

AMERICAN BACH SOLOISTS

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support materials for our recording of

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750): BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS
AMERICAN BACH SOLOISTS
Jeffrey Thomas, conductor

On 24 March 1721, a few days after his thirty-sixth birthday, J. S. Bach signed the dedicatory preface to a meticulously prepared and beautifully penned manuscript of “Concertos avec plusieurs instruments” (“Concertos with several instruments”), an offering to the Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, who lived in Berlin. Bach did not compose these concertos specifically for this collection; indeed, the set can be seen as his selection of the best concerto movements he had written over the previous decade, as he encountered, emulated, and finally assimilated the concerto style of Vivaldi and other contemporary Italian masters.

Early definitions of the concerto as a musical genre alternatively (and ambiguously) translate the term as “disputation” and “agreement” — scarcely a sign of terminological clarity! Nevertheless, this contradiction does give a useful sense of the formal rhetoric of the concerto: the very differentiation of instrumental forces into tutti and solo groupings generates an immediate sense of opposition, or disputation, but the composer’s task is to render this opposition productive and agreeable. Bach and the composers of his day used the term “concerto” quite promiscuously: it is, for example, one of Bach’s customary generic titles for the works we now call “cantatas” — an acknowledgment of the contrasts between instrumental and vocal, or solo and choral forces, all functioning in “concert.”

Bach’s first essays in emulating the Italian concerto took the form of keyboard transcriptions, or arrangements, of published concertos by Vivaldi and others. The transfer of the idiom from the orchestral originals to keyboard, whether organ or harpsichord, radically narrowed the range of contrast possible between the opposing sonorities, but it still afforded ample experience in manipulating the formal and technical devices of the Italians. Most important among these was the use of ritornello form as a structural principle. (In this type of form, a memorable block of music returns in various guises at strategic points in the piece as an audible musical marker, simultaneously establishing shape and coherence through repetition, and generating considerable musical tension by being recalled in various keys.) This principle later informs not only Bach’s grasp of the concerto proper, but virtually every genre in which he composed.

Bach’s concerto transcriptions for keyboard arose during his employment as organist, and later Kapellmeister, at

the ducal court of Weimar. Upon taking up duties as the Kapellmeister to the Prince of Anhalt-Köthen in 1717, Bach was expected to compose regularly for the court orchestra, and he transferred the concerto style back to its native, orchestral habitat, now in music of his own composition. Thus by the time he copied out the manuscript for the Margrave, he would have had several years’ supply of orchestral works from which to draw. This may account, at least in part, for the diversity of style and instrumentation in the collection: from the smooth, sonorous agreement of all the instruments in the Sixth, to the highly developed contrasts of the Fourth, with its distinctive recorders, or the Fifth, with its three independent soloists, we can hear Bach experimenting with different realizations of the concerto idea.

Eager perhaps to offer a collection which would effectively compliment the Margrave’s excellent orchestra, Bach’s aims in revision and compilation seem to have been to present six entirely disparate solutions to the concerto genre, which was by no means fixed and which could imply many instrumental combinations. Never, in fact, was he to better his achievement here, and each concerto seems exhaustively to exploit a different aspect of the genre: no two share the same instrumentation.

— John Butt, Alan Lewis, & Kristi Brown-Montesano

Brandenburg Concerto No 1 in F, BWV 1046

An early version of the First Brandenburg Concerto (without the violino piccolo) contains only the first two movements and the minuet. In the later version, the added third movement helps transform the music from a sinfonia into a concerto form. This Allegro later appears as a choral movement in Cantata 207, which could imply that it might have originated as a choral piece that has subsequently been lost. What distinguishes this concerto from the other five is the addition of five dance movements (the first of which, Menuetto, alternates with the remaining four). This gives the work the character of a French suite, something which would doubtless have flattered the Francophile tastes of the Margrave. Although in comparison with the contemporary works of Vivaldi, Telemann and Handel, these Brandenburg concerti seem that much more densely composed, Bach is never a victim of musical cholesterol:

every added note and figuration contributes to the overall momentum and affect, Bach's extravagance is always "economical" and relevant. And - as the dances show - he was not afraid to adopt a lighter texture when it suited the style of the musical genre. — J.B.

Brandenburg Concerto No 2 in F, BWV 1047

The Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F has four soloists: trumpet, recorder, oboe, and violin, along with strings and continuo. Bach combines the solo instruments in various ways, and displays both their potential for successful cooperation and their individual virtuosity (the high tromba parts in the outer movements are particularly impressive). The solo trumpet and the orchestral strings retire for the second movement, leaving the remaining soloists and continuo to present a lyrical meditation on a simple two-bar melodic fragment. As if to compensate the trumpet for its silence during the Andante, Bach gives it both the first and last word in the closing fugue, built on a fanfare-like subject. — A.L.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G, BWV 1048

Sonorous repartee invigorates the more traditional homogenous string instrumentation of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major. The three distinct groups— violins, violas, and violoncellos (joined, of course, by the basso continuo)—conflate the roles of solo and ripieno, sustaining a harmonic fullness amid the contrapuntal interaction. The delightful, three-way motivic rallies provide balance and energy to the two fast movements, an energy checked only momentarily by the two-note Adagio transition before bursting forth once again. — K.B.-M.

Brandenburg Concerto No 4 in G, BWV 1049

The Fourth Brandenburg Concerto opens with an extensive ritornello which not only introduces the basic material for the movement but also reveals the instrumental argument: a solo group is contrasted with the rest of the orchestra and within this solo group there is a dialog between the two recorders and the violin. This ritornello functions as a microcosm of the work as a whole, containing its own contrasts, departures and returns; only at the end of the movement do we hear it again complete. Intermediate returns of portions of the ritornello give the movement a sense of architecture, something to provide pillars between the episodes. However, rather than simply confining the solos to the episodes, Bach dislocates the solo argument from the ritornello structure: we simply cannot predict when the soloists will be strongly profiled, they are continually weaving in and out of the larger orchestral texture. The second movement introduces a new concept of the concerto: here there is a close dialog between the solo group and the orchestra in which the contrast is highlighted by dynamics rather than material. The piece thus plays on the concepts of repetition and light and shade. With the final movement we hear yet another interpretation of the concerto style: the opening ritornello is essentially a

fugue, the subject of which can subsequently be used in a variety of ways. Indeed there are only a few places where it is entirely absent. Thus the expected contrast of ritornello and episode is replaced by frequent contrasts of instrumentation, the fuller expositions of the subject providing the tutti sonority usually associated with the ritornello. Furthermore another traditional feature of the concerto - virtuosity - is provided by the violin part, something which by its very nature turns a fugue - brilliant enough on its own terms - into a dazzling concerto movement. — J.B.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D, BWV 1050

The Fifth Brandenburg Concerto dates from the Köthen era, and presents a somewhat unlikely trio of soloists: the violin is usual enough, but the transverse flute was a very new instrument in German orchestras in 1721, an import from the trend-setting court of France. Most peculiar of all, though, is the appearance of the harpsichord in the solo group: this instrument was perfectly familiar as a solo instrument, or as a continuo "chord-filler" within an orchestral texture, but was quite new as a concerto soloist. The comparatively thin tone of the instrument doubtlessly rendered it traditionally unsuitable to carry a solo line, but the construction of larger instruments, and, particularly, the court's well-documented acquisition of a large harpsichord from Berlin in 1719, might well have accounted for Bach's groundbreaking experiment. The instrument is hardly coy in its first appearance within a concerted context: it is accorded the most virtuosic writing, quite often dominating the texture of the other two instruments. Nevertheless, it does not - initially - have significantly more thematic material, so its exuberance barely affects the fairly standard course of the piece. However, in the closing section of the first movement, the harpsichord takes over entirely, presenting a frenzied cadenza which all but forsakes the principal motives and melodies. Only at the last minute does the opening ritornello return to restore order. Several interpretations of this state of affairs are possible: one recent theory suggests that the harpsichord - as normally the "servant" of the other, solo instruments - overthrows the existing hierarchy; in a more formalistic sense, it might represent a fevered search for closure, something which has been continually frustrated throughout the course of the movement. Of all Bach's instrumental works, this is the one which seems most to challenge the establishment of a hierarchy within the music, perhaps an allusion to his belief that all humans are created equal under God and that even established earthly orders are only temporary. The second movement is a trio for the three solo instruments alone - the point at which the concerto genre comes closest to the sonata. This scoring does not seem so unusual when it is considered that the majority of Bach's concertos were almost certainly performed with only a single instrument on each line: in other words, every instrument is, in a sense, a soloist. The final movement is an exceedingly vivacious gigue, which presents both a ritornello form and a large-scale da capo of the opening section. The harpsichord is considerably better behaved than in the first movement, sharing out the solo

sections with the other instruments. Nevertheless, it still has the fastest note-values. — J.B.

Brandenburg Concerto No 6 in B-flat, BWV 1051

As many scholars have speculated as to the origins and age of each concerto, there is a case for dating the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto to the earliest stage of the composition since it seems to be a “group concerto” employing supposedly archaic instruments, specifically the two violas da gamba. Nevertheless Bach may purposely have been mixing “ancient” and “modern” elements to create a work that was as unique in its form as in its musical ideas. Indeed the opening movement employs the ritornello form of the modern Vivaldi concerto, and it contains several textural contrasts which give the illusion of solo-tutti forces. The ritornello technique here is one of Bach’s most ingenious: virtually everything counts as ritornello since it is reused during the course of the movement. Another

interesting device is the canonic writing for violas at the outset, something which provides an extremely dramatic atmosphere that characterizes the entire movement. The second movement is essentially a sonata trio, an example of the close relation between concerto and sonata genres. Such generic ambiguity is enhanced when a concerto such as this employs single instruments: the concerto becomes more intimate without losing its “public” perspective. While the da capo form of the final movement originated in the aria genre and the gigue-like idiom came from the dance, the elaborated repetitions of the opening phrases relate to some of the oldest instrumental idioms in which the players traditionally provided elaborated divisions over a given melody. But here again Bach mixes the conventions: the violas da gamba, traditionally associated with the performance of divisions, have comparatively simple parts, while the most virtuosic writing is assigned to those most shy of stringed instruments, the violas. — J.B.

Why make another recording of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos? Two words: basso continuo!

As Johann Sebastian Bach went to some trouble indeed to provide the Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg with a stunning assortment of unique orchestrations in these six “Brandenburg” concertos, we seize the opportunity to instill even more variety in these timeless works by varying the colors of the only part of Bach’s orchestra that is available to such an indulgence: the basso continuo.

Although Bach’s indications call only generically for continuo, or at times most specifically violone e cembalo, a “continuo group” can include any one or several of the typical bass line and realizing instruments, including the harpsichord, organ, lute, violoncello, bassoon, violone, and contrabass.

The choice of string instrument used to play the continuo line (other than violoncello) is less free: Specific indications regarding the nature of the bass line and its range (lowest note) almost always result in an obvious solution.

Our scheme regarding the realizing instruments—those used to play chordal harmonizations above and along with the bass line—for these performances is as follows:

- For the first concerto, in keeping with the larger scale of the work, we employ not one but two harpsichords, a practice borrowed from the theater; a 16’ violone is used, the lowest string tuned down to C1.
- For the second, we utilize a chamber organ rather than a harpsichord (chamber organs were a very popular continuo instrument for secular as well as sacred music, and provide a highly complementary timbre to the solo trumpet); an 8’ “G” violone is used, since the violoncello and continuo line are often an octave apart, meaning that the use of a 16’ instrument would cause a two-octave separation between it and the ‘cello.
- For the third, borrowing from Bach’s scoring for three different string groups (violins, violas, and violoncellos), we use three instruments (organ, harpsichord, and lute); a 16’ violone is used, the lowest string tuned down to C1.
- For the fourth, a harpsichord and lute; a 16’ violone is used (normal tuning with D1 as the lowest string).
- We think the fifth’s cembalo concertato stands by itself; a 16’ violone is used (normal tuning with D1 as the lowest string).
- And for the sixth, with its “royal” instrumentation of two violas da gamba, we call upon two lutes to complete the sonority; an 8’ “G” violone is used due to the lowest pitch (Bb₀) of the part.

— Jeffrey Thomas

THE MUSICIANS & THEIR INSTRUMENTS

Violin

Elizabeth Blumenstock
Desiderio Quercetani, Parma,
1995; after Stradivarius.

Tekla Cunningham
Johannes Ulricus Eberle,
Prague, 1807.

Jolianne von Einem
Rowland Ross, England, 1989;
copy of Stradivarius.

Katherine Kyme
Johann Gottlob Pfretzfehner,
1791. Carlo Antonio Testore,
Milan, 1720.

Cynthia Miller Freivogel
Anonymous, Germany, circa
1780; after Antonius and
Hieronymus Amati, Cremona,
1688.

Carla Moore
Johann Georg Thir, Vienna,
1754.

Cynthia Roberts
Lorenzo and Tomaso Carcassi,
Florence, 1760.

Michael Sand
Santo Seraphim, Venice, circa
1720.

Jörg-Michael Schwarz
Pieter Rombouts, Amsterdam,
1733.

Lisa Weiss
Rowland Ross, England, 1989;
after Amati.

David Wilson
Timothy Johnson, Indiana,
1997; after Stradivari,
Cremona, 17th century.

Violino Piccolo

Cynthia Roberts
Anonymous, Mirecourt 1800,
on Generous Loan from
William Monical, Staten Island,
NY.

Anthony Martin
Bartholom aus Karner,
Mittenwald, 1793.

Viola

David Daniel Bowes
Richard Duke, London, circa
1780.

Katherine Kyme
Richard Duke, London, 1780.
Anonymous, Germany, 18th-
century.

Anthony Martin
Ædigiuz Kloz, Mittenwald,
1790.

Aaron Westman
Dmitry Badiarov, Brussels,
2003; after 18th century Italian
models.

Elly Winer
Joseph Hill, London, circa
1760.

Violoncello

Joanna Blendulf
Timothy Johnson, Indiana,
1999; after Nicola Gagliano,
Naples, 1785.

Claire Garabedian
Dominik Zuchowicz, Ottawa,
Canada, 1990; after Gofriller,
Venice, 1699.

Sergei Istomin
Dominik Zuchowicz, Ottawa,
Canada, 1994; after baroque
models.

Elisabeth Le Guin
Giovanni Grancino, Milan,
1725.

William Skeen
Anonymous, Tyrol, circa 1750.

Tanya Tomkins
Lockey Hill, London, 1780.

Viola da Gamba

Sergei Istomin
Claude Boivin, Paris, 1746.

Mary Springfels
Thomas Cole, England, 1678.

Violone & Contrabass

Steven Lehnig
Hammond Ashley Luthiers,
Washington, 1977; after 17th
century models.
John Pringle, North Carolina,
1992; after Ernst Busch,
Nürnberg, circa 1640.
Anonymous, France, circa
1830.

Archlute & Theorbo

Michael Eagan
Reid Galbraith; after J. C.
Hoffmann circa 1714.

David Tayler
Klaus Jacobsen, London,
1982; copy of Matteo Sellas,
Venice, circa 1630.

Recorder

Aldo Abreu
Tom Prescott, Massachusetts,
1976; copy of J. Denner,
private collection of Hans
Ulrich Staeps, 18th-century.
David Coomber, Utrecht,
1983; copy of J. Denner,
Musikhistorisk Museum
Copenhagen, 1720.
Ricardo Kanji & Jacqueline
Sorel, The Hague, 1993; copy
of J. Denner, Musikhistorisk
Museum Copenhagen, 1720.

Judith Linsenberg
Henri Gohin, Boissy l'aillerie,
France, 1987; copy of P.
Bressan, London, circa 1710.

Flute

Sandra Miller
Rod Cameron, California,
1983; after of Rottenburgh,
Belgium, 1750.
Rod Cameron, California,
1986; after Cahusac, England,
1740.

Oboe

John Abberger
H. A. Vas Dias, Georgia; after
Thomas Stanesby, Sr., London.

Stephen Hammer
H. A. Vas Dias, Georgia, 2002;
after T. Stanesby Sr., London,
1700.

Mark Maslow
Toshi Hasegawa, Netherlands,
1985; after Paulhahn,
Germany, circa 1720.

Debra Nagy
Oboe: Randy Cook, Basel,
2004; after Jonathan Bradbury,
London, circa 1720.

Gonzalo Ruiz
Phil Levin, New Jersey; after
Saxon models.

Trumpet

John Thiessen
Stephen Keavy, London, 1987;
after Nuremberg, 1720.
Stephen Keavy, London, 1994;
after Nuremberg, 1720.

Horn

John Boden
Richard Seraphinoff, Indiana,
1997; copy of J. W. Haas,
Nürnberg, early 18th century.

Paul Avril
Lowell Greer, Michigan, 1981;
after Anonymous, Vienna, circa
1750.

Derek Conrod
John Webb, London, 1993;
after Leichnamschneider,
Vienna, circa 1720.

Bassoon

Marilyn Boenau
Levin & Ross, New Jersey,
1991; after Eichentopf, Leipzig,
circa 1725.

Kate van Orden
Peter de Koningh, Hall
Netherlands, 1986; copy of
Prudent, Paris, circa 1770.

Harpisichord

John Butt
John Phillips, California, 1981;
copy of Ruckers-Taskin.
Michael Sponseller
John Phillips, California, 1981;
copy of Ruckers-Taskin.

Jeffrey Thomas
Martin Skowronek, Bremen-
Oberneuland, 1966; after
Christian Zelle, Hamburg, circa
1728.

Elaine Thornburgh
Larry Snyder, California, 1974;
after Blanchet, France, 1730.

Organ

Jeffrey Thomas
Jürgen Ahrend, Germany,
1975.