Johann Sebastian Bach

Overture & Badinerie from Orchestral Suite No. 2

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3

Georg Philipp Telemann

Concerto for Recorder & Flute in E minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

Air from Orchestral Suite No. 3

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5

Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685-1750) unmatched compositional skills have earned him the title of GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) putting him up there with Wayne Gretzky, Simone Biles, Pablo Picasso, and Abraham Lincoln. But long before he was considered the GOAT and more than one hundred years before the founding of the Bach Society in 1849, J. S. Bach was dealing with an immense workload as cantor of St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig. He was required to write a brand-new cantata for every Sunday service! It was 1729 when opportunity came-a-knockin', and Bach was offered an appointment as director of the nearby *collegium musicum*.

Before the 1700's, churches and royal courts were the only patrons of music. But by Bach's time there was enough of a European middle class to support musical institutions that mounted performances by (largely) amateur musicians. The Leipzig collegium musicum—founded in 1688 and reinvigorated by Georg Philipp Telemann in 1702—helped build Leipzig into one of the strongholds of European musical life. It was located at one of the biggest and most popular coffeehouses in town where there were twice weekly rehearsals, weekly concerts, and summer open-air performances. Because the collegium offered an opportunity to regularly perform with the top local musicians, Bach was no doubt thrilled to have this new gig. According to Telemann, "This *collegium*, despite the fact that it consisted mainly of university students, often reaching a total of 40 musicians, nevertheless could be listened to with great appreciation and pleasure."

It was during this time with the collegium that Bach produced his sublime orchestral suites. The overture to Orchestral Suite No. 2 opens grand and stately, but the contrasting second half is fast and intricate. You will hear the 1st violins play a short fugal subject on their own, and one by one all the other instruments will take a turn imitating this subject and producing a complex layering of independent voices working within a tightly knit texture. The Badinerie, in contrast, has a character that is light, spirited, and dance-like with the flute taking the lead. The Air from Orchestral Suite No. 3 (often called "Air on the G String") is one of Bach's most serene and expressive works. Nearly 300 years after Bach's time in Leipzig, we are still captivated by this gorgeously sustained melody over a delicately walking bass line.

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) was widely regarded as the most important German composer during his day, in contrast to Bach, who was largely known as an organ virtuoso. Did these contemporaries know each other? Not only did the two have mutual respect and admiration, they were also close friends, and Telemann was even godfather to Bach's son Carl

Philipp Emanuel. When the Leipzig St. Thomas Church cantor position opened in 1722, it was first offered to Telemann who declined and leveraged the offer for a pay bump at his job in Hamburg. He then worked behind the scenes to help Bach secure the job. And when Telemann retired from his post in Hamburg, he was once again instrumental in securing the position for his capable godson, C.P.E. Bach.

The Concerto for Flute & Recorder uses a 4-movement structure, with an alternating slow-fast-slow-fast tempo scheme. The first movement is a gentle dialogue between flute and recorder with subtle melodic ornamentation. We hear this dialogue become livelier and more playful in the 2nd movement with greater opportunity to notice the contrasting timbres of the flute's brighter color against the recorder's warmer, earthier tone. The simpler texture of the 3rd movement provides a more reflective interplay between the instruments akin to solo singers in a Baroque opera. The brisk tempo and rhythmic vitality of the 4th movement portray a lively dance with harmonies and phrasing that demonstrate Telemann's synthesis of Eastern European musical flavor.

Getting back to the GOAT. Years before his work in Leipzig, Bach had been working as court organist in Weimar and felt insulted to be passed over as music director. He was thrown a lifeline in 1717 when Prince Leopold invited him to be music director at his court in Cöthen, but first Bach needed to secure permission from the duke in Weimar (as was required in those days.) When Bach's request to leave town for the new post was denied, he made a big stink, and the duke threw him in jail for almost a month! Eventually the duke relented and gave Bach an "unfavorable discharge" from his detention, and Bach's family packed their bags for Cöthen.

The Cöthen court gig was a pretty good one, at least for a few years. Prince Leopold was a young guy who loved music, and Bach had a good salary, with over a dozen musicians in the court orchestra. Sadly, by 1721 the prince was forced to make serious budget cuts as coffers were strained by his contributions to the Prussian military. In this context, Bach assembled and sent a musical portfolio to yet another potential employer, the Margrave of Brandenburg. This job application is known as the six "Brandenburg" concertos.

There's a lot we don't know about the history of Brandenburg Concertos. Nobody is exactly sure when they were composed or premiered, and it is unclear as to the Margrave's reaction upon receiving the music. In fact, all but the 5th Brandenburg Concerto were completely lost—and forgotten—until discovered over a century later in an old library in Weimar. What we do know is that every one of the concertos uses a different combination of instruments, each unique and unprecedented to the genre, and that the complexity and virtuosity demanded of these works surpass that of any of Bach's musical contemporaries.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 is scored for nine separate string parts (1st, 2nd, 3rd violin; 1st, 2nd, 3rd viola; and 1st, 2nd, 3rd cello) and *basso continuo*, the continuous bass line played by harpsichord in combination with other bass instruments. The first movement is energetic and joyful, with a reciprocity between the nine independent string parts that weave into a refreshing musical dialogue. The second movement is so short (only two chords long!), that scholars suggest it might have been used as an opportunity for the lead violinist or harpsichordist to improvise, but there is no direct evidence to support this. These two chords lead right into the

final Allegro, a driving movement that takes the listener through an ever-shifting tapestry of exuberant sound.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, scored for solo harpsichord, violin, flute, and accompanying strings, is the first of its kind. Up to this point, the harpsichord's function was to play the bass line and fill in the harmony, yet Bach broke new ground by making it one of the featured soloists in the ensemble. (Not until the 1770's—Mozart's time—does the piano begin to replace the harpsichord.) In the first movement, you will hear the harpsichord sharing the solo line with flute and violin along with accompanying strings, but the most distinctive feature of this section is the extensive cadenza that gives us some insight into Bach's astonishing keyboard skills. In the second movement, the accompanying strings drop out, giving the listener a tender and intimate trio. The third movement, like the first, brings back the strings, and the listener is rewarded with a jaunty frolic brimming with decorative harpsichord flourishes.

--David H. Johnson

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