

Bach Program Notes

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born: March 21, 1685, Eisenach

Died: July 28, 1750, Leipzig

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F major

When Bach assumed the post of Capellmeister to His Most Serene Highness Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, in 1717, he made the move in the hopes of spending the rest of his life there. The court was Calvinist and thus required no church music, and Bach enjoyed the change of not being primarily an organist and the challenge of providing great quantities of solo, chamber and orchestral music.

His new patron, just 23, loved music and played the violin, viola da gamba and keyboards skillfully. But the idyll was spoiled when Bach's wife died suddenly in the summer of 1720, and the next year the professional scene darkened when the Prince married. His musical interests, Bach recalled later, became "somewhat lukewarm, the more so since the new Princess seemed to be alien to the muses." In fact the Amusa, as Bach called her, soon died, and Leopold's second wife was a sympathetic and sensitive patron. But by then Bach was restless and determined to leave. In 1723 he moved to Leipzig, where he was the City Council's reluctant third choice as Director of Music at the churches of Saint Thomas and Saint Nicholas, and there he remained until his death in 1750.

Bach was looking around for greener pastures as early as March 1721, when, along with a suitably servile letter, he sent the Margrave of Brandenburg a handsome presentation copy of six concertos he had composed over the last year or so for performance at Cöthen. Bach had met the margrave and played for him in 1719 when he went to Berlin to collect a new harpsichord. (Brandenburg is the Prussian province immediately south and west of Berlin.) The margrave never replied to Bach, nor did he ever use or perhaps even open the score. We are lucky

that he at least kept it, because his copy is our only source for these forever vernal concertos, which have been called "the most entertaining music in the world."

Whenever Bach assembled a collection of pieces, he took pains to make it as diverse as possible, and musicians have always delighted in the wonderful timbral variety of the Brandenburgs. Variety for the sake of entertainment and charm must have been at the forefront of Bach's mind, but as he worked he must have become more and more fascinated with the compositional possibilities his varied instrumentations suggested. He constantly defines and articulates the succession of musical events by textural-timbral means: the Brandenburg Concertos are, so to speak, about their textures and their color.

the second Brandenburg Concerto

In the two Brandenburg concertos for strings alone, the third and the fourth, Bach sets himself the challenge of creating contrast where none explicitly exists. Here, in No. 2, he has the opposite task, to integrate his most heterogeneous consort of instruments: trumpet, recorder, oboe and violin, with strings and harpsichord. No wonder that the dynamics are marked in unprecedented detail. The Andante is for the three gentler-voiced soloists with figured bass. What is best remembered about this Concerto is the trumpet part, the zenith of the clarion tradition, and one of the most spectacular sounds in all of Baroque music. Since Bach prefers a traversière, or transverse flute, in Concerto No. 5, he presumably means a recorder when, as here, he just says flauto; however, in most modern-instrument performances in large halls, the part is played on a regular flute.

Instrumentation: solo violin, flute, oboe and trumpet, with orchestra comprising harpsichord and strings

Program note excerpted from the late Michael Steinberg's The Concerto: A Listener's Guide (Oxford University Press, 1998), used with permission.