January 30, 2026

CONCERT

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Born: 1685
Died: 1750

The Brandenburg Concertos

Bach served as Kapellmeister at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen from 1717 until 1723, an unusually happy period for the composer. Prince Leopold was an enthusiastic and informed amateur musician who put the full resources of his court—including a seventeen-piece orchestra—at Bach's disposal. From this period comes the vast majority of Bach's secular instrumental music, including the sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin, the violin concertos, and the six orchestral concertos that we know today—for better or worse—as the Brandenburg Concertos.

Early in his tenure at Cöthen, Bach had journeyed to Berlin to order the construction of a new organ at Cöthen. While in Berlin, he played for Christian Ludwig, the younger brother of King Wilhelm I of Prussia. As a member of the royal family, Christian Ludwig enjoyed the official title of Margrave of Brandenburg. He expressed some interest (perhaps simply polite) in Bach's music, and the composer promised to send him some. Bach, however, was in no hurry to get around to this, and it was not until several years later, in March 1721, that he finally sent off a handsomely-copied manuscript of six orchestral concertos—with a flowery letter of dedication—to the Margrave in Berlin. The manuscripts were later found among the margrave's papers (he apparently never had them performed), and the nickname Brandenburg Concertos was attached to them long after the composer's death.

Bach probably drew these six concertos from music he had written for the Cöthen orchestra over the previous several years; evidence suggests that he revised the music somewhat before sending it off to Berlin. The painful truth is that many of Bach's instrumental works from these years have disappeared, and among these casualties were doubtless more concertos in the same style (and of the same quality) as the Brandenburg Concertos.

There is certainly no evidence that Bach thought of these six concertos as a unified set, and scholars had disagreed about how they should be classified. One of the sources of sharpest dispute is the size of the forces Bach had in mind when he composed this music. Bach himself gave little help on this issue, calling the set simply "Six Concertos for Several Instruments." The Third and Sixth can be played as chamber pieces (and frequently are), and there are those who suggest that the entire cycle is really chamber music. Others point out that several of the Brandenburgs conform closely to concerto grosso form and so must have orchestral sonorities. Such debates will probably go on forever. In the meantime, the rest of us can be grateful that this music has survived to gladden hearts and souls nearly three centuries after the Margrave of Brandenburg consigned it—unplayed and forgotten—to his dusty shelves.

Concerto No. 1 in F Major, Brandenburg, BWV 1046

Composed: 1721

I. (Allegro)
II. Adagio
III. Allegro
IV. Menuetto — Trio I — Polacca — Trio II

While some may argue that the Brandenburg Concertos represent a form of chamber music, there can be little argument that the First is an orchestral work: it requires a woodwind section (three oboes and a bassoon), a brass section (two horns), and a string section large enough to balance the wind players. The First is also the most textually complex. It exists in an earlier version that lacks the present third movement and the Polacca section of the final movement. This earlier version also asks in the score for a violine piccolo, an instrument that essentially no longer exists. Smaller than the modern violin, it was tuned a third or a fourth higher and doubtless had a more piercing sound; performances today usually replace it with the modern violin.

The First Brandenburg is a concerto in the same sense that Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra is: both are orchestral works that allow individual players—and sections—to emerge from the general texture in passages that highlight the character

and virtuosity of their respective instruments. The busy first movement opens with hunting-horn calls that would doubtless be easier to hear if they were not buried beneath the lively accompaniment. This movement is built largely on those two figures: the rising horn call and its chattering counter-theme. The Adagio spotlights the solo oboe and violin, whose long and somber melodic lines interweave over steady accompaniment from the orchestra. Along the way, there is some odd—but clearly intentional—dissonance in the accompaniment. The propulsive Allegro offers a prominent part to the solo violin, while the last movement has the most interesting structure: it is a minuet movement with three separate trio sections, each featuring a different instrumental section. The minuet itself is for full orchestra, and the first trio is for a pair of oboes over walking bassoon accompaniment. Bach calls the second trio Polacca (a dance in triple time which is, as its name suggests, of Polish origin) and scores it for strings only. The concluding trio section is the most brilliant: it is a blistering horn duet to the rousing accompaniment of all three oboes. A return to the minuet section brings the First Brandenburg Concerto to a stately conclusion.

Concerto No. 2 in F Major, Brandenburg, BWV 1047

Composed: 1721

I. (Allegro)
II. Andante
III. Allegro assai

The Second Brandenburg Concerto is in concerto grosso form, but here Bach assembles an unusual set of solo instruments: trumpet, flute, oboe, and violin. The trumpet part has caused a number of problems. The trumpet Bach wrote for was the small F trumpet, an instrument with a sound so piercing that it almost seems capable of shattering glass. Such an instrument can easily drown out the other solo voices, especially the flute (which in Bach's time would have been the wooden recorder), and conductors face difficult problems balancing the voices in this concerto. So extreme are these problems that some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Bach actually intended that this part should be played on the horn, whose mellow sonority balances more easily with the other voices.
The ear-piercing sound of the high trumpet is so much a part of this music, however, that it is hard to imagine that Bach could have intended it for any other instrument. The robust opening movement (Bach left no tempo indication) alternates extended passages for the four soloists with tutti interjections from the full orchestra. Bach solves balance problems very neatly in the slow movement. He simply leaves the trumpet (and the rest of the orchestra) out, turning the music over to the remaining soloists and continuo for a chamber music interlude; this Andante is based on a short melodic phrase that repeats throughout the movement. The finale, marked Allegro assai, is fugal, and the trumpet celebrates its return by introducing the main subject, followed by oboe, violin, and flute. This movement belongs largely to the soloists, who often play with only continuo accompaniment. The writing in this movement for trumpet, which often plays in its highest register, is of unbelievable brilliance and virtuosity.

Concerto No. 3 in G Major, Brandenburg, BWV 1048

Composed: 1721

I. (Allegro)
II. Adagio
III. Allegro

The genial Third Brandenburg has presented scholars and performers with a surprising number of problems, and those who feel that it is more properly chamber music than an orchestral concerto may have a point. They note that it is scored for three violin parts, three viola parts, and three cello parts, plus bass and continuo, and so modest an ensemble belongs in a small room suited to intimate music rather than the concert hall. The competing view notes that the three cellos, which usually play in unison, create an overpowering sound in the lower register that must be compensated for by increasing the number of violins and violas; thus the Third Brandenburg demands a chamber orchestra just to keep the voices balanced.

A further problem is the slow movement, an Adagio only one measure long: what possibly could Bach have meant by this? Some have suggested that this measure is there as a modulation, but since both outer movements are in G Major, no modulation is necessary. Others believe that there existed a movement for several instruments which is now missing; the modulating chords make good sense if the concerto moves from a slow movement in E minor to a finale in G Major (which is the exact harmonic progression of the Brandenburg Concerto

No. 4). Still others believe that Bach, who doubtless played in performances of this music at Cothen, simply improvised on the violin or viola during this interval. We will probably never know what Bach had in mind, and modern performers have solved this problem in a number of ways, including placing other Bach slow movements in this slot.

In any case, the exuberant Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 takes its character from the outer movements, both marked by bright energy and the warm sound of a string ensemble. Bach left no tempo marking for the first movement, but it must be some form of Allegro. The sturdy main theme, heard immediately, dominates the movement. It is a long theme, but Bach builds the movement on parts of this theme, with brief figures tossed between different voices, rocking along and intermeshing beautifully. At certain points, instrumental solos emerge briefly from the orchestral texture, then quickly return to the ensemble. The concluding Allegro is a gigue in 12/8. The different voices make what seem to be fugal entrances (though the movement is not a fugue), and once again solo voices emerge from the orchestral texture for brief moments of individual glory. The energy of this two-part movement is remarkable; even more remarkable is Bach's ability to wring rhythmic variety from what is an almost non-stop progression of steady sixteenth-notes.

Concerto No. 4 in F Major, Brandenburg, BWV 1049

Composed: 1721

I. Allegro
II. Andante
III. Presto

The Fourth Concerto is in concerto grosso form, but what makes the Fourth unusual is Bach's choice of solo instruments. Rather than using the violinists and continuo typical of Vivaldi's concerti grossi, Bach instead chose one solo violin and two wind instruments that he called flauti d'echo. Exactly what he meant by this term is unclear, and when Bach later revised this music as a harpsichord concerto, he replaced the flauti d'echo with flauti a bec, which we know as the recorder; the parts are usually undertaken by transverse flutes in modern performances.
In any case, the contrast of the bright, purling sound of the flutes and the resonant glow of the violin is one of the most distinctive—and ingratiating—features of the Fourth Concerto. The Allegro opens with the bubbling sound of the flute duet, soon joined by the solo violin. Bach makes virtuoso demands on the violinist in the outer movements of this concerto: the flutes are a pleasing part of the musical texture, but the violinist is given music of extraordinary difficulty, full of swirling runs, awkward string crossings, and multiple-stops. In fact, many consider this Fourth Brandenburg Bach's finest violin concerto. The Andante moves to the tonic minor (G minor) and brings pulsing, dark music; this is the only slow movement in the entire cycle of Brandenburg Concertos that requires a full orchestra. After the grieving quality of the second movement, the concluding Presto leaps out brightly in G Major. This a fugal movement, with the main subject introduced by the strings and eventually joined by the flute duet. Along the way, Bach requires some heroic playing by the solo violin and crowns the virtuosity of this writing by weaving the violin's part into the movement's contrapuntal bustle. The concerto comes to a sturdy close on vigorous tutti passages.

Concerto No. 5 in D Major, Brandenburg, BWV 1050

Composed: 1721

I. Allegro
II. Affettuoso
III. Allegro

The Fifth Brandenburg is a true concerto grosso: a small band of soloists (the concertino) is contrasted with string orchestra and continuo (the ripieno). But in this concerto Bach avoids the expected combination of solo violins in the standard concerto grosso, instead offering an unusual set of soloists: flute, violin, and harpsichord. The flute in this case is the modern flute, the transverse (or horizontal) flute, and Bach gives the harpsichord so prominent a part that many feel that this is the first harpsichord concerto: the first movement brings a harpsichord cadenza of unusual brilliance and length (65 measures).
The Allegro opens with a joyous and vigorous orchestral outburst; the orchestra is unusual in that it has only one violin part, rather than the standard two. This movement features bright sounds—rippling trills and harpsichord runs—punctuated by the return of the opening refrain, though Bach often abbreviates this figure when it returns. Near the end of the movement comes the huge harpsichord cadenza; an

earlier version of this concerto had a cadenza only 19 measures long, and Bach significantly lengthened it when he prepared the handsome presentation copy of the manuscript for the Margrave of Brandenburg.

The slow movement, marked Affetuoso ("affectionate" or "tender") is a lovely chamber music interlude for the three soloists with continuo accompaniment, while the finale, marked Allegro, begins with fugal entries from the three soloists; as it proceeds, this dance-like movement shows some similarity to the gigue. All three soloists have music of high spirits and unusual brilliance in this movement.

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

Composed: 1721

I. (Allegro)
II. Adagio ma non tanto
III. Allegro

The Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 is one of the most unusual of the set. Bach eliminates violins altogether from the orchestra (their absence gives this concerto a dark hue) and instead scores this music for two viola da braccia, two viola da gamba, cello, and continuo part (usually played by bass and harpsichord). The scoring is quite flexible: this concerto can be performed by as few as seven players, making it chamber music, or it can be expanded to orchestral dimensions by adding more players. The viola da braccio is the modern viola, held under the chin with one's arm (braccio is Italian for arm; this sense of the term survives the German word for viola: Bratsche). The viola da gamba was a bass-viola with frets, played while held between the knees (gamba is the Italian word for leg; it has come into modern American usage as the slang term for legs: gams). The viola da gamba part in this concerto is relatively easy, suggesting that Bach may have written it for Prince Leopold, who liked to take part in orchestral performances. Today, the gamba parts are usually undertaken by the modern viola.
Bach left no tempo indication for the opening movement, but the general thrust of the music suggests an Allegro. The Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 is essentially a double concerto for two violas, and the writing for the solo violas in this movement is extremely ingenious. Much of it is canonic, with one instrument repeating the other's music. The violas are sometimes several measures apart, sometimes as close as an eighth-note, giving this movement an extremely "busy" feel as the melodic lines mesh and interlock.

The Adagio ma non tanto is a lovely, extended duet for the solo violas. The viola da gamba are silent in this movement, and the only accompaniment is a walking bass line far below the solo voices. The concluding Allegro is an energetic gigue, a dance form related to the jig. The two violas sail brilliantly forward, at first playing in unison and soon rapidly exchanging phrases. The center section brings cadenza-like passages for the soloists before the opening material returns and the concerto flies energetically to its close.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger