

Historical Background

Musicologists still do not know when J.S. Bach wrote the Six Brandenburg Concertos. In fact, the title was not even Bach's own; it was given by scholars who discovered them in the archives in Brandenburg in the mid-1850s. The original name was called *Concerts avec plusieurs instruments*, which means concertos for several instruments. According to some music scholars, it was quite likely that they were not composed all at the same time because there was evidence that Bach put together this set of music as some sort of a resume when he applied for a position as a Kapellmeister in Cöthen. We also know that the full score of these concertos were completed on March 21, 1721 as indicated on its autograph page and were dedicated to Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg. These concertos were unique in terms of their choice of instrumentations. For instance, No.3 was apparently written for nine solo instruments plus the harpsichord; No.6 was written for two solo viola da gambas, cellos and harpsichord, but without violins. So, for whom were these concertos written? There was evidence to support the idea that they were written for a group of highly skilled musicians from Berlin who were disposed of by the new King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm I, but were snatched up by Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen except for the sixth concerto. It is believed that Bach wrote this particular concerto for Prince Leopold, an accomplished gamba player. This is a marvelous collection of instrumental concertos written at the time when no one dared, except for Bach, to push the limits of the musicians of the day. What makes this performance unique is that very few orchestras, either professional or amateur, have presented this entire collection in one concert.

Brandenburg Concerto No.1 in F major, BWV 1046

The first concerto is the only one that has four movements; there is a menuet after the final Allegro. The opening movement reminds the audience of the sound of hunting horns and the solo violin is prominent throughout the entire piece. Another interesting orchestration about this concerto is that three oboes and bassoon are the solo parts.

Brandenburg Concerto No.2 in F major, BWV 1047

Concerto No.2 in F Major has three movements: Allegro – Andante –Allegro assai with very demanding music written for solo trumpet, two recorders and violin. Some very interesting facts about this concerto are: it was probably written with the court trumpeter Johann Ludwig Schreiber of Anhalt-Cothen in mind; the trumpet does not play in the second movement because it was written in a different key and therefore it is impossible for a natural trumpet to perform such a task. A recording of this piece was chosen as the first to be played on the "golden record", a LP record containing a variety of Earth's common sounds, languages and music sent into outer space with the two Voyager probes.

Brandenburg Concerto No.3 in G major, BWV 1048

Even though the score indicates that there are three movements in this concerto, the second movement is actually a Phrygian cadence (iv6-V). It is believed that Bach's intention was to have a violinist or harpsichordist to improvise between the movements. However, not all orchestras use their soloists in this manner. Bach wrote this very challenging concerto that requires musicians of high calibre to perform, even though there are no solo parts.

Brandenburg Concerto No.4 in G major, BWV 1049

This concerto is scored for solo violin and two flauti d'echo ("echo flutes") or recorders. The violin solos in the first and third movements require musicians who possess virtuosic techniques in order to do them justice. This concerto is also considered to be the lightest in terms of orchestration among the collection.

Brandenburg Concerto No.5 in D major, BWV 1050

This concerto makes use of a popular chamber music ensemble of the era (flute, violin and harpsichord) which Bach used on its own for the middle movement. It is believed that Bach wrote this concerto in 1719 to show off a new harpsichord by Michael Mietke, which Bach had brought back from Berlin for the Anhalt-Cöthen court. It is also thought that Bach wrote it for a competition at Dresden with the French composer and organist Louis Marchand. This concerto is well written throughout for showing off the techniques of a fine harpsichord and the virtuosity of its player, but especially in the lengthy solo 'cadenza' to the first movement. It seems almost certain that Bach was the harpsichord soloist at the premiere. Scholars have also argued that this work was the predecessor of the modern piano concerto.

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

This concerto was written in 1721 and is scored for seven instruments: two violas, two violas da gamba (similar to the modern cello), cello, violone (double bass) and harpsichord continuo, but no violins; the absence of violins is unusual. This work may have been composed with Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen and Bach themselves as performers in mind. The prince played not only the violin and the harpsichord, but also the viola da gamba. The two violas open the first movement with a vigorous subject in the form of a canon, and as the movement progresses, the other instruments are gradually drawn into a steady flow of melodic counterpoint. The second movement is basically a trio sonata for two violas and continuo, although the cello has a decorated version of the continuo bass line. This final concerto concludes with a gigue, a baroque dance, just like the finale of the fifth concerto.