

## PROGRAM NOTES

### J.S. Bach: *Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major, BWV 1046*

“There is an exuberance and abundance of inspiration in this music which only a genius, aware of his newly achieved full mastery, could call forth.”

— Karl Geiringer, Bach biographer<sup>1</sup>

Over a decade, Bach wrote several Italian-style concertos for solo instruments and back-up band. While today we know of these works as the Brandenburg Concertos, they lack the shared instrumentation and tonality usually found in a set of pieces that are designed as a collection.<sup>2</sup> Scholars believe that Bach decided to assemble these concertos as a collection and dedicated the score to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg-Schwedt, with the hope that this dedication would ensure their performance.<sup>3</sup> The original score looks as if it was never used, however, and there is no record that Christian Ludwig thanked Bach for the music.<sup>4</sup> It is Christian Ludwig and his court's grave loss, for the Brandenburg Concertos are some of the most exhilarating music ever written.

What makes these works so significant, and delicious, is the virtuosic writing for unusual groupings of instruments. The standard concerto grosso format is a large group of instruments (known as the “ripieno” or the “concerto grosso”) alternating with a smaller group or soloist (the “concertino”). Vivaldi and Bach both abandoned this format in favor of a variety of musical instrument combinations. What makes Bach's concertos so exciting, however, is the variety and unexpectedness of his instrument groupings. The Brandenburg Concertos feature all kinds of combinations, from homogeneous string sounds in Nos. 3 and 6 to the heterogeneous mixing of brass, woodwind, string, and keyboard instruments.<sup>5</sup>

Concerto No. 1 has the most full, layered, and complex orchestral sound of any of the works in the Brandenburg collection. The work is scored for two horns in F, three oboes, strings, continuo, and the violino piccolo, a mini violin tuned a minor third higher than a regular violin. Bach divides the instruments into three groups—strings, woodwinds, and brass—with rotating solo instruments within each group.

The dynamism of this instrumentation is showcased in the first three movements as Bach creates multiple layers of musical ideas one on top of the other, as well as call-and-response-like sections where the instrumental groupings imitate each other. In the first movement, Bach uses this technique with the instrumental choirs. In the second movement, the Adagio, he turns to a solo violin and oboe, answered by the other strings and oboes, and, in the third movement, a solo horn joins the violin and oboe.

In the fourth movement, however, the choirs of instruments are treated differently. This final movement is in the form of a minuet and trio, a 17th-century French dance in the form of ABACABA. For the A sections—the repetitions of the minuet—all the instruments play together; in each of the three middle sections, a different instrumental group is featured: first the woodwinds, then the strings in the polonaise (Polish dance), and finally the horns accompanied by unison oboes.

Bach's use of horns is one of the standout features of Concerto No. 1. Horns had been employed in musical compositions to depict hunting scenes, but this concerto is one of the earliest works to use horns as regular members of the orchestra.<sup>6</sup> Despite their new role in an ensemble, Bach calls for virtuoso technique from the horns. As if to emphasize their presence, Bach superimposes the opening horn calls onto the more traditional concerto music played by the rest of the orchestra, using a cross rhythm (triplets against the sixteenths of the orchestra), and he uses the traditional horn calls unaltered, even though some notes conflict with the harmonies of the orchestra.<sup>7</sup>

### **Stephen Hartke: *A Brandenburg Autumn***

"Bach gave us an alpha and omega of instrumental composition and orchestrational mastery, not just for the high Baroque period but for all time."

— Alan Kay, Artistic Director of Orpheus Chamber Orchestra<sup>8</sup>

In 2006, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra began the New Brandenburg Project, a commission series for six new works inspired by Bach's original Brandenburg Concertos. The concept was to use Bach's famed yet unusual works as a framework for modern listeners to experience modern music. Each commission mirrors the original in its instrumentation and grandeur, but is wholly new in its style and form.

Stephen Hartke, who responded to Brandenburg Concerto No 1, did so while in residence near the home of the Margrave of Brandenburg-Schwedt, the Brandenburgs' dedicatee. The commission became "something of a musical diary."<sup>9</sup> The first movement, Nocturne: Barcarolle, is a musical description of the Wannsee lake; the muted harpsichord is designed to sound like ropes striking against the masts of the sailboats moored in the marina.

The second movement, a playful Scherzo, is intended to mimic the rhythms and dynamic shapes of a lively dinner table discussion that alternates between polite conversation and feisty debate. The third movement, Sarabande: Palaces, is about strolling through the parks of Potsdam (the capital of Brandenburg) admiring the Hohenzollern palaces. Hartke explains:

It was hard not to think about Bach coming here to visit his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who was working at court, and, in the end, the movement came to have a few more overt references to the Baroque period. The harpsichord textures in particular spring from the Sarabande Double in Bach's D minor English Suite. And a harmonic juxtaposition in the opening quotes the theme by Frederick the Great that Bach elaborated in his Musical Offering.<sup>10</sup>

The last movement is a celebratory romp reminiscent of the orchestral pieces from the Baroque era that were played at outdoor parties.

## C.P.E. Bach: Cello Concerto in A major, Wq 172

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was the first son of J.S.'s first marriage and the most distinguished musician of the twenty Bach siblings, of whom ten survived to adulthood.<sup>11</sup> In his career of almost 60 years, C.P.E. Bach wrote over 1,000 separate works, ranging from popular songs to oratorios and from keyboard dance movements to orchestral symphonies.<sup>12</sup>

Both J.S. and C.P.E. used the works of Antonio Vivaldi as the model for their solo concertos.<sup>13</sup> From Vivaldi, the Bachs gleaned the stylistic elements of the Italianate concerto, which was all the rage in 18th-century Europe. The most significant of these characteristics are the three-movement structure and ritornello form—an instrumental refrain that returns multiple times throughout the movement, sometimes as a complete statement, sometimes just fragments. While ritornellos are commonplace now—they even show up as the chorus in pop songs—this was a new musical structure at the time. Vivaldi inspired the formal structure for the Cello Concerto in A major, Wq 172, but C.P.E. fashioned the concept in his own way. C.P.E.'s compositions are known for their angular melodies, rhythmic variety, short phrases, and constantly changing moods.

————— Emily Isaacson

### Notes

1. Karl Geiringer. *The Culmination of an Era*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
2. Breig, Werner. "The instrumental music," from *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*. (New York: 1997), pg. 131.
3. Martin Pearlman. <https://baroque.boston/js-bach-brandenburg-concertos/#program-notes>
4. Wolff, Christoph, and Walter Emery. "Bach, Johann Sebastian." *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press. Date of access 6 May. 2022, <<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-6002278195>>
5. Ibid.
6. Martin Pearlman. <https://baroque.boston/js-bach-brandenburg-concertos/#program-notes>.
7. Martin Pearlman. <https://baroque.boston/js-bach-brandenburg-concertos/#program-notes>.
8. Alan Kay. <https://www.wqxr.org/story/11020-orpheus-chamber-orchestra-the-new-brandenburgs/>
9. Stephen Hartke. <http://www.stephenhartke.com/brandenburg.htm>
10. Stephen Hartke. <http://www.stephenhartke.com/brandenburg.htm>
11. Paul Corneilson. [https://americansymphony.org/concert-notes/the-sons-of-bach-2/#:~:text=Johann%20Sebastian%20Bach%20\(1785%E2%80%931750,composers%20in%20their%20own%20right.](https://americansymphony.org/concert-notes/the-sons-of-bach-2/#:~:text=Johann%20Sebastian%20Bach%20(1785%E2%80%931750,composers%20in%20their%20own%20right.)
12. Wolff, C., & Leisinger, U. "Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel." *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved 3 May. 2023, from <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-6002278185>.
13. Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi* (Leipzig, 1991), 358.