

J.S. BACH : BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS 3,4,5 & 6

Transcribed for two pianos by Max Reger BACH 770

The SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS by J.S. Bach 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 which makes them instantly and universally enjoyable. They were written around 1721, when Bach was in service at the Court of the young music-loving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Though Bach enjoyed four happy and fruitful years in his service, the prince then married his cousin Friederika Henrietta, who proved not only to be distinctly unmusical, she gradually persuaded the prince to spend less time and resources on his musical pursuits. The prince lost interest in his court orchestra and had it disbanded. 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 24th 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 are several possible occasions on which the first meeting might have taken place. One possibility was on a visit by Bach to Berlin to find a new harpsichord for Prince Leopold of Cöthen; another could have been on a visit accompanying Prince Leopold to Carlsbad in the summer of 1718; or yet again, on one of Bach’s visits to the Court of Saxe Meinigen, whose Elector, Duke Ernest Ludwig, was married to a sister of the Margrave of Brandenburg.

There is some internal evidence in the music itself that Bach was intending to visit Berlin in person for the first performances. 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. The most noteworthy indication however is the missing middle movement of the third concerto. Bach, so his contemporaries frequently noted, would not even permit his performers to put in their own trills and elaborations; he would certainly not have left an entire movement to the whim of some distant performer about whose capabilities Bach knew nothing.

History shows no record of Bach’s having subsequently visited the Margrave at his Brandenburg Court. There could be many reasons for this. The Margrave was not easily accessible as he was more frequently to be found in residence at his estates at Malchov than in Berlin. Moreover the death of Kuhnau in June 1722 opened the possibility of an appointment for Bach at Leipzig, perhaps more attractive to him than Berlin.

Nonetheless this entirely credible possibility of a personal visit by Bach would explain much. First, if a visit had been planned, or an invitation hoped for, it would be quite likely and very sensible for Bach to send in advance of his visit a set of scores that he would wish to conduct before the Margrave, so that the orchestra could familiarize themselves with the music. Second, any errors could of course be corrected during rehearsals under Bach himself. Third, if Bach had planned to be present and to provide an improvisation, this would solve the enigma of the “missing” slow movement to the third concerto.

Additionally, if it had 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 bunched 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.

While perhaps giving some indication of a planned visit by Bach with performance conducted by himself in person the missing movement to the third concerto now requires some consideration by contemporary performers. Was it intended that the two bare chords be played as written? Surely not. An improvisation by Bach seems far more likely. But we can in fact learn more from the nature of the two chords themselves. For these two chords serve a specific purpose, namely to bring the listener back to the major key for the final movement, from the relative minor of an expected improvisatory slow movement. There are many cases in baroque music where these two chords serve precisely that function.

Examples can be found in Handel's Organ Concerto No 1 in g minor (leading the first minor-key movement into the relative major for the second movement), or in Bach's Trio Sonata BWV 1039 (minor-key adagio to major-key presto). This would indicate that a minor-key movement or interpolation was intended for the third concerto. Indeed the use of the relative minor for the slow movement is general throughout the six Brandenburg concertos, and in fact the slow movement to the Fourth Concerto is not only in the relative minor, it regains the major tonality through precisely *the same chordal combination* as the two chords indicated for the Third.

We may therefore suppose that an elaboration or improvisation of some kind was intended, and that it was to be in the relative minor key, the written chords serving to "bring back" the minor into its relative major. Now we must ask: what sort of an improvisation was intended?

Several performers have used harpsichord improvisations. But should we assume the improvisation was to be on the harpsichord? The earlier views on baroque performance developing during the 1960s laid stress on the custom of conducting from the harpsichord and no doubt Bach would have done this in his harpsichord concertos. However, much academic opinion now gives weight to the violin as being Bach's preferred contribution to the orchestra as conductor/leader, for he was better able to control the orchestra from this standing position. He might well, therefore, have intended to conduct these concertos from the violin and not the harpsichord - though he would doubtless have taken the harpsichord himself for the fifth concerto!

If a violin improvisation is to be considered, what are the possibilities here? Bach's father was a violinist, and Bach learned the violin at an early age, possibly even before studying the keyboard. While he was in Cöthen, about the same time as the Brandenburg concertos were written, Bach composed the Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. Could it be that he had intended to use a movement from one of these works as his improvisation in the third Concerto? If so, then the Sarabande from Partita II in d minor, BWV 1004 could be a distinct possibility, transposed up to e minor. It is this movement, transcribed for two pianos by the present interpreters, which is included in the present recording.

Orchestrations can never be so clear, and in most performances of the Fifth for example, the harpsichord is inaudible. These are measured performances, taken at a pace allowing full clarity of texture.

Our cover photos show the miniature Czech Spa Town of Frantiskovy Lazne, now restored to its original 18th century beauty. The town was officially founded in the year 1793 under the name *Kaiser Franzensdorf* (Emperor Francis II's village) and later renamed to *Franzensbad*, taking its Czech name after WWI.