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Background

The concerto was to the late Baroque what the symphony was to the Classical era: the most popular and important genre of instrumental music. Only the orchestral suite, outside vocal music, brought together as many musicians at one time, and the concerto had an advantage over the suite in that it provided greater opportunity for virtuoso display, so that a patron or prince might take delight not only in the size but also in the technical capabilities of the orchestra at his disposal. The concerto was also a particularly versatile genre when it came to the forces necessary to perform it. A concerto grosso of the type written by Corelli, for instance, might be played by as few as three or four musicians, simply by dispensing with the *ripieno* (or tutti) parts, or by as many as sixty or more with the *ripieno* parts doubled many times over, perhaps by woodwind and brass instruments as well as by strings.¹ Once the concerto became established in Italy during the last decades of the seventeenth century, there were few composers in the major European centres who were not drawn to its various possibilities, and few orchestras and music societies that did not avail themselves of the ever-increasing repertory of such works at their disposal.

In the concertos of Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) and his imitators the virtuoso element was to some extent constrained by the texture of the music, an expansion of the contrapuntal trio sonata. This was perfectly in tune with the conservative taste that held sway in Rome, but it was soon to be rendered old-fashioned (though not completely outmoded) by the newer type of solo concerto, in the formation of which Corelli's contemporary Giuseppe Torelli (1658–1709) played an important part. Like Corelli, Torelli had been trained in Bologna and, taking his cue from the brilliant sonatas for trumpet that he and others wrote for performance in the basilica of San Petronio, he began to cultivate there a newer type of concerto that placed a single soloist (usually a violinist) in the limelight.

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Torelli spent about two years (1697–9) in Ansbach as *maestro di concerto* to Margrave Georg Friedrich of Brandenburg-Ansbach, a distant cousin of the margrave to whom Bach later dedicated his concertos.² Relations between Ansbach and the Berlin court were close, and in 1697 the Electress Sophie Charlotte ‘borrowed’ both Torelli and the margrave’s *Kapellmeister*, F. A. M. Pistocchi (1659–1726), for her own music-making in Berlin. The following year Torelli dedicated his twelve *Concerti musicali* Op. 6 (1698) to the electress, and the Berlin court’s particular association with the concerto might well date from this time.

Tomaso Albinoni (1671–1751) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) were Torelli’s principal successors in developing the newer type of concerto that was to exist alongside the Corellian concerto grosso and eventually to supplant it. Both composers were born, died and spent most of their working lives in Venice, and the type of concerto they established, in three movements and with the ritornello structure favoured for the outer movements, has sometimes been called the ‘Venetian concerto’, though it was soon taken up throughout Europe. That Vivaldi left more than 450 concertos and Albinoni only about 60 is less important than the fact that most of their contemporaries would have regarded them principally as opera composers (a genre in which their achievements are numerically more or less equal). Connexions between the da capo aria and the concerto’s ritornello structure (which assume special importance in Bach’s work) will be explored later, but it cannot be without some significance that Corelli is not known to have composed operas or very much in other vocal genres.³

The concerto seems to have claimed Bach’s attention during three quite distinct periods of his life and in three quite different ways. The first period, at Weimar in 1713–14, might be described as one of apprenticeship. As court organist and chamber musician (and from 2 March 1714 *Konzertmeister*) to Duke Wilhelm Ernst, Bach came into close contact with the young Prince Johann Ernst (1696–1715), the duke’s nephew and an enthusiastic admirer of Italian music, especially Italian concertos. He evidently brought back both printed and manuscript copies from the Netherlands, where he had studied for two years at the University of Utrecht, and he also composed Italianate concertos himself, some of which were published by Telemann in 1718, three years after the prince’s death at the early age of nineteen. But it seems that Johann Ernst’s appetite for concertos was not easily satisfied, and he evidently got his teacher J. G. Walther, a kinsman of Bach’s, and Bach himself to

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arrange such works for solo organ or harpsichord. Fourteen of Walther's arrangements and some twenty of Bach's remain. Bach's contributions to this enterprise include four works by the prince himself and one by Telemann, but it is the modern Venetians, and especially Vivaldi, who are most strongly represented, and it is to them that we must look for the roots of Bach's concerto style.

The reputation that Weimar achieved at this time as a centre for Italian music, and particularly Italian concertos, is reflected in a petition which the young Augsburg musician Philipp David Kräuter (1690–1741) addressed to his ecclesiastical employers in 1713. Kräuter had gone to Weimar the previous year and studied there with Bach. On 10 April 1713 he requested an extension of his leave from Augsburg in order

firstly to complete my studies in both composition and the playing of keyboard and other instruments, and with God's help to make greater strides in my art; and, secondly, because the prince of the Weimar court [Johann Ernst], who is not only an excellent musical dilettante but also an incomparable violinist, will return to Weimar from Holland after Easter and remain there during the summer, and so it will be possible for me to hear a good deal of fine Italian and French music, from which I will benefit in composing concertos and overtures ...⁴

But it was not only through Johann Ernst and the Weimar court that Bach came into contact with Vivaldi's music and the new concerto styles at this time. As mentioned earlier, Torelli's presence in 1697–9 had brought the late seventeenth-century Italian concerto style to Ansbach, and through the court there to Berlin. The German violinist Johann Georg Pisendel (1687–1755) was also at Ansbach, where he studied with Torelli and later played in the court orchestra. In 1709 he went to Leipzig, and on the way he broke his journey to visit Bach at Weimar, no doubt bringing with him some Italian concertos, including the violin concerto by Albinoni that he was to perform with the collegium musicum at Leipzig. Founded in 1702 by Telemann, the collegium musicum was directed at the time by Melchior Hoffmann (c.1685–1715), who increased its membership to about forty musicians. In 1712 Pisendel obtained employment in the Dresden court orchestra and in 1716–17 he visited Italy, where he studied with Vivaldi in Venice and established a firm friendship with him, as a result of which Vivaldi wrote several concertos expressly for Pisendel and the Dresden court orchestra. Bach's connexions with Dresden date at the latest from 1717, the year of his famous 'duel' with the French harpsichordist and organist Louis Marchand, which was decided in Bach's favour when Marchand withdrew from the scene of

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battle without a note being struck.

Bach had numerous opportunities, then, to familiarize himself with Italian concertos before he left Weimar in December 1717, and the effect of this was soon to be observed, for example in the structure and figuration of the sonata that introduces the Easter Cantata, No. 31, *Der Himmel lacht* (1715). Bach's own first essays in concerto writing may possibly date from the Weimar years, but it was probably not until he was appointed *Kapellmeister* to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen in 1717 that he was able to devote himself to the composition of concertos in any systematic way. Prince Leopold was a keen musician and by 1713, when he returned to Cöthen after a period of study in Berlin and a tour of the Low Countries, England, France and Italy, he was a competent performer on the violin, bass viol and harpsichord. He soon set about creating what he called his 'collegium musicum', a permanent and fully professional court *Kapelle* which by 1716, when the prince attained his majority and succeeded his late father as ruler, consisted of seventeen musicians, including the *Kapellmeister*, Augustin Reinhard Stricker. Seven of these had been recruited from Berlin when the new Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm I, disbanded his orchestra there in 1713.

When Bach succeeded Stricker as *Kapellmeister* in 1717 the constitution of the collegium musicum was as follows:

Joseph Spiess, violin	Johann Ludwig Schreiber,
Martin Friedrich Marcus, violin	trumpet
Emanuel Heinrich Gottlieb Freytag,	Johann Christoph Krahel,
violin	trumpet
Christian Ferdinand Abel, bass viol	Anton Unger, timpani
Christian Bernhard Linigke, cello	Johann Christian Kreyser,
Johann Heinrich Freytag, flute	organ
Johann Gottlieb Würdig, flute	Johann Freytag, 'ripienista'
Johann Ludwig Rose, oboe	Wilhelm Andreas Harbordt,
Johann Christoph Torlée,	'ripienista'
bassoon	Adam Ludwig Weber,
	'ripienista'.

The last three musicians on this list were evidently employed as 'rank-and-file' instrumentalists, required only for doubling parts; each is entered in the payment lists as 'Musicus', as distinct from the more elevated title of 'Cammer-Musicus' enjoyed by the better-paid members of the collegium musicum.⁵ Assuming the participation of Prince Leopold on the bass viol and of Bach himself (perhaps as viola player, if not at the

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harpsichord), we have here the forces required for most, if not all, of the six Brandenburg Concertos. The third concerto would seem to demand two viola players and two cellists in addition to those available from the collegium musicum; and, unless the trumpeters were able to double on horns (which is perhaps unlikely given the highly specialized technique called for on both instruments), the Cöthen band would have needed the services of extra players for the First Brandenburg Concerto. Supplementary players were in fact employed a number of times, and the presence at court of two horn players on 6 June 1722 might well have been one occasion for a performance of that work.

It is reasonable to assume that the Brandenburg Concertos were played by, and for the most part composed for, the orchestra at Cöthen. How many other concertos Bach wrote for the same players we do not know. Supposition takes the place of hard evidence in assigning the two solo violin concertos (BWV 1041–2) and the Concerto in D minor for two violins (BWV 1043) to the Cöthen years: autograph material exists only for the A minor and D minor concertos (and then only in part), and all these concertos (including the Brandenburgs) were unknown to Bach's first biographer, Johann Nicolaus Forkel. Bach's predilection for composing in a particular genre more or less systematically over a period of time, returning to it only to bring a corpus of works to their final form, reinforces the theory that it was at Cöthen that the composer wrote his original concertos, that these numbered many more than the nine that are known to us, and that some of them are to be found in transcriptions for one or more harpsichords and strings that Bach made during his time at Leipzig.⁶

It was in Spring 1729 that Bach first accepted control of the collegium musicum that Telemann had founded in Leipzig in 1702. The term 'collegium musicum' is not used in this connexion in the same way that Prince Leopold used it at Cöthen – for a regularly constituted professional ensemble – but rather in its more usual sense of a music society at which students, amateurs and perhaps semi-professionals met regularly to make music for their own enjoyment and that of anyone who cared to listen. Bach's society met weekly at Gottfried Zimmermann's coffee house in the Catherinenstraße, or during the summer months at the same Zimmermann's garden outside the city. Its members were frequently called upon to provide music on special civic or academic occasions elsewhere in the city, but it would be for the ordinary weekly meetings that Bach made his concerto transcriptions. They include versions for harpsichord(s) and

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strings of the violin concertos BWV 1041–3 and the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto, as well as Vivaldi's A minor Concerto for four violins (RV 580) and other concertos by Bach of which the original versions have been lost. It may be assumed that in the concertos for more than one harpsichord Bach would have been joined as soloist by his eldest sons, but although he continued to direct the collegium musicum at least until 1741 (with a break of two years between 1737 and 1739) the activity does not seem to have stimulated him to compose entirely new concertos. None, at least, is known to date from this period. As far as original composition is concerned, he seems to have exhausted his interest in the genre at Cöthen, or at least in the early Leipzig years.

Bach's historical position at the culmination of an era, manning one of the last bastions of the Baroque in the face of an encroaching *galant* style in music, has tended to obscure the fact that very little in the way of a native tradition stands behind the Brandenburg Concertos. It is true, of course, that the concerto as a genre was about forty years old by the time the Brandenburgs were composed; Georg Muffat (1653–1704) had heard concertos by Corelli in Rome in the early 1680s and claimed credit for introducing the genre to Germany on his return in 1682. But the concertos that Muffat himself composed and published in Salzburg and Passau were, quite naturally, of the conservative Roman type and much influenced by the French orchestral suite (Muffat had studied with Lully in Paris), as were the concertos and concerto-like works of other south German composers such as Benedict Anton Aufschnaiter (1665–1742) and Johann Christoph Pez (1664–1716). Johann Sigismund Kusser (1660–1727), another pupil of Lully, and Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) were among other composers who preferred the French-influenced orchestral suite to the concerto. The more modern style of the Venetian concerto made rapid inroads, especially in more northerly parts, when it eventually reached Germany, and Bach was not the only German composer whose music was affected by it. As Pippa Drummond has written,

the main impact of the new form was felt in the second decade of the [eighteenth] century. It is at this stage that references to Vivaldi's concertos begin to appear in German literature and correspondence; at this stage, too, that a whole generation of young composers (Stölzel, Heinichen, and Pisendel, to name but a few) sought tuition from Italy's leading concertists.⁷

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It is highly likely that by 1721 Bach was familiar with concertos by each of the three German composers mentioned by Drummond, but in the absence of a firm chronology for any of them it is impossible to suggest how many and which concertos Bach might have known. He would certainly have known some by Telemann, with whom he was on friendly terms from about 1706, but whether these would have been of the Venetian type or of Telemann's preferred Roman type one cannot say. Joseph Meck (1690–1758), who worked at the Eichstätt court as violinist from 1711 and became *Hofkapellmeister* there in 1721, is another composer whose concertos Bach would certainly have been acquainted with. Meck is credited with being the first German to publish a set of solo concertos.⁸ They appeared in 1720–21, at the same time that Bach was working on the Brandenburg Concertos and, like the Meck concerto that J. G. Walther arranged for organ, they are all in the Vivaldian three-movement form.

It seems certain, though, that Bach's familiarity with the Venetian concerto style came directly from hearing and studying Italian examples, especially those of Vivaldi, rather than through the works of his German contemporaries. The fundamental importance of Vivaldi to the formation of Bach's concerto style was recognized by the latter's earliest biographer, who was undoubtedly informed on the subject by C. P. E. Bach, and through him by J. S. Bach himself. Forkel wrote:

John Sebastian Bach's first attempts at composition were, like all first attempts, defective. . . . He soon began to feel that the eternal running and leaping led to nothing; that there must be order, connection, and proportion in the thoughts; and that, to attain such objects, some kind of guide was necessary. Vivaldi's Concertos for the violin, which were then just published, served him for such a guide. He so often heard them praised as admirable compositions, that he conceived the happy idea of arranging them all for his clavichord. He studied the chain of the ideas, their relation to each other, the variations of the modulations, and many other particulars. The change necessary to be made in the ideas and passages, composed for the violin, but not suitable to the clavichord, taught him to think musically . . .⁹

and later:

[Bach's] ardent genius was attended by an equally ardent industry, which incessantly impelled him, when he could not succeed by his own strength, to seek aid from the models existing in his time. At first, Vivaldi's violin concertos afforded him this assistance . . .¹⁰

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Modern Bach scholars, including Christoph Wolff, have on the whole confirmed Forkel's opinion of the over-riding importance of Vivaldi's influence:

Vivaldi's concertos . . . confronted him [Bach] with an entirely new set of problems and possibilities. This is not to say that Vivaldi was the first and only one to develop a new compositional concept, but he certainly was the principal exponent of a new way of musical composition based on genuine 'musical thinking' exemplified first and foremost in his concertos . . .¹¹

Some idea of the nature and extent of Vivaldi's influence on the concertos of Bach will, I hope, become apparent from the pages that follow.¹²

Genesis and reception

Most of what we know about Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg we owe to the researches of Heinrich Bessler.¹ The dedicatee of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos was born on 14 May 1677 to the second wife of the Elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, whose far-reaching reforms laid the foundations for the kingdom of Prussia and earned him the name of the Great Elector. Friedrich Wilhelm died in 1688 and was succeeded by his son and heir (Christian Ludwig's half-brother), Friedrich, who reigned as elector from 1688 and as King Friedrich I of Prussia from 1701 until his death in 1713. The king was a cultured man and a generous patron; in 1696 he founded an Academy of Arts in Berlin, and four years later an Academy of Sciences headed by Leibnitz. In his leanings towards intellectual pursuits he was encouraged by his musically gifted wife, Sophie Charlotte, for whom he built the Schloss Charlottenburg, which became a glittering centre for music in the early years of the eighteenth century.

Things changed abruptly in Berlin when Friedrich Wilhelm I (the 'Soldier King') succeeded his father in 1713. One of his first acts as ruler was to dismiss all the musicians (some of whom found employment at Cöthen and were later Bach's colleagues there), but he allowed his uncle Christian Ludwig to remain in residence at the Berlin Schloss and to retain his own *Kapelle*; he also made over to him for life estates in Malchow and Heinersdorf, about five miles from the Schloss, which the margrave used as a summer residence. While the king led a philistine life, concentrating his energies on building up the military strength of his kingdom, Christian Ludwig seems to have done his best to maintain the cultural traditions of his late half-brother. He evidently had the means to do it: in 1734 his income amounted to the considerable sum of 48,945 Thalers. A good deal of this was presumably spent on the musical establishment, but we know the names of only six of his *Kammermusici*:

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those who were paid twenty-five Thalers each for mourning dress at his funeral (he died on 3 September 1734). They appear in the account books as Emmerling, Kotowsky, Hagen, Kühltau, Emis and Ellinger. Cyriak Emmerling (c.1660–1737), listed in Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon* as a composer, keyboard player and bass viol player born in Eisleben,² was evidently the margrave's *Kapellmeister*; Bessler identified Kotowsky as probably the father of the flautist Georg Wilhelm Kottowsky (born in 1735 according to Eitner)³ and Kühltau as the bassoonist Samuel Kühltau, who in 1754 was a member of the royal *Kapelle* in Berlin and died soon afterwards.

It does not follow, however, that the six who were provided with mourning clothes were the only musicians in the margrave's household in 1734; neither should it be assumed that his *Kapelle* had remained at the same size as it was when Bach visited Berlin fifteen years earlier. The purpose of Bach's visit in 1719, for which the sum of 130 Thalers was made over to him from the Cöthen exchequer on 1 March, was to pay for a new harpsichord which had been ordered for Prince Leopold from the instrument-builder to the Berlin court, Michael Mietke. Bessler suggested that Bach must have made an earlier visit, some time after 15 June 1718, to place the order in person, but there is no documentary evidence for such a visit, and no compelling reason for supposing it to have taken place. The specification for the new instrument could perfectly well have been sent by post or messenger, but Bach's presence would have been necessary in 1719, not only to pay for the harpsichord but also to inspect it and to make arrangements for transporting it from Berlin. Possibly Bach himself travelled back with it to Cöthen, where it arrived on 14 March 1719.

It must have been this Berlin visit that Bach referred to in his dedication of the Brandenburg Concertos, dated 24 March 1721, when he spoke of playing before the margrave 'il y a une couple d'années' and receiving his request for 'quelques pieces de ma Composition'. Written in courtly French and in a conventionally obsequious style (made the more so in the original by the writer's consistent use of the third person in addressing the margrave), it reads:

To His Royal Highness
 Monseigneur
 Crétien Louis
 Marggraf de Brandenburg &c. &c. &c.
 Monseigneur