

Music@Menlo 2008

Concert Program I: Towards Bach

SATURDAY, JULY 19, 8:00 P.M.

Prelude Performance, 6:00 p.m.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto

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SUNDAY, JULY 20, 6:00 P.M.

Stent Family Hall, Menlo School

July 19: Moira Cullen Martin and Hugh Martin

July 20: Martin Family Foundation

July 21: Nancy and DuBose Montgomery

MONDAY, JULY 21, 8:00 P.M.

Prelude Performance, 6:00 p.m.

(at Martin Family Hall, Menlo School)

Stent Family Hall, Menlo School

TONIGHT'S PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

ROSSI (1570?–ca. 1630)

LEGRENZI (1626–1690)

PURCELL (1658/1659–1695)

HANDEL (1685–1759)

BACH (1685–1750)

Sonata no. 4 sopra l'aria dei Ruggiero (1623)

Sonata "La Foscari," op. 2 (1655)

Fantasia upon One Note, Z. 745 (ca. 1680)

Meine Seele hört im Sehen, HWV 207 (1724–27)

Wedding Cantata, BWV 202 (before 1730)

Concerto no. 1, after Vivaldi, op. 3, no. 9 (1713–14)

"Schafe können sicher weiden" (1713)

Brandenburg Concerto no. 4, BWV 1049

(ca. 1720)

Just as no composer throughout the last 250 years has failed to acknowledge J.S. Bach's profound influence on the very course of Western music, so did that Baroque master insatiably absorb the existing canon throughout his life and career. This season's opening concert program begins with a sonata for two violins composed more than half a century before Bach's birth by Salamone Rossi—a transitional voice from the Renaissance to the Baroque period—and escalates towards Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto. Along the way are works by Giovanni Legrenzi (himself an important model from Bach's early musical training), Henry Purcell, and Bach's greatest contemporaries, Handel and Vivaldi. Together with Bach, these composers illuminate the musical firmament under which the Baroque period paved the way for the innovations to follow in the eighteenth century.

Some terms throughout these program notes appear in **BOLDFACE**. They can be found in the Glossary of Musical Terms in the program book.

PROGRAM

Salamone Rossi (1570?–ca. 1630) | **Sonata no. 4 sopra l'aria dei Ruggiero** (1623)
Arnaud Sussmann, Erin Keefe, violins; Laurence Lesser, cello; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

Giovanni LEGRENZI (1626–1690) | **Sonata “La Foscari” a due, op. 2** (1655)
Adam Barnett-Hart, violin; Dennis Godburn, bassoon; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

Henry PURCELL (1658 or 1659–1695) | **Fantasia upon One Note, Z. 745** (ca. 1680)
The Escher String Quartet: Adam Barnett-Hart, Wu Jie, violins; Pierre Lapointe, viola; Andrew Janss, cello; Hsin-Yun Huang, viola

George Frideric HANDEL (1685–1759) | **Meine Seele hört im Sehen, HWV 207** (1724–27)
Celena Shafer, soprano; Demarre McGill, flute; Laurence Lesser, cello; DaXun Zhang, bass; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) | **Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten (“Wedding Cantata”), BWV 202**
(before 1730)

- I. Aria: Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten
- II. Recitative: Die Welt wird wieder neu
- III. Aria: Phöbus eilt mit schnellen Pferden
- IV. Recitative: D’rum sucht auch Amor sein Vergnügen
- V. Aria: Wenn die Frühlingslüfte streichen
- VI. Recitative: Und dieses ist das Glücke
- VII. Aria: Sich üben im Lieben
- VIII. Recitative: So sei das Band der keuschen Liebe
- IX. Gavotte: Sehet in Zufriedenheit

Celena Shafer, soprano; Kathryn Greenbank, oboe; Erin Keefe, Wu Jie, violins; Hsin-Yun Huang, viola; Laurence Lesser, cello; DaXun Zhang, bass; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

INTERMISSION

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Concerto no. 1 in D Major, BWV 972** (1713–14), **after Vivaldi, op. 3, no. 9**
(arranged by Kenneth Cooper)

- I. Allegro
- II. Larghetto
- III. Allegro

Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord;
The Escher String Quartet: Adam Barnett-Hart, Wu Jie, violins; Pierre Lapointe, viola; Andrew Janss, cello; DaXun Zhang, bass

Johann Sebastian BACH | “Schafe können sicher weiden” (Sheep may safely graze), from *Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd!*, BWV 208 (1713)

Celena Shafer, soprano; Demarre McGill, Sooyun Kim, flutes; Andrew Janss, cello; DaXun Zhang, bass; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Brandenburg Concerto no. 4 in G Major, BWV 1049** (ca. 1720)

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Presto

Erin Keefe, solo violin; Demarre McGill, Sooyun Kim, flutes; Arnaud Sussmann, Adam Barnett-Hart, violins; Hsin-Yun Huang, viola; Laurence Lesser, cello; DaXun Zhang, bass; Kenneth Cooper, harpsichord

Salamone Rossi (Born probably August 19, 1570, Mantua; died ca. 1630, Mantua)

Sonata no. 4 sopra l'aria dei Ruggiero

Composed: 1623

Publication: 1623, as part of *Il terzo libro de varie sonate, sinfonie, gagliarde, brandi e corrente*, **OP. 12**

Other works from this period: *Il terzo libro de varie sonate*...—that is, the third book of various **SONATAS**, et al.—appeared within about a year of the fourth, and final, book of Rossi's instrumental works. The rest of Rossi's oeuvre comprises vocal music, including, from this period, *Il quinto libro de madrigali* for five voices and **BASSO CONTINUO** (1622) and *Hashirim asher lish'lomo* (*The Songs of Solomon*) for three to eight voices (1622–23).

Approximate duration: 4 minutes

Salamone Rossi represents an important transitional voice between the music of the Renaissance and that of the early Baroque period. His work certifies the assessment made by the musicologist and early music specialist Claude V. Palisca that “The music of the mid-seventeenth century strikes a happy balance between freshness and maturity...After decades of experimentation...[a]t last a consistent and distinct style has been achieved that may be called, for lack of a better name, Baroque.”

Rossi's catalog of instrumental music comprises four collections of works in various genres, published between 1607 and 1623. The Sonata no. 4 for Two Violins from *Il terzo libro de varie sonate*, the third of these four volumes, is subtitled “sopra l'**ARIA** dei Ruggiero”—on the Air of Ruggiero, a popular seventeenth-century

tune. Rossi was one of many composers to write sets of **VARIATIONS** on this melody; such composers as Brunelli, Buonamente, and Frescobaldi likewise used the Air of Ruggiero as the basis for both instrumental and vocal works.

The Sonata on the Air of Ruggiero is a set of eight variations on this melody, each one more ornate than the last. In the modest first variation, the violins move in parallel thirds, which technique Rossi employs for much of the sonata. In other variations, Rossi focuses on a specific means of melodic figuration and distributes it back and forth quickly between the two violins. Though perfectly innocuous to our ears today, this device represented a marked departure from the music of the Renaissance and pointed the way towards further figuration techniques used by later Baroque composers.

Music scholar Homer Ulrich writes, “Salamone Rossi stands at the very beginning of the line of composers who gradually developed violinistic music.” Citing the Sonata on the Air of

Ruggiero, Ulrich goes on to laud Rossi as “one of the foremost champions of instrumental monody.”

Giovanni Legrenzi (Baptized August 12, 1626, Clusone, Bergamo, Italy; died May 27, 1690, Venice)

Sonata “La Foscari” a due, op. 2

Composed: 1655

Published: 1655

Other works from this period: Concerti musicali per uso di chiesa, op. 1 (1654); Harmonia d'affetti devoti, op. 3 (1655); Sonate da chiesa e da camera, op. 4 (1656) (see below)

Approximate duration: 5 minutes

The Venetian composer and organist Giovanni Legrenzi—hailed by scholar Stephen Bonta as “one of the most gifted and influential composers of the latter half of the seventeenth century”—played a significant role in the development of the late Italian Baroque style that Vivaldi would inherit and which, in turn, would so deeply influence Bach. His prolific output includes the most prevalent genres of the day: oratorio and opera, in addition to his instrumental chamber music. Indeed, Legrenzi was one of the composers—along with Arcangelo Corelli, Tomaso Albinoni, and others—whose music the young J. S. Bach assiduously copied out as part of his early musical training.

“La Foscari” comes from the **OPUS 2** collection of eighteen duo and trio sonatas, published in 1655. These sonatas, as well as other works from this early period in Legrenzi’s celebrated career (at the end of his life, Legrenzi occupied the prestigious post of chapelmaster at St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice), represent a pivotal moment in the evolution of chamber music. While “La Foscari” has only one **MOVEMENT**,

others of the Opus 2 sonatas contain three or four and begin to establish a pattern for multimovement sonatas that would flourish over the following two centuries. Also during this time, particularly following the death of the iconic Italian composer and church organist Girolamo Frescobaldi in 1643, church music began to more heavily incorporate string ensembles. Volumes of multimovement sonate da chiesa e da camera (“sonatas for church and chamber”—dance movements would be omitted for liturgical use) for instrumental chamber ensembles, such as Legrenzi’s Opus 4 collection of thirty such sonatas, subsequently appeared in increasing abundance.

Legrenzi’s Opp. 2 and 4 sonatas, as well as the duo and trio sonatas of Giovanni Battista Vitali, Corelli, and their contemporaries, mark an important phase in the development of the Baroque style. In its formal, thematic, and harmonic clarity, sophisticated **COUNTERPOINT**, and virtuosic treatment of the violin, the language of these works reflects the Baroque period on the cusp of its full maturation.

Henry Purcell (Born 1658 or 1659, London; died November 21, 1695, London)

Fantasia upon One Note, Z. 745

Composed: ca. 1680

Other works from this period: Other chamber works, including a dozen additional **FANTASIAS** for three and four instruments (Z. 732–43); In Nomine à 6, Z. 746, and In Nomine à 7, Z. 747; and numerous sacred songs and anthems

Approximate duration: 3 minutes

Henry Purcell continues to be widely acknowledged as one of England's greatest composers—and, indeed, among the most important musical figures in all of seventeenth-century Europe. But his importance to England's musical identity in particular constitutes a significant part of his legacy: he is, in many ways, the patriarch of English music, occupying a place in that country's musical heritage similar to that of Charles Ives in the United States.

Purcell was a prolific composer. Though best known for stage works such as *Dido and Aeneas* and a myriad of sacred vocal works, Purcell was

also a skilled and innovative composer of instrumental music. His *Fantasia upon One Note*, composed for five viols (typically realized today by string quartet plus viola), demonstrates his mastery in writing chamber music: the “One Note”—a sustained C held by the tenor voice—remains constant as lush harmonies are woven above and beneath by a consort of strings. (Some hold the unsubstantiated, but charming and entirely plausible, theory that Purcell composed the work for a friend in the common predicament of being unable to play an instrument yet wishing to participate in a chamber music performance.)

George Frideric Handel (Born February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany; died April 14, 1759, London)

Meine Seele hört im Sehen, HWV 207

Composed: 1724–27

Publication: *Meine Seele hört im Sehen* appeared as part of Handel's *Neun Deutsche Arien*, **HWV 202–210**.

Other works from this period: The operas *Ottone, re di Germania* (premiered January 12, 1723; revised for further performances in 1726 and 1727); *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (prem. February 20, 1724; rev. for further performances in 1725 and 1730); *Tamerlano* (1724); *Rodelinda, regina de' Longobardi* (1725); *Scipione* (1726); *Alessandro* (1726); *Admeto, re di Tessaglia* (1727); and *Riccardo primo, re d'Inghilterra* (1727).

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

Born just twenty-six days before Bach in 1685, George Frideric Handel is consistently regarded alongside Bach as one of the elite musical voices of the first half of the eighteenth century. Handel scholar Anthony Hicks observes, “Handel's music consolidates the characteristics of the main European styles of his day...The greatness of the music lies in the assurance with which Handel unites these styles and...fashions

melodic lines that are themselves shapely and memorable.”

Handel excelled in every genre of both vocal and instrumental music prevalent during his time. Over the course of his long career, he prolifically produced operas, oratorios, orchestral works, hymns, **CANTATAS**, vocal and

instrumental chamber music, and music for solo keyboard.

Meine Seele hört im Sehen is the sixth from the set of *Neun Deutsche Arien* (Nine German Arias) that Handel composed between 1724 and 1727 on texts by the German poet, and a close personal friend of the composer's, Barthold Heinrich Brockes. Though the texts are sacred,

Text and Translation

Meine Seele hört im Sehen (from *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott*)

Meine Seele hört im Sehen
wie, den Schöpfer zu erhöhen,
alles jauchzet, alles lacht.
Höret nur, des erblüh'nden Frühlings
Pracht ist die Sprache der Natur,
die sie deutlich durchs Gesicht
allenthalben mit uns spricht.

—Barthold Heinrich Brockes (1680–1747)

the songs were likely not intended for liturgical use; they better suited instead the popular practice of the day among Protestant households of domestic musical worship. Each of the nine songs is scored for soprano voice with basso continuo and an **OBBLIGATO** instrument—in *Meine Seele*, the solo flute.

My soul hears by seeing
How to praise the Creator,
All rejoicing, all laughing.
Just listen
To the awakening beauty of Spring—the voice
of nature—
Which speaks clearly to our faith.

Johann Sebastian Bach (Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany; died July 28, 1750, Leipzig)

Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten (“Wedding Cantata”), BWV 202

Composed: Before 1730

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 20 minutes

Though three cantatas composed by Bach for the celebration of weddings survive, the especial beauty, dramatic power, and subsequent popularity of *Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten*, **BWV 202**, have earned it alone the “Wedding Cantata” handle. Little is known of the cantata’s genesis apart from its single manuscript copy placing the date of composition no later than 1730. Modern scholarship widely assumes the work to date from Bach’s years as Kapellmeister at Cöthen, during which tenure Bach produced a healthy share of his great instrumental chamber and orchestral works, including the cello suites, *Brandenburg Concerti*, and others. The *Wedding Cantata* may equally well have been penned in the mid-1720s, during Bach’s

years in Leipzig, which would place it among the steady stream of sacred cantatas (not to mention the immortal *St. Matthew Passion*) that Bach composed in his dual capacity as Cantor of St. Thomas Church and City Music Director. Neither theory is implausible, nor do we have a specific nuptial occasion to vouch for one or the other.

The cantata comprises nine movements, alternating arias and **RECITATIVES** and ending with a buoyant **GAVOTTE**. Throughout the work, Bach deploys his sonic forces—soprano, oboe, strings, and continuo—with exquisite imagination. Gracefully woven soprano and oboe lines begin the opening aria, illustrating

the rising mist and budding spring flowers on the joyous day. “Phöbus eilt mit schnellen Pferden” (Phoebus hurries with rapid horses) features an aptly galloping continuo-only accompaniment. Bach conjures an inclement

rumbling in the basso continuo to stir the final recitative just so (“May no waterfall or thunderclap frighten the impulse of love”) before “Sehet in Zufriedenheit” concludes the cantata with celebratory dancing.

Texts and Translations

I. Aria: *Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten*

Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten

Frost und Winde, geht zur Ruh’!

Florens Lust

will der Brust

nichts als frohes Glück verstatten,

denn sie trägt Blumen zu.

Vanish, troublesome shadows;

Frost and wind, calm yourselves.

Once the flowers

have arrived,

spring allows the breast

nothing but bliss.

II. Recitative: *Die Welt wird wieder neu*

Die Welt wird wieder neu,

auf Bergen und in Gründen

will sich die Anmut doppelt schön verbinden,

der Tag ist von der Kälte frei.

The world seems new again;

the mountains and valleys

are doubly beautiful.

The day is free of cold.

III. Aria: *Phöbus eilt mit schnellen Pferden*

Phöbus eilt mit schnellen Pferden

Durch die neugeborne Welt.

Ja, weil sie ihm wohlgefällt,

Will er selbst ein Buhler werden.

Phoebus hurries with rapid horses

Through the newborn world.

Because it pleases him so well,

he himself wants to become a lover, yes, yes,

yes.

IV. Recitative: *D’rum sucht auch Amor sein Vergnügen*

D’rum sucht auch Amor sein Vergnügen,

wenn Purpur in den Wiesen lacht,

wenn Florens Pracht sich herrlich macht

und wenn in seinem Reich,

den schönen Blumen Gleich,

auch Herzen feurig siegen.

Then love’s pleasures are sought

when purple laughs in the meadows,

when spring’s splendor is breathtaking,

and when fiery hearts learn

the lesson of the flowers.

Please refrain from turning the page until the end of the movement.

V. Aria: Wenn die Frühlingslüfte streichen
Wenn die Frühlingslüfte streichen
und durch bunte Felder wehn,
pflegt auch Amor auszuschleichen,
um nach seinem Schmuck zu sehn,
welcher, glaubt man, dieser ist,
dass ein Herz das andre küsst.

When the spring breezes blow
and flutter through
multicolored fields, Cupid
likes to sneak out to reap
his reward, which is: to see
two people kissing.

VI. Recitative: Und dieses ist das Glücke
Und dieses ist das Glücke,
dass durch ein hohes Gunstgeschicke
zwei Seelen einen Schmuck erlanget,
an dem viel Heil und Segen pranget.

And this is the stroke of luck:
that through a great gift,
two souls can seek a common dream;
let us wish them much blessing and salvation.

VII. Aria: Sich üben im Lieben
Sich üben im Lieben,
in Scherzen sich herzen
ist besser als Florens vergängliche Lust.
Hier quellen die Wellen,
hier lachen und wachen
die siegenden Palmen auf Lippen und Brust.

To practice love,
to embrace with joy
is better than spring's temporary pleasures;
here the waters gush,
and the palms of victory live and laugh on lips
and breast.

VIII. Recitative: So sei das Band der keuschen Liebe
So sei das Band der keuschen Liebe.
Verlobte Zwei,
vom Unbestand des Wechsels frei!
Kein jäher Fall,
noch Donnerknall
Erschrecke die verliebten Triebe!

Thus may the bond of pure love exist,
betrothed pair,
free from fickleness.
May no waterfall
or thunderclap
frighten the impulse of love.

IX. Gavotte: Sehet in Zufriedenheit
Sehet in Zufriedenheit
tausend helle Wohlfahrtstage,
dass bald bei der Folgezeit
eure Liebe Blumen trage!

May you spend happily
a thousand enchanting days,
so that in the days soon to come,
you will bear the fruits of love.

—Anonymous

—Translation by Kenneth Cooper

Johann Sebastian Bach

Concerto no. 1 in D Major, BWV 972, after Vivaldi, op. 3, no. 9

(arranged by Kenneth Cooper)

Composed: Vivaldi composed *L'estro armonico*—his famous Opus 3 collection of twelve concerti for one, two, and four violins—in 1711. Bach arranged the ninth of these concerti for harpsichord between 1713 and 1714.

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 9 minutes

No discussion of the unfolding of Western music towards the towering work of Johann Sebastian Bach can omit the importance of Antonio Vivaldi, indisputably the most influential of the great Italian composers of the Baroque era. Vivaldi's music emits a captivating combination of melodic invention, rhythmic vitality, and structural formidability which Bach and his contemporaries found irresistible.

The bulk of Vivaldi's compositional oeuvre lies in his concerti, whose elements of drama, passion, and soulfulness have compelled generations of listeners since. Vivaldi first established his reputation as a major composer with the publication in 1711 of a seminal collection of concerti entitled *L'estro armonico*. In addition to ranking among the finest examples of the Baroque **CONCERTO**, this collection had an especially profound influence on Bach.

Between 1713 and 1714, while serving at the court of Weimar, Bach prepared solo keyboard arrangements—or at least what appear to be so (more on which in a moment)—of sixteen concerti by various composers: in addition to at least six concerti by Vivaldi (possibly more; some have never been identified), these included works by Alessandro Marcello, Benedetto Marcello, Torelli, Telemann, and Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar. The first of the set (as

collected in Bach's own manuscript) is the splendid Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 3, no. 9, from Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico*.

This evening's performance of Bach's arrangement, however, presents the concerto in a different incarnation: neither as violin concerto nor solo keyboard suite, but as a keyboard concerto, restored by harpsichordist and musicologist Kenneth Cooper. While Bach's arrangement remains widely known and played today as a three-movement work for solo harpsichord, Cooper explains: "What I think is that that's not what Bach intended to do with these pieces at all. I think he intended them to be played with the Vivaldi string parts, as concerti. You put Bach's solo with the Vivaldi string parts...[and] they are little gems of keyboard concerti with strings, of which there were very few samples in those days, if any at all. The earliest keyboard concerti in existence are these, the Handel Opus 4's, both from 1715–20, and the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto (the Brandenburs, obviously, unthinkable without that strong Vivaldi influence). When I started putting these harpsichord solos together with orchestra, I discovered that they work fabulously. Obviously, they're meant to be concerti."

Johann Sebastian Bach

“Schafe können sicher weiden” (Sheep may safely graze)

Composed: This aria comes from the cantata *Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd!*, BWV 208—also known as the “Hunt” Cantata—which Bach composed in 1713.

First performance: Presumably February 23, 1713, the birthday of Duke Christian of Weissenfels (see below)

Other works from this period: Biographer Martin Geck posits an interesting hypothesis regarding Bach’s compositional activity at this time, directly relating to the “Hunt” Cantata: “We do not know when Bach began to compose concerti of his own. It seems likely that even in his early Weimar years he was not only copying concerti but increasingly composing them. Bach scholarship today leans toward the view that even some of the Brandenburg Concerti already existed in early versions during the Weimar period...[T]he early version of the first Brandenburg Concerto, BWV 1046a, would in some respects make an ideal first movement for the ‘Hunt’ Cantata, BWV 208, whose handwritten score begins immediately with a recitative, omitting an overture; the concerto may thus have been played as early as 1713, or on the occasion of the presumed repeat performance of the work in 1716.”

Approximate duration: 5 minutes

The “Hunt” Cantata, *Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd!*, from which comes the aria “Schafe können sicher weiden,” is the earliest of Bach’s secular vocal works. Bach composed it in 1713 as a birthday tribute to Duke Christian of Weissenfels, one of the few nobles who, according to Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel, “loved him particularly and [was] also especially generous to him.” The cantata is scored for four solo voices, two horns, two recorders, two oboes, oboe da caccia, bassoon, strings, and basso continuo. But for the gentle aria “Sheep may safely graze,” sung by the solo soprano,

Bach reduces his instrumental forces to just the pair of recorders and basso continuo. Given that Bach composed the cantata to honor Duke Christian, listeners in his day would have immediately understood the “good shepherd” of the text—by the poet Salomo Franck, one of Bach’s customary collaborators—as a metaphor for the nobleman. (Art may in this case represent a distant idealization of real life: Duke Christian’s extravagance—as evidenced, for example, by his commissioning a Bach cantata for his birthday party—nearly brought about the financial ruin of his flock.)

Text and Translation

Schafe können sicher weiden,
Wo in guter Hirte wacht.
Wo Regenten wohl regieren,
Kann man Ruh und Friede spüren
Und was Länder glücklich macht.

—Salomo Franck (1659?–1725)

Sheep may safely graze,
Where the good shepherd watches.
Only where right and wisdom abide,
Can there be rest and peace
And the land be made happy.

Johann Sebastian Bach

Brandenburg Concerto no. 4 in G Major, BWV 1049

Composed: ca. 1720

Dedication: “To His Royal Highness Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, etc. Sire: Since I had the happiness, a few years ago, to play by command before Your Royal Highness and observed at that time that you derived some pleasure from the small musical talent that Heaven has given me; and since, when I was taking leave of Your Royal Highness, you did me the honor of requesting that I send you some of my compositions: I have therefore, in compliance with your most gracious demand, taken the liberty of tendering my most humble respects to Your Royal Highness with the present concerti, arranged for several instruments, begging you most humbly not to judge their imperfection by the strict measure of the refined and delicate taste in musical pieces that everyone knows you possess, but rather to consider kindly the deep respect and the most humble obedience which I am thereby attempting to show to you. For the rest, Sire, I beseech Your Royal Highness most humbly to have the kindness to preserve your goodwill toward me and to be convinced that I have nothing so much at heart as to be able to be employed on occasions more worthy of you and your service, since I am with matchless zeal, Sire, Your Royal Highness’s most humble and obedient servant, Johann Sebastian Bach. Cöthen, March [May?] 24, 1721.”

Publication: C. F. Peters, Leipzig, 1850

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

In late 1717, Johann Sebastian Bach departed Weimar, where he had held the post of court organist and Konzertmeister for nearly ten years. His ambition to rise to the prestigious post of Kapellmeister—whether at Weimar or elsewhere—had set off a bizarre conflict between Bach and his employer, Duke Wilhelm. The feud culminated in Bach’s brief incarceration, followed by his unceremonious dismissal. But notwithstanding this embarrassing episode, these events also marked a transition into one of the happiest times in Bach’s career, as he took the position of Kapellmeister at the court in Cöthen. His new patron, Prince Leopold, was an amiable ruler and an avid music lover and was, in fact, also responsible for a musical renaissance of sorts in Cöthen. For after assuming power, the prince increased the number of court musicians from three to seventeen, thereby having, upon Bach’s arrival, an able chamber orchestra ready to serve as muse for the accomplished composer—and, incidentally, as the test lab for an important catalog of instrumental works.

Having concentrated primarily on the composition of sacred vocal music in the years preceding his appointment at Cöthen, Bach was now given the opportunity to produce such solo, chamber, and orchestral instrumental pieces as the orchestral suites, the Suites for Solo Cello, the violin concerti, the keyboard concerti, and the magnificent Brandenburg Concerti. Though much of Bach’s orchestral output dating from these years tragically does not survive, the Brandenburgs nevertheless remain as a testament to the vitality of his writing for large instrumental ensembles during this period.

Several years earlier, Bach had played for the elector of Brandenburg in Berlin while negotiating the terms for a new harpsichord for the court at Cöthen. The autograph score of these concerti, dedicated to the elector, is titled, “Six concerti with several instruments, dedicated to His Royal Highness Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, etc., by his very humble and obedient servant Johann Sebastian Bach, orchestral conductor of His Most Serene Highness the reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen.”

In spite of the set's flowery dedication (see above), the Margrave of Brandenburg—lacking the musical resources to stage a performance of the concerti—never thanked or paid Bach; but the works came to life nevertheless at Cöthen, for Bach had deliberately suited them for the greater number of technically proficient musicians he had at his own disposal.

The structure of the Baroque **CONCERTO GROSSO**—of which the Brandenburg Concerti serve as masterful examples—involves a dialogue between sections of music played by the full ensemble and more intimate sections played by a group of soloists, called the **CONCERTINO**. This convention came about during the latter half of the sixteenth century, as the personnel of large musical chapels comprised two categories of musicians: the *ripieno*, or full ensemble, and a small group of soloists. The ripienists were typically players of average ability, whereas the soloists exhibited higher instrumental facility.

The dialogue between ripienists and soloists developed into **RITORNELLO** form, the predominant form used in the concerti of Vivaldi and Bach. The music played at the outset of the concerto by the full ensemble is the ritornello: it returns throughout and at the end of the piece, either in full or in fragments (and often in different keys). In between statements of the ritornello come the more intimate concertino passages.

Each of the six Brandenburg Concerti employs a unique instrumentation. The timbral qualities and expressive capabilities of the specific instruments chosen by Bach play an essential role in determining the particular character of each concerto. The fourth employs, in addition to the full complement of strings and basso continuo, a solo violin and “fiauti d’echo”—echo flutes. In Bach’s time, a pair of recorders would have been used; today, modern flutes are used. But this peculiar designation points to Bach’s treatment of the instruments throughout the concerto, which experiments with a variety of imitative techniques.

The concertino of solo violin and two flutes lends the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto a light and airy spirit. But the effortless delicacy of the opening ritornello and first few concertino passages is deceptive: for the solo violinist, the concerto contains its share of devilish passagework. The sorrowful **ANDANTE** sustains a fragile texture. The final movement—the only one in the Brandenburg cycle bearing a tempo marking as fast as **PRESTO**—highlights the supporting cast, as the concerto grosso embarks on an effervescent **FUGUE**, which serves as the movement’s ritornello. But just as soon as the solo flutes join the conversation, the concertino has taken over again, spinning an intricate contrapuntal texture.

Notes on the Program by Patrick Castillo