

## BACH 715 - J.S. BACH: Concertos for 1, 2, 3 & 4 Harpsichords

Bach moved to Leipzig on May 22, 1723, where he was to live as Cantor of the Thomas Kirche for the remaining 27 years of his life. One significant reason for seeking a position in this city was to provide a high level of education and intellectual stimulus for his growing sons.

At the beginning of the 1700s Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state, with Leipzig as its economic capital. Leipzig, with a population of 30,000, was the second city of Saxony, the center of the German printing and publishing industries, an important European trading center, and site of a progressive and famous university. It was also one of the foremost centers of German cultural life, with magnificent private dwellings, streets well paved and illuminated at night, a recently opened municipal library, a majestic town hall, and a vibrant social life. Outside its massive town walls were elegant tree-lined promenades and extensive formal gardens, enhanced by the Pleisse River. The old-established University drew scholars and men of distinction from far and wide, and the famous book trade contributed much to the cultural life of the city.

One of Leipzig's most important features was its international commerce. When the three-times-yearly Leipzig Trade Fairs were in progress, the town was transformed into a show-ground mixing business with pleasure, and was popular with members of the Royal Court of Dresden. Many connections were established between nations on these occasions, and this in turn had a beneficial effect on the civic economy and culture as well as the international variety of its music. Leipzig was the center of book publishing in Germany and Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, 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.



Leipzig's eight Coffee Shops played an important role in the social and musical life of the city. The frontispiece to the Song Collection "The Singing Muse by the Pleisse" shows an idealized view of Richter's Coffee garden which nonetheless captures the lively cultured atmosphere of the city when it was published in 1736. Note the variety of activities - conversation, spinet-playing, cards, and yes, bottom right - snooker!

Music-making in Bach's time was largely provided by the *Collegia Musica* - secular musical organizations run mainly by the students of the city's famed University - a tradition dating back at least to 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 ones - 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. One was established in 1702 by Georg Philipp Telemann; the other was begun six years later, by Johann Friedrich Fasch. Fasch's organization ultimately 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 his Collegium was taken by Balthasar Schott, the Neukirche Organist.

In Spring 1729, Schott moved to a new position in Gotha, and Bach took over directorship of the *Collegium*. The story of Bach's *Collegium Musicum* is closely bound to a Leipzig coffee shop 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 Cather 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.

That Gottfried Zimmerman was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a highly 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 *clavycymbel 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: *Oдинаire* and *Extraordinaire*. The former were the normal run of performances; the latter were for special celebrations (kings' birthdays and the like), and were usually marked by elaborate festive cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor. (Bach adapted many of these works into church pieces; the Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248, for example, is made up primarily of such adaptations). About the regular concerts we know less; the Leipzig newspapers, in general, only bothered to announce the *Extraordinaire* events. These more probably consisted mainly of instrumental music, 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 his own 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.

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. These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular coffee shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual diversions offered there. The performances of the Collegium were, in fact, hardly different from what we consider to be normal concert procedure today. Indeed, the word *concert* began to be used expressly in connection with the *Collegium* during its later years.

The schedule of weekly performances - the composition of new works, rehearsing them and arranging programs, reveals that the *Collegium Musicum* was no mere diversion for Bach. The fact is that this was, for much of his later life, his central artistic activity, the church becoming almost peripheral. In his years with the *Collegium* Bach satisfied a side of himself that certainly must have lain dormant since the happy and fruitful period at Cöthen. He remained the Collegium's director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741.