

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

The Brandenburg Concertos

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany.

Died July 28, 1750, in Leipzig.

Composed around 1720.

Total concert duration: 2 hours, 15 minutes

Though Bach practically defines Baroque music as we know it today, he met with a surprising number of setbacks in his own lifetime. The Brandenburg Concertos were one such unsuccessful attempt for recognition. They were named after Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg, whom Bach only met once—in 1719 during a trip to Berlin. The Margrave asked for some of Bach's music but it took two years for the composer to deliver, at which time his employer, Prince Leopold of Cöthen, was having financial difficulties and Bach was probably looking for leads on a new job. Bach gathered six concertos with vastly different instrumentations, made revisions, and sent them to the Margrave in March 1721. Not only did Bach not get a job, there is no record the Margrave ever listened to them or even acknowledged Bach's gift. The Brandenburgs remained virtually unknown until they were rediscovered and published in 1850.

The **First Brandenburg Concerto** may be the oldest of the six, as there is an early version (without the third movement) believed to have been composed in 1713. It is unclear why Bach added the third movement as this is the only Brandenburg Concerto with four movements. This concerto calls for the largest ensemble of the six, including a wind section with three oboes, bassoon, and two horns. The winds are featured throughout but especially in the full-textured first movement and in the last movement, a compilation of dances. The piece also includes the piccolo violin, a small, higher pitched violin that essentially disappeared by the 19th century and is best remembered today for its role in this piece and Bach's 1731 cantata *Wachet auf*.

In the **Third Brandenburg**, there's no differentiation between soloists and accompanying strings. The nine string players take turns playing solo and ensemble parts. With three violins, three violas, and three cellos playing over the continuo line, it has the most homogenous sound of all the Brandenburgs, a stark contrast with the first concerto. The tightly knit strings work together and play off each other to generate exuberant momentum that sweeps inexorably forward. This is also the shortest of the Brandenburgs, partly because it doesn't have a slow movement—just two brief chords. The first violinist often plays a short cadenza to ornament what would otherwise be a simple half cadence.

The **Fifth Brandenburg** is special, even in this set of highly contrasted concertos. Not only is Bach's instrument, the harpsichord, included in the group of solo instruments (with flute and violin) but it is the first keyboard concerto of all time. Before this concerto, the harpsichord typically played accompaniment—its solo opportunities only came when it played completely alone. The reason for the unusual choice of instrumentation was probably to feature a new harpsichord, one that Bach brought home from a 1719 trip to Berlin (the same trip where he met the Margrave of Brandenburg). In the first movement, Bach gradually sneaks in the harpsichord solo, giving it successively longer individual

passages until finally the other instruments drop out and the harpsichord shines in intricate waves of notes.

The solo instruments in the **Second Brandenburg** are flute, oboe, violin, and piccolo trumpet, a very diverse group. And though Bach gives each instrument time in the spotlight, the trumpet's clear, high-pitched playing soars over the first and third movements. Its calls are echoed and reinforced by the other soloists, creating a sonic palette of string, woodwind, and brass that shines in the brilliant treble register. The second movement stands in stark contrast to the outer movements—the trumpet and ensemble strings drop out and the remaining soloists and continuo play something akin to an intimate sonata, an introspective interlude sandwiched between the high energy and bright tones of the outer movements.

SIDEBAR: Most movements in the Brandenburgs are in ritornello form, a style popularized by Vivaldi beginning around 1711. In this most Baroque of all forms, repeating sections of solid, stable melody alternate with free episodes of harmonic instability and instrumental virtuosity. Vivaldi used ritornello form to showcase his incredible technique on the violin, structuring the episodes to build tension, making each one longer and more harmonically far-reaching than the last. Bach, for his part, takes a more measured, thoughtful approach to the form, prioritizing compositional craft over flashy instrumental display. And in the Brandenburgs, he has no shortage of soloists or solo groups to feature in the episodes, giving him nearly endless variety of timbres and techniques at his disposal.

Bach wrote the **Sixth Brandenburg** for another unusual ensemble. It features a pair of solo violas—which in the Baroque era typically played harmony parts within the string ensemble—accompanied by parts for two violas da gamba (here performed on cellos) and continuo. The viola da gamba was the instrument played by Bach's employer at Cöthen, Prince Leopold, and was usually a solo instrument. "Bach reversed these roles, such that the violas perform virtuosic solo lines while the viols amble along in repeated eighth notes," wrote Bach scholar Michael Marissen. "Pursuing these two radical instrumental treatments within the same work was unprecedented (and wouldn't be imitated)... These kinds of inversions play a significant part in Christian scripture, which frequently proclaims that with God the first shall be last while the last shall be first."

The **Fourth Brandenburg Concerto** features a violin and two flutes accompanied by strings (two violins and viola) and continuo (cello, bass, and harpsichord). In the first movement, the flutes take the lead playing the ritornello melody while the violin has virtuosic passages in the episodes. The second movement is a feature for the flutes while the violin alternately accompanies them and joins the string section. The last movement is a series of lively fugal sections separated by episodes of graceful flute collaboration and fiery violin virtuosity.

SIDEBAR: The Margrave of Brandenburg died in 1734 with Bach's scores still in his library. Bach, who kept his own copies of the concertos, died in 1750. The manuscript copies of the score and parts passed through many different hands, including Bach's sons C.P.E. and J.C.F. Bach, the Margrave's niece

Princess Anna Amalia of Prussia, Bach's student Johann Philipp Kirnberger, as well as various private libraries before they ended up in the Berlin State Library by 1914. [PDF of the Margrave of Brandenburg's score](#)

By the time Bach died, his music had fallen out of favor. His unparalleled counterpoint remained an example of high Baroque style for students and connoisseurs, but it went largely unperformed. It wasn't until 1829, when Mendelssohn conducted the *St. Matthew Passion*, that a wider audience took a renewed interest in his music. An enthusiastic period of Bach performances and research ensued: a full-scale Bach Revival. The rediscovery of the Brandenburgs took 20 more years, but they were eventually published in 1850 as part of the first complete edition of Bach's works. Around 1880, Bach biographer Philipp Spitta coined the nickname 'Brandenburg Concertos' to replace what Bach had called 'Six Concerts avec plusieurs instruments' (Six Concertos for various instruments). With those many developments, our modern understanding of the Brandenburgs was created. The concertos now stand as prime examples of Baroque technique and style, combining intricate part-writing with spirited melodies in a dazzling variety of textures.

Notes by Laura Keller, CMS Editorial Manager
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