

Tafelmusik

Johann Sebastian Bach
Brandenburg Concertos

PROGRAMME NOTES

Six Concertos with Several Instruments

Dedicated to His Royal Highness

Monseigneur Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, &c.

by His very humble and very obedient servant

Johann Sebastian Bach

Kapellmeister of His Most Serene Highness,

the Reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen

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 honour 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; begging Your Highness most humbly not to judge their imperfection with the rigour of the fine and delicate taste which the whole world knows Your Highness has for musical pieces; but rather to infer from them in benign Consideration the profound respect and most humble obedience which I try to show Your Highness therewith. For the rest, Sire, I beg Your Royal Highness very humbly to have the goodness to continue Your Highness' gracious heart as the wish that I may be employed on occasions more worthy of Your Royal Highness and of Your Highness' service, I, who without an equal in zeal am, Sire, Your Royal Highness' most humble and obedient servant.

Jean Sebastien Bach
Cöthen, March 24, 1721

So reads the dedication on the title page of the fair copy of the so-called Brandenburg Concertos. Margrave Christian Ludwig, uncle of the "Soldier King" of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm I, was a cultured and musically literate man. He kept his own *Kapelle* at Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin, and had a collection of scores of concertos "*von diversen Meistern*," most of them Italian. The meeting with Bach to which the latter refers in his dedication probably took place in 1719, when Bach was in Berlin to take possession of a new harpsichord for the Cöthen court built by the Berlin instrument maker, Michael Mietke. Bach may well have had the opportunity to study the Margrave's concerto collection, and his own offering of a score of six concertos "*avec plusieurs instruments*" eventually joined the

others on the Margrave's library shelves.

Bach's title was apt, as the variety of instrumentation in these concertos is their trademark feature and far exceeds that of any comparable set from the period. The choice of instruments was probably inspired by the musicians of the Cöthen court, where Bach was employed as *Kapellmeister*. The sixteen regular members of the *Kapelle* included almost all the instrumentalists needed to perform the six concertos. The works are concerti grossi, each with a group of soloists supported by a string orchestra. In this case Bach undoubtedly had in mind a string "orchestra" of only one player per part, resulting in works with a distinctly chamber quality.

The first concerto is the largest of the six, scored for thirteen musicians: three oboes, bassoon, two horns, *violino piccolo* (a small violin tuned a third higher than usual), a quintet of strings, and harpsichord continuo. It is a reworking of the three-movement Sinfonia in F, BWV 1046a. The latter was thought to have been used as an introduction to the secular cantata "*Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd*," BWV 208, written in 1713 for the hunting festivities celebrating the birthday of Prince Christian of Saxe-Weissenfels – hence the hunting calls of the horns in the first movement. Substantial revisions were made to this sinfonia when Bach re-worked it as a concerto. The sinfonia does not include the *violino piccolo*, nor does it include the third movement which heavily features that instrument. The sequence of minuets and trios in the concerto is revised and many details of melody, rhythm and ornamentation are altered. Bach returned to the work several times after 1721, using individual movements in both sacred and secular cantatas.

The third concerto is thought to have been composed as early as 1712, clearly inspired by the four-violin concertos in Vivaldi's *L'Estro armonico*. As in the Vivaldi model, Bach creates an orchestra out of a group of solo string players, in this case three violins, three violas and three cellos, with double bass and harpsichord continuo. Bach constantly shifts the roles of the players — at times the three groups play antiphonally, at other times an individual steps forward for a brief solo, and at yet other times all eleven instruments come together to play an "orchestral" tutti. Bach later re-used the first movement of the concerto as the sinfonia for Cantata 174 "*Ich liebe den Höchsten von ganzem Gemüte*," adding parts for two horns and three oboes to the already rich sound of the strings.

The fourth and fifth concertos were written shortly before the Brandenburg compilation, both featuring a trio of solo instruments. In the fourth concerto a solo violin is paired with two recorders, the violinist taking the lead in brilliant passagework. The violin yields to the recorders only in the slow movement, playing an accompanying role to their plaintive echos.

The fifth concerto was undoubtedly inspired by the new Mietke harpsichord. This concerto has been described as both revolutionary and evolutionary: for the first time in a concerto the harpsichord steps forward from its traditional function as an accompanying continuo instrument to take on a solo role, and it does so in spades. The harpsichord overshadows the two other solo instruments (flute and violin), claiming all the virtuoso passagework and finally silencing them altogether in a massive solo cadenza. No less than thirteen 18th-century sources for this concerto exist, in various hands, a testament to the work's popularity then as now.