

13. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos

Waking up on a sunny day to the joyful sound of a Bach Brandenburg makes you feel glad to be alive

IN 1719 Johann Sebastian Bach visited Berlin in the Margraviate of Brandenburg to approve and pick up a new harpsichord for his employer, Prince Christian Leopold of Cöthen. While there he may have played for the Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, who requested him to write some pieces for his extensive music library. Two years later, on 24th March 1721, Bach sent the Margrave a manuscript with the French title 'Six Concerts Avec plusieurs Instruments' (six concertos with several instruments). As far as we know, Bach never received an acknowledgement, and it may be that the Margrave never bothered to perform the works or even examined the scores. His estate inventory didn't catalogue them but included the manuscript in a bulk lot of 177 concertos. In fact, Bach's Brandenburgs, the greatest secular masterpieces of the baroque era, remained unknown until they were finally published in 1850 in commemoration of the centenary of Bach's death. Their popularity had to wait nearly another century for the record player.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 in Eisenach, famous for its Wartburg Castle. He was the youngest child of Johann Ambrosius Bach, the director of the town musicians, who taught him to play violin and harpsichord. His mother and father both died when he was only 9 years old and he moved in with his elder brother, an organist in St Michael's Church in Ohrdruf, near Erfurt.

He went to the lyceum there, learned Latin and sang in the school choir. In 1700 he went to school in Lüneburg, where he sang in the local church. By the time he left he was also an organ virtuoso of some renown, and in 1703 he was appointed organist in the Neue Kirche in the town of Arnstadt. This was followed by a short period as organist in the town of Mühlhausen, where his compositions included the famous *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor*. Here he brought his second cousin Maria Barbara whom he married in October 1707. She died prematurely in 1720, having borne 7 children. He married his second wife Anna Magdalena a year later, and she was to bear him a further 13 children.

In 1708 the Duke of Weimar offered him a post among his court chamber musicians and Bach seized the opportunity. He was both a member of the orchestra as violinist and court organist. This was the first productive period of composition, when most of his organ works were written. His reputation as organist also spread throughout the country. One contemporary described his playing thus: "*His feet seemed to fly across the pedals as if they were winged, and mighty sounds filled the church*".

A complete change in Bach's life came in 1717, when he was appointed Kapellmeister, or court Musician, to the Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Leopold, a keen amateur musician who sang and played the violin, viola da gamba and harpsichord, liked his sounds secular, and in the quiet backwater of Cöthen, where he stayed for the next six years, Bach discovered an ideal place to cultivate the world of instrumental music, producing a rich library of sonatas,



partitas, suites and concertos including the works discussed here. It was not until the 19th century that they were given the name 'Brandenburg Concertos' by the Bach scholar Philipp Spitta.

The scores of the Brandenburgs make demands far in excess of the modest musical resources that the Margrave had in Berlin, which possibly explains why he probably put them away and never had them performed. It therefore seems likely that the composer, who kept his own copy of the score, intended his brilliantly diverse anthology to be played by the excellent band of some 18 players at Cöthen, of which he himself was director.

These scintillating works are gems of creative inspiration, displaying Bach's wide knowledge of the international scene, especially Italian and French styles. They represent a magnificent synthesis of the old Italian concerto grosso and – notably in nos. 4 and 5 – the newer solo concerto and, although they were not composed as a group but assembled by Bach from among the courtly entertainment he had composed between 1718 and 1721, they present a logical cycle by being all differently scored. Thus they demonstrate an incomparable attempt to explore different instrumental sonorities through an astonishing range of original musical forms.

No.1 is a majestic concerto symphony that features two hunting horns, outdoor instruments probably never before heard in an elegant chamber room. The dazzling writing for the trumpet in No.2 invests the two fast movements with such brilliance that we almost seem to be dealing with a solo concerto, yet Bach dispenses with the instrument in the beautiful andante. No.3 is a delightful example of the Baroque concerto, oozing dynamic drive throughout. No.4 is almost a violin concerto, with a lovely andante and a finale that is a stunning monument to Bach's virtuosity. No.5 is effectively the first harpsichord concerto in history and presumably allowed Bach himself to show off the new instrument he had bought in Berlin. No.6 is notable for its serenity and gravity and is the most intimate of the six, with a beautiful adagio.

In 1723 Bach was appointed Director of Music and Cantor in Leipzig, a position he held until his death in 1750. It was in this last period that he wrote some of his greatest sacred music, including the *St Matthew Passion* and the *Mass in B minor*. Of course, he himself regarded his entire body of work as reflecting the divine harmony of the universe and intended for the glory of God. Yet we do not have to agree with his analysis to appreciate the music of one of the greatest composers who ever lived, especially the sublime sounds of his 'secular' period at Cöthen.

Bach's Brandenburg Concertos have been aptly described as a hive of bees working diligently under a sunny, incredibly blue, summer sky; a miracle of sound which says that life is beautiful and orderly and good, every second chock-full of industry and purpose. Waking up on a sunny day to the joyful sound of a Brandenburg makes you feel glad to be alive.
