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J. S. BACH

BRANDENBURG CONCERTO No. 6

B^b major/B-Dur/Si^b majeur
BWV 1051



Eulenburg

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

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BWV 1051

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PREFACE

From August 1717 to April 1723 Johann Sebastian Bach was Kapellmeister and Master of the Royal Chamber Music at the Court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Bach expressed his feelings about this post retrospectively in a letter to his longstanding friend Georg Erdmann, written in 1730.¹ One may gather from this letter that for Bach the well-paid post of Kapellmeister obviously carried with it a certain prestige and for that reason he felt it to be a demotion to have to trouble himself with a choirmaster's job. On the other hand Bach's comments make it clear that the working conditions in Cöthen became increasingly difficult with the approaching marriage of Leopold to Friederica Henrietta von Bernburg, which took place at the end of 1721. Bach had in fact, in November 1720, already tried to make a change by applying – though without success – for the vacant post of choirmaster at the Jakobikirche in Hamburg.

In this context the fact that Bach sent selected concertos to Berlin, in a dedicatory manuscript, beautifully prepared as a fair copy in his own hand, for Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, youngest son of the Electoral Prince, has particular significance. According to the requirements of his secular post, Bach composed almost exclusively keyboard works, chamber music and instrumental concertos during his time at Cöthen. So when he dedicates some of his works to an equally secular master it is natural to suppose that he would choose them from this repertory.²

Furthermore, in the text of the inscription (in French) to the Margrave dated 24 March 1721, he makes reference to concrete grounds for the dedication of these *Six Concerts avec*

plusiers instruments, named nowadays, after their dedicatee, the 'Brandenburg Concertos':

A couple of years ago I had the good fortune to be heard by your majesty [...]. Your majesty honoured me with the request that I send you a few of my compositions.

The circumstances of this performance have been much puzzled over. A coincidental meeting between Bach and the Margrave in Meiningen, of which Christian Ludwig's brother-in-law was Duke, or in Carlsbad during a trip made by Leopold early in 1718 would be possibilities; it is more likely however that Bach met the Margrave in Berlin at the beginning of 1719. Prince Leopold had ordered a harpsichord and instructed Bach to collect the instrument from Berlin – as can be verified from an item for travel expenses in the accounts for 1 March 1719.³

The Margrave may well have expressed the desire to hear more of Bach's compositions at the time of this performance. The fact, however, that Bach did not comply with the Margrave's wishes until the sudden dedication of these six concertos two years later makes it much more likely that a secret request was the real reason behind the sending of the scores.⁴

This theory is supported by further observations. As already mentioned, for the enclosures which accompanied his dedicatory manuscript Bach drew on the repertoire of instrumental concertos which he had in all probability composed in and for Cöthen – taking into account, of course, the circumstances in Berlin, with which he must have been familiar both from

¹ *Bach-Dokumente*, Bach-Archiv, Leipzig, edited by Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, Vol. I (Kassel [-Leipzig], 1963), No. 23

² It seems plausible, owing to this contractual relationship, to put the date of composition somewhere between 1717 and 1721.

³ *Bach-Dokumente*, Vol. II (Kassel-Leipzig, 1969), No. 95. Whether Bach was already in Berlin at the time the harpsichord was ordered or only went there to collect it is of secondary importance. The unusual French of the opening of the dedication 'une couple d'années' obviously encouraged the view that the reason for the dedication is to be found at least two years earlier.

⁴ cf. H.-J. Schulze, 'Johann Sebastian Bachs Konzerte – Fragen der Überlieferung und Chronologie', in: *Bach-Studien 6. Beiträge zum Konzertschaffen Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Leipzig, 1981), 15

his journey there and from the lively exchange of musicians which took place between Cöthen and Berlin. He probably hoped to perform the concertos himself in Berlin.⁵

In its six works the score mirrors the whole range of types of concertante ensemble music current at the time: the third and sixth concertos display the characteristics of social music-making most clearly, the second and fourth more the concerto grosso type, and Concertos 1 and 5 in their final autograph form document the development towards the solo concerto. Furthermore, a comparison with the copies, still in existence, of the early versions of Concertos 1, 2 and 3 made by the Bach scholar Christian Friedrich Penzel shortly after Bach's death in Leipzig, and of Concerto No. 5 made by Johann Christoph Altnickol, shows that the diversity of the concerto type was extended in many respects in the writing out of the dedicatory score. Bach enriched the instrumentation by the use of unusual instruments such as the violino piccolo in No. 1 and flauto d'écò in No. 4; he divided the cello part in No. 3 and expanded the cadenzas of the solo instruments in Concerto No. 5. In addition, the treatment of the sequence of movements shows Bach's desire to display his skills to the full – by choosing a two-movement composition for the third piece and by extending the first concerto in the drawing up of the manuscript to a quasi four-movement piece.

Although Bach provides a representative cross-section of his concertos in the dedicatory score, it would be mistaken to think of them in terms of a cycle. We have here merely a collection of pre-existing concertos composed as individual works.

After the death of Margrave Christian Ludwig the dedicatory manuscript came into the possession of the Bach scholar Johann Philipp

Kirnberger. He in turn handed the score on to his pupil Princess Amalie of Prussia and it was bequeathed with her library to the Joachimsthalschen Gymnasium. From there the score was finally passed on to the Berlin Staatsbibliothek. It was not published until 1850 when, on the centenary of Bach's death, the Brandenburg Concertos were printed for the first time by C.F.Peters in Leipzig.

CONCERTO No. 6, BWV 1051

In several respects, the Concerto No. 6 in B flat major BWV 1051 is an exception among the Brandenburg Concertos. This is true particularly of its instrumentation. With its two violas, two violas da gamba, violoncello and basso continuo, it has the smallest number of parts of all the concertos of the set: Bach dispenses entirely with the bright sound of the high strings.

It is possibly this feature of the Sixth Concerto, conflicting as it does with the expectations of modern concert audiences, that prevented the Concerto in the past from establishing itself as securely in public consciousness as, say, the Third or the Fifth. It was performed comparatively infrequently,⁶ and it has also seemed less interesting to musical scholars than other Brandenburg Concertos have done. In an era when listeners were still feeling their way towards a new understanding of Bach's music, the obvious strangeness and archaism of the scoring led the Concerto to be ranked rather low on the aesthetic scale.

Let us, however, leave aside the much-debated question whether the Sixth Concerto brings the Brandenburg Concertos to a worthy conclusion, or 'at least does not convincingly round off the series':⁷ this question is important only if the Brandenburg Concertos are regarded as a cycle. Ignoring this issue, we can view the question of the origins and completion

⁵ There is as much uncertainty over the performability of the works as over the date of origin. It appears that the pieces as handed down to Penzel, and thus as they were to be found in Cöthen, were certainly performable there. There is no reliable information about the conditions in Berlin. See Heinz Becker, review of 'Johann Sebastian Bach, Sechs Brandenburgische Konzerte hrsg. von Heinrich Besseler, Neue Bach-Ausgabe, Serie VII, Bd. 2 [...], Kritischer Bericht', in: *Die Musikforschung* 1960, 115ff.

⁶ cf., for example, the lists of performances of Bach's works in the *Bach-Jahrbücher*, 1906 (pp. 124–5), 1912 (pp. 141–2) and 1914 (pp. 185–6)

⁷ See Martin Geck, 'Gattungstraditionen und Altersschichten in den Brandenburgischen Konzerten', in: *Die Musikforschung* 1970, 139–52