

Bach's Significant Orchestra Music

Brandenburg Concerti

The set was commissioned by Christian Ludwig, the Margraf of Brandenburg, who may never even have heard them. They were completed early in 1721. When Christian Ludwig's library was disposed of following his death, the six concerti were sold in a bundle for scrap paper or burning purposes, for what amounted to \$10 each. Luckily, they were rescued and were first printed by Peters in 1850—100 years after Bach's death!

The concertino is varied for each of the six and, except for #3, features instruments other than just strings. This in itself is a great contrast to other earlier concerti grossi (like Corelli) we have studied.

No 1 in F

Concertino: Violino piccolo, 3 oboes, 2 natural horns, bassoon

Ripieno: Strings and continuo

Violino piccolo was a small violin tuned a 3rd higher than normal. The part is scordatura, notated in D major. Nowadays, it is re-notated and played on a normal violin. Three regular movements of the concerto form (F-S-F) are followed by a long, compound movement in dance meters that includes a minuet heard four times, with two trios and a polacca interspersed between the minuet repetitions.

No 2 in F

Concertino: Trumpet, flute a bec, oboe, violin

Ripieno: Strings and continuo

Flute a bec was the block flute or recorder. The trumpet part is extraordinary—brilliant and difficult. It exploits the uppermost or clarion register. The last movement has been characterized as "the most brilliant trumpet part of the 18th century." The 2nd Concerto is in the familiar three-movement form.

No 3 in G

3 vln, 3 vla, 3 celli, continuo

This is not a concerto grosso, but rather an orchestral concerto, like some of the Torelli, Op. 6. A one-measure Phrygian cadence connects two allegro movements, providing an opportunity for extensive improvisation. The joy and zest of this work have made it an exceptionally popular work.

No 4 in G

Concertino: Violin, 2 flutes (recorders)

Ripieno: Strings and continuo

The flute parts were composed more for our present-day recorders. Essentially, this is a violin concerto, with exceptional technical demands on the soloist. In the standard three movements. The fugue found in the third movement is a polyphonic marvel, but primarily a musical masterpiece.

No 5 in D

Concertino: Clavier, violin, flute

Ripieno: Strings (without violin II)

The first movement features an enormous unaccompanied passage for the clavier (harpsichord)—a cadenza of such brilliance that it transcends its virtuosity to splendid musical expression. This is an excellent example of Bach's orchestration: no other instrument could play this passage, and in fact, no other composer (with the exception of Mozart) could compose such an idiomatic keyboard passage in an orchestral setting. After a beautiful adagio, the finale has been described as an Irish jig!

No 6 in B Flat

2 Viole de braccio, 2 viole da gamba, celli, bass and continuo

(Braccia-shoulders/Gamba-thighs) In modern performances, violas and cellos replace the all-but-extinct instruments. The first movement features a canon in the violas. After a noble slow movement, Bach finishes with another gigue.

II. 4 Orchestral Suites

These orchestral works were designated by Bach as "Overtures," the German term for dance suite. Each of the four suites begins with a French overture, in which the slow opening returns to make a formal three-part format. These seem to have been composed at different times, but they certainly were in existence by 1736.

No 1 in C

Instrumentation: Str, 2 Ob, Bsn, Continuo

Movements: Overture, Courante, 2 Gavottes, Forlane, 2 Minuets, 2 Bourees, 2 Passepieds

With the four doubled movements, the typical practice was followed of repeating Dance I, going on to the contrasting Dance II, repeating it, then playing Da Capo to Dance I without repeats. This creates a large AABBA form.

No 2 in b

Instrumentation: Flute, Strings, Continuo

Movements: Overture, Rondo, Sarabande, Bouree I&II, Polonaise with Double, Minuet, Badinerie

This is the lightest and most popular of the 4 Suites. As it is the only surviving Bach work for solo flute and orchestra, it is sometimes referred to as Bach's flute concerto! This piece was written for the transverse flute, not the dolce (recorder-like) flute of the 4th Brandenburg.

No 3 in D

Instrumentation: 2 Ob, 3 Trp, Tymp, Strings, Continuo

Movements: Overture, Air, Gavotte 1 & II, Bouree, Gigue

This suite contains the celebrated Air, best known as "Air on the G String" because of the Wilhemi transcription for solo violin and piano. The form of this suite is again typical of all four. Incidentally, all of the doubled movements (as discussed previously) are binary forms. Therefore, with Da Capo and all repeats, the form is AA/BB/CC/DD/AB. We discussed the derivation of gig from gigot ("little ham"). Bouree was also an old French dance originally called the "Bourrir," meaning "to flap the wings." This was a

very primitive dance in which dancers were to mimic the movements of birds used in the ancient rituals. The Gavotte is an old French dance.

No 4 in D

Instrumentation: 3 Ob, bsn, 3 Trp, Tymp, Strings, and Continuo

Movements: Overture, Bouree I & II, Gavotte, Minuetto, Réjouissance

This suite adds the 3rd oboe and a bassoon (used in the continuo) to the large forces of the 3rd Suite.