

Baroque masters – January 26, 2019

Concerto in D minor for Two Violins and String Orchestra Johann Sebastian Bach **BWV 1043** 1685-1750

Johann Sebastian Bach composed the bulk of his instrumental secular music during his employment at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen from 1717 to 1723. Since the court was Calvinist, there was no call on Bach to compose church music. From that period came the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the first book of the *Well-tempered Clavier*, the *Orchestral Suites* and many of the works that appear to have been lost in their original versions but crop up later as concertos for one, two, three and four harpsichords.

We know that during his years in Cöthen Bach composed at least four concertos for one violin and two for two violins. After his death, however, half his manuscripts went to his son Wilhelm Friedemann, who, perennially short of money, probably sold them for scrap paper, a valuable commodity at the time. The other half, including those of the A minor and E major violin concertos and the D minor concerto for two violins, ended up in the hands of his more fastidious son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, who took good care of them. We do not know when and by whom the Concerto for Two Violins was first performed, but it probably was at the court of Cöthen with its modest orchestra.

In the Concerto, Bach seems to have delighted in the many ways he could make the two soloists interact in dialogue intertwining and playing tag with the melodies. In fact, all three movements are short on thematic material in order to emphasize the flexibility of the main themes, which are shared equally by the two violins. The Concerto is composed in the high Baroque style “invented” by Antonio Vivaldi. Bach was a great admirer of the Italian composer, adopting his style and even resetting his Concerto for Four Violins as a concerto for four harpsichords.

The first and third movements have strong, driving ritornellos (thematic refrains), while the violin dialogue plays the intervening episodes. But the second movement belongs to the soloists alone, playing a gentle, serpentine melody in imitative counterpoint. It is among the most sensuous and emotive of all Bach’s concerto movements. The themes assiduously avoid tonic cadences in order to increase the harmonic tension. The movement includes a number of repeats, as if the young composer had been reluctant to release them.

Around 1739, while Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, Bach transcribed this Concerto for two harpsichords, to be performed by the *Bachisches Collegium*, the weekly concert of secular vocal and instrumental music held in Zimmermann’s Coffee House, a high-class bourgeois establishment spacious enough to accommodate a large ensemble.

Cello Concerto in G minor, RV 416 Antonio Vivaldi 1678-1741

Beginning in 1703 and intermittently for many decades, Antonio Vivaldi served as music factotum at the *Pio Ospedale della Pietá* in Venice, an institution devoted to the care and education of abandoned, orphaned and indigent girls—not a few of them with unacknowledged patrician pedigrees. There was with a special emphasis on musical training (no Dickensian work house or Dotheboys Hall this). In addition to his duties as virtuoso

violinist, violin teacher, orchestra director and instrument purchaser, Vivaldi served as resident composer, producing hundreds of works for various instruments and ensembles, including nearly 450 concerti, usually at a rate of more than two per month. The resident girls were trained in both string and wind instruments, including the organ, and as part of their training Vivaldi composed concertos for every instrument and instrument combination. Many of them were apparently written with specific girl soloists in mind.

While Vivaldi saw to it that his compositions were disseminated throughout Europe by printing 12 collections in Amsterdam – they greatly influenced J. S. Bach’s instrumental music – the published works represent only a small part of his output. Most of it remained in manuscript form, undated, in various collections. For nearly 200 years after his death his music was practically forgotten except by musicologists and historians. Only in the last century was Vivaldi rediscovered, in part through the efforts of American poet Ezra Pound who resided in Italy after World War I.

The concerto in the high Baroque style was in three movements, each movement based on a ritornello, or refrain, for the ensemble, interspersed with episodes for the soloist that were not necessarily based on the ritornello. Vivaldi’s concerti represented new stylistic features that were embraced by composers throughout Europe. J. S. Bach, who admired them greatly even transcribed some for other instruments (under his own name!) Copyrights came into existence a century thanks to Carl Maria von Weber.

Vivaldi composed at least 27 concertos for cello, string orchestra and basso continuo. None were published during his lifetime and the date of composition is unknown. They all explore the emotive and technical and emotive range of the instrument, and are somewhat subdued, compared to the flashier violin concertos. The G-minor Concerto is one of the earliest, its manuscript survived in the private collection of the Count Schönborn family in Germany.

Bassoon Concerto in E minor, RV 484

Antonio Vivaldi
1678-1741

Lacking among the girls in the *Ospedale* were bassoonists. There is no mention of bassoon solos or instruments among the records, and it is unclear for whom Vivaldi composed his 38 bassoon concertos – more than for any other instrument except the violin. None of them was published during his lifetime, but the manuscripts were preserved in the *Biblioteca Nazionale* in Turin. From their technical demands, it is clear that he composed them for a virtuoso. It should be noted that the Baroque bassoon was not the versatile instrument we know today; there were only a couple of keys, and makers were experimenting constantly to create more responsive and accurate double-reed instruments.

In the first movement of this concerto Vivaldi puts the bassoon through its paces; each episode features a different technique, with an emphasis is on rapid fingering.

The second movement of a Baroque concerto, virtually always in a slow tempo, was designed to showcase the emotive side of the solo instrument. Long, legato lines that could be freely embellished – either by the composer or by improvisation on the part of the soloist – were standard. Although the bassoon is not usually cited as a romantic instrument, Vivaldi does his best to smooth over the characteristic double reed vibrato of the instrument.

The third movement returns to the faster tempo and ritornello form of the first and involves even more difficult virtuosic playing for the soloist.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat major, BWV 1051

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

The six Brandenburg Concerti stand at the crossroads in musical history, where chamber music and orchestral music went their separate ways. These *Concerts à plusieurs instruments* (Concerti for various instruments) as Bach named them, were dedicated to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, who employed a modest orchestra that was in all probability too small and inexpert to play all the Concertos. The Dedication Score, including an obsequious cover letter by Bach, has been preserved and is now in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. The mint condition of the manuscript indicates that in all probability the Margrave's orchestra seldom if ever performed them.

The Concerti were composed between 1718 and 1721, although parts may have been written as early as 1708. They were not composed as an independent group, but rather assembled from various orchestral works Bach had already composed over the years; they may be described as courtly entertainment music on the highest level.

The sixth Concerto reflects the practice of ensemble music making with no clear distinction between solo and tutti sections. The absence of violins making for a subdued – but not somber – tone. Of the six Concertos, it is the least often programmed, because the absence of violins and inclusion of viols makes it difficult to perform with modern ensembles.

The first movement has a static quality about it in places because its ritornello is a close canon, sounding like a series of broken chords. Marked *adagio ma non tanto* (slow, but not too slow), the second movement is a duet for the first and second viola with an even quarter-note accompaniment by the cello. The ritornello begins as what appears to be a canon at the fifth at a very long distance, but breaks down so that the soloists can move into the episodes. The third movement is a gigue, the ritornello stated first as a simple melody, then repeated as a canon.

The Water Music, Suite No. 1 in F major

George Frideric Handel
1685-1759

Despite their familiarity, the *Water Music* suites, particularly the first one, are fraught with musicological mysteries. The myths and legends surrounding these works are as well-known as the music itself. Everyone “knows” that Handel's employer, George, Elector of Hanover and heir to the British throne, was miffed with his *Kapellmeister* for both overstaying a leave of absence in England and for writing laudatory compositions for England's Queen Anne, whose childlessness set him up to succeed her. We also “know” that when George became king of England, Handel arranged a suite to be played on a barge on the Thames as part of a royal regatta in order to get back into the good graces of the angry monarch.

Unfortunately, little of the story is substantiated. Handel did write his first *Water Music* Suite in 1715, a year after George's accession to the British throne, and there is ample evidence that he wrote the Suite for the Royal River Festival. But there is no hard evidence that the

composer had ever been out of favor with George, as evidenced by a *Te Deum* written for the king in 1714 and a Royal payment to Handel in 1715. Nevertheless, any convincing documentation pro or con the various stories of Handel's relationship with his boss at this point in his career has yet to turn up.

Since there is no manuscript of the full score and the earliest publication of the entire set was in 1788, there's a problem with the musical content. The Suite No. 1 is traditionally played in ten sections, eight in F major, two in the relative D minor. Nevertheless, there is some question about whether these ten numbers were all actually played at the premiere or whether Handel later added two sections from an earlier concerto composed the same year

The traditional Baroque suite consisted of four to six movements based on a standard menu of court dances. The *Water Music* Suites, however, incorporate non-dance movements, most of which bear only tempo marking and no title at all. The First Suite, for instance, opens in traditional French style, a slow overture featuring dotted rhythms. Movements two through five have only tempo markings; the sixth is titled "Air," and only the seventh and eighth ("minuet" and "bourrée") are traditional dance movements. The "hornpipe" of the ninth movement – inserted between repetitions of the bourrée – is unusual in that it was a popular English sailors' dance. There are now so many editions of this popular work with varying numbers of movements and titles that it is difficult to confine it to a definitive version. Several recordings refuse to name or distinguish between the movements at all.

The instrumentation varies from movement to movement, but usually employs oboes, bassoons and horns – typical instruments for outdoor performances – in addition to strings and continuo (which were probably later addition for indoor performances).

Program notes by:
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn
Wordpros@mindspring.com
www.wordprosmusic.com