasure of appearing before Your Royal Highness, by virtue of Your Highness' commands and as I noticed then that Your Highness took some pleasure in the small talents which Heaven has given me for Music, and as in taking leave of Your Royal Highness, Your Highness deigned to honor me with the command to send Your Highness some pieces of my Composition: I have then in accordance with Your Highness' most gracious orders taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which I have adapted to several instruments.... For the rest, Sire, I beg Your Royal Highness very humbly to have the goodness to continue Your Highness' gracious favour toward me, and to be assured that nothing is so close to my heart as the wish that I may be employed on occasions more worthy of Your Royal Highness and of Your Highness' service...."

There is some internal evidence in the music itself that Bach was intending to visit Berlin in person for the first performances, and that he sent the scores in advance for familiarization by the musicians. There are for example some musicological errors in the scores – hardly something Bach would permit were he seriously dedicating music to a dignitary, particularly with the hope of prospective employment. Another indication is the missing middle movement of the Third Concerto – Bach provides only the final cadence of what presumably would have been an extemporization by himself. Our recording offers a brief improvisation on the harpsichord, sufficient to provide relief between the two outer movements.

History shows no record of Bach's having subsequently visited the Margrave at his Brandenburg Court. Had it been anticipated that Bach would attend for their performance, it seems likely that the Margrave would not have had these Concertos performed until Bach was present. This could explain why the Concertos were not performed, but were left on the shelves of the Court Archives for over thirteen years. The manuscripts were then re-discovered at the Margrave's death in 1734, wrapped and bundled together with some lesser material to be sold for a total of two thalers. Fortunately, the "lot" was picked up by Bach's faithful pupil Johann Philipp Kirnberger, who of course immediately appreciated their true value.

The individual concertos themselves were scored to provide an opportunity for each of the Margrave's musicians – and those of our own Brandenburg Bach Orchestra – to take a turn. In the scores we find – beside the usual strings – hunting horns, oboes, bassoon, trumpet, viols, recorders, and flutes.

The Fifth Concerto features a *concertante* harpsichord – something of a novelty at a time when harpsichords were expected to provide a beat and continuo bass only, and like Victorian children, should be seen but not heard. Bach would surely have intended to perform this demanding score with its brilliant cadenza himself.

The Six Concertos follow the usual three-movement pattern of fast-slow-fast. The notable exception is the first Concerto, which for some reason best known to its composer, further entertains us with a Minuet, two Trios and a Polacca, turning the Concerto into more of an Orchestral Suite. Bach re-worked these latter movements in 1730 to form a Sinfonia.

As to the **Four Orchestral Suites**, there is some uncertainty as to whether they, like the Brandenburg Concertos, were Cöthen works, or whether they date from Bach's Leipzig years. They have come down to us as copies retained by Bach's son Carl Philip Emanuel, part in his own hand and part in his father's, dating from the 1730s. Whether these copies represented the works' first appearance or were copies of earlier compositions, it is known that they were performed during the 1730s at Zimmermann's Collegium Musicum concerts.

In Bach's time, the city of Leipzig enjoyed numerous musical performances of various kinds, among which were those of the Collegia Musica. These were secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed University – a tradition dating back at least to the middle of the preceding century. 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. At the beginning of the 1700s, two new Collegia Musica – which were to enjoy a comparatively long existence – were founded by two young men at the University who were eventually to number among the most celebrated composers of their time. The first was established in 1702 by the redoubtable Georg Philipp Telemann. The other was begun six years later, by Johann Friedrich Fasch; Fasch's group later fell to the direction of Johann Gottlieb Görner, the Director of Music at the University and a constant musical rival of Bach's. After Telemann left Leipzig the leadership of the 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 Musicum.

Bach's Collegium Musicum was hosted regularly by the Leipzig coffeeshop-proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann who was himself clearly a music-lover and most probably a competent musician. 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 Catherine Strasse, centrally placed close to the Market Place. 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", with summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm. Leipzig was known during Bach's time as an attractive "tourist destination" with its paved streets lit at night, its fine buildings, vibrant musical and commercial life, and not least for the numerous ornamental gardens and fine tree walks surrounding its city walls.

These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular coffee shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual culinary attractions. Indeed the term *concert* had already begun to take the form known today. Two types of Concert were given: *Ordinaire* and *Extraordinaire*. The former were the standard performances; the latter were for special celebrations (King's birthdays and the like), and were usually marked by elaborate festive Cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor. 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 Leipzig newspapers announced the *Extraordinaire* events with full program details.

At the "regular" Concerts instrumental music would have been heard, ranging from clavier solos through sonatas to orchestral works. It was doubtless here that Bach's Concerti for one or several Harpsichords received their performances, many of these having been adapted from 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.

Bach's four Orchestral Suites follow the already established traditional pattern, based on a combination of opera and dance. The grand *Overture* would be followed by movements from the Opera itself forming an *Instrumental Suite*. Alternatively, the Suite might be written purely for dancing. Bach follows his grand *Overtures* with the usual dance movements – *Gavotte*, *Minuet*, *Bourrée* – adding some non-dance movements such as the so-called "*Air on the G-string*" from Suite 3 which has long been an favorite ingredient of any "Baroque Treasures" program. In fact the Air had a more pedestrian function – to allow a breather for the trumpeter. The narrow high-bore trumpets of Bach's day required a lot of "puff", and it was normal for movements involving trumpets to be separated by a movement in which the trumpet was silent. Another example can be seen in the second Brandenburg Concerto with its trumpet-less slow movement.

These Suites would certainly have made varied and entertaining listening. Indeed, the strident instrumentation including brass and timpani would have leant itself perfectly to performance out of doors in Zimmermann's Gardens just outside the city wall on a warm summer's evening.