



Notes on the Program

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Concerto in D minor for Oboe, Violin, and Strings, BWV 1060

Johann Sebastian Bach

Some of Johann Sebastian Bach's concertos come down to us in multiple versions, and when they don't it is widely assumed that the existing text may be all that survives of a lost original. All of his solo concertos with orchestra – there are only seven complete ones – exist as harpsichord concertos, but none is thought to have been first created to spotlight that instrument. Earlier violin versions of several are unquestionably authentic; indeed, it makes sense that Bach, who was an adept violinist as well as a brilliant keyboard player, should have chosen to feature the violin in several of his concertos.

For the most part, Bach wrote his harpsichord concertos either for courtly entertainment or for use by the members of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum. The Collegium was a society of university students, interested amateur musicians, and a few professionals who met most Friday evenings to play music for their own pleasure, as well as for the delectation of members of the public who dropped

by. In cold months the group gathered at Zimmermann's coffeehouse, in Leipzig's Catherinestrasse; during the summer they moved out of doors, either to the café's garden or to some site on the outskirts of town. Bach directed the group from 1729 to 1741 (with a two-year break from 1737 to 1739), and often dipped into his back catalogue of compositions when crafting "new" pieces for the Collegium to explore.

An analysis of the tessitura and other musical characteristics of Bach's C-minor Concerto for Two Harpsichords and Strings (BWV 1060) has led to the generally accepted belief that it was initially a Double Concerto for Oboe and Violin, under which guise it is performed here. A 1764 catalogue from the publishing firm of Breitkopf lists a Bach concerto for oboe and violin; although it fails to mention the work's key, it does confirm that Bach

In Short

Born: March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany

Died: July 28, 1750, in Leipzig

Work composed: This concerto is a reconstruction of a work which Bach is thought to have written between 1717 and 1723.

World premiere: There is no information available about the early performance history of this work.

New York Philharmonic premiere: premiered December 30, 1961, Werner Torkanowsky, conductor, Joseph Silverstein, violin, and Principal Oboe Harold Gomberg, soloists

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 24, 2005, Kent Nagano, conductor, Sheryl Staples and Sherry Sylar, soloists

Estimated duration: ca. 14 minutes

penned a piece for this instrumental combination. Dissenting opinions persist, however, and all reconstructions — or, more precisely, “retro-constructions” — involve considerable speculation. That explains why this piece can be found in modern versions for oboe and violin (or for two violins) in the keys of both C minor and D minor, the latter being the version to be performed in this concert.

Commenting about the double harpsichord concertos that we know today as BWV 1060 and BWV 1061, Johann Forkel wrote, in his 1802 biography of Bach: “The first is very old, but the second is as new as if it had been composed only yesterday.” Recent musicological opinion agrees with Forkel’s statement that BWV 1060 was “very old” at that time. Bach

almost surely wrote it — in its original version — some time between 1717 and 1723, during his tenure as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Cöthen, and refashioned it for two harpsichords considerably later in Leipzig. The 13-member instrumental ensemble available to him at Cöthen fell short of what we would consider a modern orchestra; this is why Bach’s orchestral pieces of that period still stand with one foot planted in the realm of chamber music. As it happens, the manuscript for both the presumed original and the revision are lost, but at least the two-harpsichord arrangement has survived in reliable copies from the period.

This is an aggressive and intensely emotional work, the more so in the version that employs the pungent tones of the oboe and

Angels and Muses

Johann Sebastian Bach was 32 years old when he assumed the position of Kapellmeister (music director) at the Court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt in Cöthen, in December 1717. It was a big decision for the composer, who already had a perfectly good job as orchestra leader for the Duke of Weimar, where he had worked since 1708 (his second stint there, actually, following his brief first appointment in 1703). Accepting the new position was personally disruptive beyond the fact that it entailed moving Bach’s quickly growing family the distance of about 60 miles; the Duke refused to accept Bach’s resignation and had him held under arrest for a month before he finally relented and let his music director go.



The allures of Cöthen were substantial. Leopold’s realm may have been small (with just 5,000 subjects), but his passion for music was boundless. He was a reasonably accomplished performer on the viola da gamba, and he traveled to France, England, Italy, and the Netherlands to polish his skills not only as a gambist but also as a violinist and harpsichordist. As a teenager the Prince had convinced his mother to start hiring a musical staff with whom he could play chamber music, and by the time he assumed the throne himself the assemblage had grown into a full-fledged *collegium musicum* (essentially a chamber orchestra) of about 13 players. As it happened, Friedrich Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, had just then decided to put more money into military spending, and as a result Leopold had his pick of the newly unemployed players who had belonged to the King’s orchestra. In addition to these musical inducements there was Leopold’s practically unbeatable financial proposal: Bach would be the second-highest-paid employee of the entire court, and his wife would be paid half as much to serve as a singer. Unfortunately, the nearly six and a half years Bach spent in Cöthen would not be entirely happy. His wife died in 1720, leaving him a single father of seven children; but he remarried a year and a half later, and generally prospered, moving on only when offered the prestigious position of Thomaskantor in Leipzig, in 1723.

the wide-ranging expressive possibilities of the violin. It is cast in the standard Italianate pattern of three movements, the first of which is a fine example of the harmonic density that some of Bach's followers would deplore as "turgid." The texture lightens, however, for a luminous, introspective slow movement in which the two soloists weave their lines in elegant counterpoint above simple chords in

the orchestra. A brittle theme is strongly etched by the soloists and orchestra at the outset of the final movement, which in a central episode boosts the violinist into the spotlight to proclaim great sweeps of triplets.

Instrumentation: solo oboe and violin with an orchestra of strings and continuo (comprising harpsichord, cello, and bass).

At the Time

In the year 1717, when J.S. Bach began his employment at Prince Leopold's court in Cöthen, and apparently began composing the work on this program, the following events were taking place:

The first Premier Grand Lodge of Freemasons is established in London; in letters to friends in England, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762, pictured at top left) describes the practice of smallpox inoculation in Constantinople; French Enlightenment philosopher François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778, top right), who wrote under the pen name "Voltaire" starting in 1718, is sentenced to imprisonment in the Bastille for his satirical writings; the English pirate "Black Sam" Bellamy dies along with more than 140 members of his crew when his ship, the *Whydah Gally*, sinks during a storm off the coast of Cape Cod (the ship was recovered in 1984); the first levee, standing at three feet tall, is built in New Orleans on the Mississippi River; school attendance is made compulsory in Prussia; Britain, France, and the Netherlands sign the Triple Alliance, an effort to stem the power of Spain in Europe; French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) paints *Pilgrimage on the Isle of Cythera* (center); George Frideric Handel's *Water Music* is performed for England's King George I on the occasion of a royal barge trip on the Thames, seen depicted here in a painting by Edouard Jean Conrad Hamman (bottom)

