

Getting a Handel on Bach | Program Notes

Bach And Handel – Two Saxons Who Changed The World

G.F. Handel and J.S. Bach were born in the same year, only about 80 miles apart. Bach came from a clan of Lutheran church musicians, while Handel grew up listening to the music of the aristocracy, since his father was a court surgeon. Each wore the lifelong stamp of his origins, but Bach's admiration for Handel inspired him to attempt a meeting at least twice.

Bach owned a copy of Handel's Brockes Passion, "Armida abbandonata" and the Concerto grosso in F minor. Carl Philip Emmanuel wrote to Forkel that Handel was one of the composers his father most admired.

In 1719 Bach's work took him to Halle, where he learned that Handel was home on a visit. Bach tried to look him up, but Handel had unfortunately left the day before. Bach made a second attempt to contact Handel ten years later, and that also failed to pan out. In one of the curious ironies of music history, both men would be afflicted with cataracts in their old age and undergo surgery at the hand of the same unscrupulous eye surgeon, John Taylor.



In March of 1719, Johann Sebastian Bach, Kapellmeister to the Prince of Köthen, travelled to Berlin on an errand to purchase a two-manual harpsichord. Always on the lookout for career opportunities, he took out time while in Berlin to perform for a certain Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg. The Margrave was so delighted with Bach's playing that he commissioned Bach to write several pieces for him. Two years later, the Margrave received a beautifully bound manuscript, dedicated to him, and containing the six magnificent pieces which he called *Six Concerts avec plusieurs d'instruments*.

We know them as the Brandenburg Concerti, but they were not, in fact, composed specifically for the Margrave. Rather, these are six individual pieces that Bach had written at various times for use with his orchestra at Köthen, and possible Weimar. Being a busy man and a practical one, he simply collected six concerti which represented his best work, and copied them out for the Margrave. Apparently the Margrave did not have the musical personnel necessary to perform these works; thus, he never used the score, never sent Bach a fee, and never thanked him. So much for the Margrave.

The fact that these concertos were composed at different times for different occasions--not to mention the extremely diverse instrumentation (each one requires a different group of players)--demonstrates that the six concerti were never intended to be performed as a set. To perform all six is impractical from the point of view of musical personnel. Moreover, the structural coherence that Bach always instilled in pieces that he composed as a set (i.e., key relationships, form, instrumentation, etc.) does not exist between the six Brandenburgs. Rather, each one is an individual gem--a sparkling and perfectly-structured entity on its own.

Music writers in the 18th century often talked about the goal of musical performance: to move the Affections (moods, emotions) of the listener. The Brandenburg concertos have proven their extraordinary power to move, delight and captivate audiences for 250 years. But what is it that gives them that power – that greatness that we all intuitively sense?

To start with, most of Bach's instrumentations are unique and daring. Bach uses both texture and form in unprecedented ways, blending the solo concerto and group concerto (concerto grosso) forms. Concertos no. 2, 4, 5 and 6 feature primarily one solo instrument (trumpet, violin, harpsichord, and a pair of violas, respectively), but also feature *groups* of solo instru-

ments in contrast. He also achieves extraordinary textural variety: the slow movements take us into a chamber music environment, where the pool of light centers on the soloists and their continuo players, while themes unfold with expressive individuality and a timeless sense of measured order.

Above all, there is a sense of exhilaration that all of us feel from performing the Brandenburgs. Some of that is due to sheer virtuosity: the featured solo instrument(s) in each piece requires a level of virtuosity that is literally *athletic*.

Concerto no. 4 features revolutionary pyro-technics for the violin and the recorder parts are rather devilish as well. The triumphant counterpoint of the finale proves once and for all that that fugal writing can be *fun*.

Concerto no. 5 requires from the harpsichordist a level of speed in the scalar passages that far exceeds anything else in the repertoire. One has to train for this piece the same way one trains for an athletic event. Also, the unusual role of the harpsichord in this Concerto--starting off playing basso continuo (*easy*), then playing solo melodies in dialogue with the flute and violin (*moderately difficult*), then getting carried away into virtuoso scales (*very difficult*), and finally leaving the others in the dust as one contemplates the universe in a huge solo cadenza (*mountaintop experience*)--makes this piece a unique emotional experience each time one plays it.

What makes them so great, in the end, is best understood through Bach's words as a teacher of how to play basso continuo: "The aim and reason of the basso continuo, *as of all music*, should be none else but the glory of God and the refreshing of the mind.



George Frideric Handel dominated the London opera stage for three decades in the first half of the 18th century. Along with his contemporaries Rameau and Vivaldi, Handel was responsible for bringing the genre of baroque opera to its culmination. With a sophisticated background including early training in Germany followed by five years of study in Italy, Handel arrived on the London scene at a moment when the city was ready to embrace his blend of ambition and international sophistication. A true artist-entrepreneur, he started three commercial opera companies within fifteen years, managing to convince the English nobility that they absolutely needed this entertainment in a foreign language with mostly foreign singers.

However, the London audience was fickle. Handel's successes spawned rivals. He both made and lost a fortune during his years as the Andrew Lloyd Webber of 18th-century London. Like the characters to whom he gave voice, Handel was destined for tumultuous successes, failures, and upheavals. Perhaps this is inevitable for anyone who dedicates himself to that passionate art form of love and despair: opera.

We perform arias from *Alcina* and *Giulio Cesare*.

Alcina (1735). The third in Handel's *Orlando furioso* trilogy for Covent Garden, this opera concerns the adventures of the heroic knight Ruggiero and his fiancée Bradamante on the enchanted island ruled by the sorceress Alcina. The cast featured many of the same singers as the *Ariodante* production a few months earlier. While Anna Maria Strada played Alcina, Cecilia Young created the role of Morgana, Alcina's flirty young sister. Morgana is infatuated with "Ricciardo" (Bradamante disguised as a man). At the end of Act I, she sings the flirtatious coloratura aria "**Tornami a vagheggiar,**" believing that Ricciardo loves her as she loves him.

Giulio Cesare (1724). This great opera featured the renowned Francesca Cuzzoni in the pivotal role of Cleopatra. Cleopatra seduces Cesare to gain the throne of Egypt, but then falls passionately in love with him. Handel beautifully conveys her passions and fears – as a political leader and a woman in a violent milieu. Cleopatra sings the famous tragic aria, "**Piangerò la sorte mia**" (I will lament my fate) in Act III when she fears that Cesare is dead. She believes she has lost both her lover and her powerful position. In the fiery B-section of this da capo aria, Cleopatra imagines the vengeance she will wreak on her enemies after her death, as a ghost. In the following scene, she sings the coloratura aria "**Da Tempeste,**" which uses the metaphor of a ship tossed at sea to convey her conflicting emotions.

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