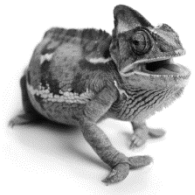

Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston
Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

25th Anniversary Season
chamber series 3: The Brandenburgs

Saturday, November 19, 2022, 8 PM at First Church in Boston
Sunday, November 20, 2022, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:
J. S. Bach, Complete Brandenburg Concertos, BWV 1046–1051

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is a truly monumental presence in the history of music. From the beginning of every classical musician's education, what we learn as the language of Western music is the system of tonality that found its apotheosis with J. S. Bach, and we study his examples for its rules and best practices. It is easy for us to think of him as a singular genius, even a god-like figure that appeared on Earth to teach us all what music is meant to be.

In truth, J. S. Bach was the most famous member of an enormous family of influential musicians that spanned for at least four generations before him and, including several of his own sons, at least two generations after him. He was born in Eisenach, Germany, the youngest of eight children of Johann Ambrosius Bach, an organist and municipal musician. Johann Sebastian was orphaned by his tenth birthday and sent to live with his oldest brother Johann Christoph, organist at Ohrdruf, near Arnstadt. He received a solid fundamental musical education, first in his brother's care and then as a scholarship student at the choir school in Lüneburg.

In 1703, he received his first professional appointment at the church of St Boniface in Arnstadt. It was not smooth sailing. Among other things, the virtuosic young organist confused the congregation with his embellishments during hymns, but the biggest problem was that he extended a granted leave to travel to Lübeck to hear Dieterich Buxtehude (considered the greatest organist of the time) by three months – without permission, of course.

Bach's next appointment in Mühlhausen was marginally happier. He still found himself in some conflict with church authorities, but the musical situation was generally better, and he composed the first significant cantatas. He also married Maria Barbara Bach – a second cousin – during this period, who had seven children before her death in 1720. In 1708 he came into the employ of Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Weimar as organist and court musician. Much of his most famous organ

music was written at Weimar, as well as arrangements of concertos by Vivaldi and others, which expanded his familiarity with other styles, particularly Italian instrumental music.

In August 1717, Bach was offered the post of Kapellmeister to the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, a sophisticated music lover and musician himself, but Duke Wilhelm was reluctant to release him. The messy process included spending a month in prison and being discharged from Weimar in disgrace, but the few years that followed were among the happiest and most productive of Bach's career. As a strict Calvinist, Prince Leopold had little music in church, but the music at his court and the musicians Bach met and performed with must have been glorious. During his time in Cöthen, Bach composed his keyboard suites and inventions, the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, violin and cello sonatas, suites, and partitas, and the six Brandenburg Concertos on today's program.

Maria Barbara's passing in 1720 was followed just the next year by marriage to Anna Magdalena Wilcken, daughter of a trumpet player at the court, who gave birth to another 13 children, only three of whom survived infancy. Unfortunately, 1721 also brought Prince Leopold's wedding to a woman who had so little appreciation – even active dislike – for music that Bach again had to seek out other employment. He applied for the vacant position of Thomaskantor at Leipzig, which was finally his in 1723 after both Telemann and Graupner declined offers. He would spend the remainder of his life in the position.

Once again a full-time church musician and now responsible, along with his students, for the music at no less than four churches, over the next five years Bach completed three annual cycles of weekly cantatas, the *Magnificat* in E-flat, various motets and other sacred works, and the Passions of St. John and St. Matthew. In 1729 he took over the direction of the *Collegium Musicum* that Telemann had founded. Records of exactly what music was performed there have been lost, but they must have included the secular cantatas, orchestral suites, concertos for one and two harpsichords, and many other familiar secular works. The years that followed also saw the composition of the keyboard partitas, the *Goldberg Variations*, and the second volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier.*

In the last few years of Bach's life, the value of his prodigious musical skills finally received significant recognition beyond the cities of his employment, and he seemed to actively regard much of his creative work as a legacy to future generations. In May 1747 he was summoned to visit Frederick the Great in Potsdam and given a fiendishly long and difficult "royal theme" on which to improvise. He was able to improvise a three-voice fugue on the spot, but when challenged to extend to six voices he begged leave to work on the score in private. The result was the Musical Offering, a set of diverse ricercars and canons, a trio sonata in the *galant* style that suited Frederick's modern tastes, and an absolutely brilliant six-voice fugue. At the time of his death in 1750, following illness (probably diabetes) and blindness that proved impossible to cure, he had nearly completed *The Art of the Fugue*, an exhaustive treatise by example of contrapuntal techniques that is still quite literally the definitive word on the matter.

The exact chronology of composition and performance of the six Brandenburg Concertos is impossible to determine from the historical record, but they were certainly completed by 1721 when Bach sent them as a carefully hand-copied collection to Margrave Christian Ludwig of

Brandenburg, which is how they got the name by which we know them. The title page of Bach's submission reads (as translated from the formal French): "Six Concertos with several instruments, dedicated to His Royal Highness, Lord Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg etc. etc. etc. by his most humble and obedient servant Johann Sebastian Bach, Chapel-Master to His Highness, the reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen."

The dedication, also in French, reads:

> To His Royal Highness, Lord Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg etc. etc. etc.
> My Lord, as it was my good fortune, a couple of years ago, to play before your Royal Highness at your command, and as I noticed that you took some pleasure in the small musical talents which heaven has bestowed upon me, and as you did me the honor, upon my leave-taking, to command me to send you some pieces of my own composition, I have, in accordance with your gracious orders, taken the liberty of fulfilling my very humble duties toward your Royal Highness with the present concertos, which I have arranged for several instruments, and most humbly beseech you not to pass judgment upon their imperfections, in the severity of that refined and exquisite taste which all the world knows you to possess toward works of music, but rather to regard with benevolence the profound respect and most humble obedience which I have sought to evince through them. As for the rest, My Lord, I beseech your Royal Highness most humbly to have the kindness of preserving me in your good graces and to be assured that nothing would be closer to my heart than to strive to be at your service on more worthy occasions, I who am, my Lord, with incomparable zeal, your Royal Highness's most humble and obedient servant, Johann Sebastian Bach, Cöthen, the 24th of March, 1721.

This was almost certainly a kind of job application, following Bach's realization that his situation at Cöthen was souring. It was not exactly a naked request for ongoing employment, but he had to step lightly; after all, his last job transition had included a month in jail.

The unique instrumentations were clearly not intended for the small band of musicians available to the Margrave, however, but to the lively musical community that had been in place at Prince Leopold's court at Cöthen. Further, such diversity of instrumentation and the conspicuous lack of an over-arching harmonic plan gives us the indication that these concertos were not originally intended as a cycle like the six solo violin sonatas, the six sonatas for violin and harpsichord, six cello suites, and so on (although they reinforce the idea that Bach clearly liked the number six). They were probably pieces composed at different times for different court occasions, certainly influenced by Vivaldi specifically and the Italian Concerto Grosso style generally, but also inspired by the musical forces at hand at any given time. The various ways that Bach used those forces to great effect are nothing short of brilliant.

Concerto No. 2, BWV 1047, for trumpet, flute, oboe, violin and orchestra, is the closest to the standard *concerto grosso* of the High Baroque, in which a small group of soloists, called the *concertino*, plays with and in contrast to orchestral strings and keyboard/low string *basso continuo*, called collectively the *ripieno*. Bach chooses four solo instruments that operate in essentially the same tonal register (especially with the virtuosically high trumpet part), taking full advantage of their timbral differences to make the counterpoint continually varied and always

crystal-clear.

No. 5, BWV 1050, is closest to what we think of now as a concerto, in which one instrumentalist is accompanied by an orchestra. In this case the startling harpsichord cadenza in the first movement makes it clear who has the lead. In fact, in an earlier version of the score this cadenza was only 19 measures long; for the version sent to the Margrave, Bach extended it to the 65 measures we will hear today, probably transcribed after the fact from a cadenza he himself improvised in performance. The solo flute and violin parts maintain their presence throughout, however, commenting continuously on the material presented at the keyboard and reminding us that these concertos are entirely unique in conception and execution. Another curious feature of Concerto No. 5 is that there is only one violin part in the orchestra rather than the customary two. When not at the keyboard Bach's primary instrument was the violin, but his preference in orchestral situations was to play the viola, in order to be "in the middle of the harmony." As the virtuosic nature of the harpsichord part was almost certainly intended for his own hands, he probably had the normal 2nd violinist play viola in his stead.

Concerto No. 3, BWV 1048, is in a sense representative of the oldest Italian idea of a concerto as a "coming together" of instruments, and it quite possibly owes something to the Venetian models of the Gabrieli family of composers, who used the vast spaces of the cathedrals at which they worked to set off groups of instruments against each other in a sonic bath of antiphony. Those who share Bach's enthusiasm for numerology will no doubt notice that Concerto No. 3 calls for three groups of three string instrument soloists: high (violin), middle (viola), and low (cello), along with the requisite basso continuo. There is a mysterious feature in the middle of the piece that presents an intriguing performance choice. Between the two fully-composed outer fast movements are just two chords, traditionally interpreted as an opportunity for the harpsichordist to provide a transition. Often that is another of Bach's works for solo keyboard that fits in the tonal transition, but in many cases, as we will hear today, the performer will improvise a cadenza – as was almost certainly the practice of Bach himself.

Concerto No. 1, BWV 1046, for a pair of French horns, three oboes, bassoon, solo violin and standard Baroque orchestra of strings and continuo, had its origins with the instrumental introduction to the earlier "Hunt" Cantata of 1713 (which contains the famous aria "Sheep May Safely Graze"), apropos to the traditional hunting function of the horns. He added the third movement allegro and expanded on the set of dances that make up the fourth movement, for a hybrid of the older Baroque concerto style of overture followed by dance movements and Vivaldi's more recent innovations, in which soloists and orchestra alternate. Throughout, Bach treats the large complement of soloists antiphonally, playing off of or in combination with each other at different times.

Concerto No. 6, BWV 1051 is unusual in that Bach's chosen instrumentation – two violas, two violas da gamba (played on cellos in our modern instrument ensemble), and basso continuo – emphasizes lower, darker sounds rather than the brilliantly wide spectrum of the rest. This concerto was probably written for him to lead an ensemble from the viola, further delighting his gamba-playing employer Prince Leopold by including a choice of two solo gamba parts for him as well. The effect is warm and enveloping, with the soloists emerging gradually from the ensemble rather than being starkly set off by register and tone color.

Concerto No. 4, BWV 1049 is second only to No. 5 in featuring a single player – in this case the solo violinist – in a virtuoso showcase. Nothing in the Brandenburg Concertos is ever simple, however. Bach presents an instrumentation mystery here: nobody knows what he meant by specifying the solo instruments as violin and two "flauti d'echo." No instrument by that name seems to have existed, and some performers have tried soprano recorders or flageolet (a type of tin-whistle fashionable at the time) that sound an octave above the written pitch. Most, however, think that Bach was referring simply to the echo effects he wrote in the second movement, as the two flutes together imitate the violin figures.

The diversity of sounds and moods in the Brandenburg Concertos make a for a wonderful single performance event, and virtually any chosen order can work. We have decided on a performance order that we feel will give a dramatic progression for each half of the concert. We present them, humbly, for your enjoyment on this "worthy occasion" of Chameleon's 25th anniversary season, celebrating the community you have helped us to build, united in the joy of music.

- Gabriel Rice