Nicholas Kraemer Conductor and Harpsichord

J. S. Bach
The *Brandenburg* Concertos, BWV 1046-1051

*Brandenburg* Concerto No. 1 in F Major, BWV 1046  
[Allegro]  
Adagio  
Allegro  
Minuet  
  Robert Chen *violin*  
  Eugene Izotov *oboe*  
  Daniel Gingrich *horn*  
  James Smelser *horn*

*Brandenburg* Concerto No. 6 in B-flat Major, BWV 1051  
[Allegro]  
Adagio ma non tanto—  
Allegro  
  Weijing Wang *viola*  
  Catherine Brubaker *viola*

*Brandenburg* Concerto No. 5 in D Major, BWV 1050  
Allegro  
Affettuoso  
Allegro  
  Jennifer Gunn *flute*  
  Robert Chen *violin*  
  Mark Shuldiner *harpsichord*

INTERMISSION
Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major, BWV 1047
[Allegro]
Andante—Allegro assai
   Jennifer Gunn flute
   Eugene Izotov oboe
   Christopher Martin trumpet
   Robert Chen violin

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major, BWV 1048
[Allegro]
Adagio
Allegro

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G Major, BWV 1049
Allegro
Andante
Presto
   Robert Chen violin
   Jennifer Gunn flute
   Louise Dixon flute

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Johann Sebastian Bach
Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany.
Died July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany.

The Brandenburg Concertos, BWV 1046-1051

Berlin is now only a short afternoon’s drive from the half a dozen towns in East Central Germany where Bach lived and worked his entire life. (In sixty-five years, he never set foot outside Germany.) But in his day, the trip was much more arduous, and Bach didn’t travel that far unless he was sent on official business. He went to Berlin, apparently for the first time, in 1719, on an expense-account shopping trip, to buy a new, state-of-the-art harpsichord for his patron in Cöthen, a small, remote, rural town sometimes dismissively called “Cow Cöthen.” Bach wouldn’t recognize Berlin today, with its traffic jams and round-the-clock construction, but he was probably put off by its urban bustle even in 1719, for he had only a passing acquaintance with large towns such as Leipzig and Dresden.

We don’t know exactly when Bach visited Berlin that year—on March 1, the Cöthen court treasury advanced him 130 thalers “for the harpsichord built in Berlin and travel expenses”—or how long he stayed. But he found time to make several useful contacts, none more beneficial to the future of music than the margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, who asked Bach to send him some of his compositions. At the time, Bach was preoccupied with inspecting the harpsichord that had been made to order by Michael Mietke, who was famous for the quality of his high-end, elaborately painted instruments, and with arranging to have it shipped back to Cöthen. But he didn’t forget the margrave’s request.

It would be another two years before Bach handed Christian Ludwig the carefully written “presentation copy” of the six concertos we now call the Brandenburgs, after the margrave’s province just to the south and west of Berlin (its capital was Potsdam). Bach’s life, in the meantime, had been busy and unsettled. He had watched three family members (his ten-month-old son, his wife Maria Barbara, and his brother) die—a sudden spate of funerals, even in an age when life was short. He had gone to Halle to compete for the job of organist (he later declined the offer), which suggests that he was growing restless in Cöthen, despite working for an enlightened patron, the twenty-something Prince Leopold, who “both loved and understood music.” (The prince’s sympathies would suddenly change in 1721 when he married a woman who “seemed to be alien to the muses.”) And, in addition to his daily workload at Cöthen, he was trying to finish some of his most important music, including the sonatas and suites for solo violin.

We don’t know when Bach wrote the six concertos he dedicated to the margrave of Brandenburg. Recent scholarship suggests that most of them were already finished when he met the margrave (two of them possibly dating from 1713) and that he simply took his time compiling a set of pieces, some old and some new, that he thought made a sufficiently varied and satisfying whole. The fifth concerto, for example, with its unprecedented star role for harpsichord, was surely written after Bach returned from Berlin, in order to inaugurate the new special-order instrument. The presentation score he gave the margrave is a “gift edition” of the set, almost entirely in Bach’s own meticulous handwriting, prefaced by an elaborate dedication page written in French and dated...
March 24, 1721. “As I had a couple of years ago the pleasure of appearing before Your Royal Highness,” Bach wrote, recounting how the margrave had praised his talent at the time and asked for “some pieces of my composition.” Bach simply but provocatively describes the contents as “concerts avec plusieurs instruments”—that is, concertos for many different combinations of instruments, a modest way of expressing one of the set’s most innovative features.

Since we have no record that the margrave ever arranged to have his concertos performed, he has often been unfairly portrayed as an unworthy patron who put the unopened score on his bookshelf and never thanked or paid Bach for his efforts. We probably will never know when or where these works were first played, but they were obviously not widely known during Bach’s life. (The obituary prepared by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel doesn’t even mention them.) Only the Fifth, with its remarkable harpsichord solo, was performed with any regularity in the years after the composer’s death; eventually, the whole set was forgotten. The earliest documented public performance of a Brandenburg Concerto dates from 1835, more than a century after they were written. Today they are arguably Bach’s most popular works.

Like many of Bach’s sets, such as the Goldberg Variations or The Well-Tempered Clavier, the Brandenburg Concertos form a kind of master anthology—a demonstration, really, of all the imaginable possibilities inherent in a certain musical form. Each of these six concertos calls for a different combination of soloists—every one unprecedented in its choice of instruments and still without parallel today.

**BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 1 IN F MAJOR, BWV 1046**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**
- January 10 & 11, 1908, Orchestra Hall. Frederick Stock conducting
- August 4, 1973, Ravinia Festival. Lawrence Foster conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**
- April 17, 18, 19, 20 & 21, 2002, Orchestra Hall. Pinchas Zukerman conducting
- August 9, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting
- January 11, 2008, Orchestra Hall. Edwin Outwater conducting (Adagio and Allegro only)

**INSTRUMENTATION**
- two horns, three oboes, bassoon, and violin, strings, and continuo

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
- 21 minutes

**BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 6 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, BWV 1051**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**
- February 23 & 24, 1900, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting
- July 9, 1967, Ravinia Festival. Seiji Ozawa conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**
- August 9, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting
- December 13, 14, 15 & 18, 2012, Orchestra Hall. Harry Bicket conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**
- strings without violins, continuo

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
- 18 minutes

**BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 5 IN D MAJOR, BWV 1050**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**
- December 7 & 8, 1923, Orchestra Hall. Frederick Stock conducting
- July 28, 1956, Ravinia Festival. Leonard Bernstein conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**
- August 11, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting
- March 15, 16 & 17, 2007, Orchestra Hall. Mitsuko Uchida conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**
- solo flute, violin, and harpsichord, with strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
- 21 minutes
Perhaps they represent Bach’s ideal, for their instrumentation corresponds neither to the Cöthen ensemble he conducted nor to the margrave’s own resident group of musicians. Bach gives solo roles to members of all three orchestral families, and often groups them in unexpected combinations, such as the trumpet, flute, oboe, and violin ensemble of the second concerto. All the concertos demand and celebrate the performers’ virtuosity as much as they demonstrate Bach’s amazing skill. The union of joyful music making and compositional brilliance combine to put the Brandenburgs among those rare works that delight connoisseurs and amateurs alike.

The First Brandenburg is, at least in part, the oldest of the concertos. It’s also the most complex and stylistically varied, and the only one with four movements. The concerto is scored for a large and remarkably diverse ensemble of brass, wind, and string soloists, which, when joined by the orchestral strings and harpsichord, creates a rich eleven-part counterpoint. The violin is the primary solo instrument, but it shares a lovely duet with one of the oboes in the Adagio, and there are passages of great difficulty and prominence for the other instruments as well. Three of the four movements were originally composed, in a somewhat simpler form, as the introduction to Bach’s Hunting Cantata in 1713. Transforming that music into this Brandenburg Concerto was a major reconstruction and redecorating project, involving the addition of an extra movement (the third); a polonaise-like trio in the minuet; and an entirely new, virtuoso solo violin role; in addition to countless luxury details. Like many a renovation, the result is something of

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### **BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 2 IN F MAJOR, BWV 1047**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

- March 7 & 8, 1913, Orchestra Hall. Frederick Stock conducting
- July 6, 1969, Ravinia Festival. Seiji Ozawa conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

- August 9, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting
- April 1, 2, 3 & 7, 2009, Orchestra Hall. [no conductor]

**INSTRUMENTATION**

- flute, oboe, trumpet, and violin, strings and continuo

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**

- 13 minutes

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### **BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 3 IN G MAJOR, BWV 1048**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

- February 5 & 6, 1892, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting
- July 2, 1939, Ravinia Festival. Sir Adrian Boult conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

- November 23, 24, 25 & 27, 2001, Orchestra Hall. Daniel Barenboim conducting
- April 7, 2004, Philharmonie, Berlin, Germany. Daniel Barenboim conducting
- August 11, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**

- three each of violins, violas, and cellos, with double bass and continuo

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**

- 10 minutes

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### **BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO. 4 IN G MAJOR, BWV 1049**

The dates of composition and first performance are unknown.

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

- January 17 & 18, 1930, Orchestra Hall. Frederick Stock conducting
- August 17, 1998, Ravinia Festival. Peter Schreier conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

- June 13, 14 & 15, 2002, Orchestra Hall. Daniel Barenboim conducting
- August 11, 2006, Ravinia Festival. Jaime Laredo conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**

- violin, two flutes, strings and continuo

**CSO RECORDING**

- 1966. Jean Martinon conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 12: *A Tribute to Jean Martinon*)
a mishmash stylistically, but Bach’s technical skill is so great, his care for detail so refined, and his command of style so persuasive that the result is nothing less than a complete triumph.

Scored exclusively for low strings, the Sixth Brandenburg has the most unusual sonority of all these concertos. What is most remarkable, however, is that Bach has managed to write music that is never somber, despite the unremittingly dark sound of his ensemble. Like the Third (the other all-string Brandenburg, which at least benefits from the brilliance of high violins), this concerto is a marvel of endless variety, in color and texture, within a monochromatic world. The first movement, especially, is very densely woven and insistently repetitive, but in Bach’s hands it comes out lively and transparent. It is as if Bach had set himself the task of achieving the maximum contrast—both in the overall design of two full-ensemble movements surrounding an intimate viola duet, and within the shaping of the movements themselves—using a completely homogenous cast of instruments.

The Fifth Concerto stands out, even among the Brandenburgs, for Bach seems to be on the verge of inventing a new form—the keyboard concerto—that would soon be a favorite of virtually every composer from Mozart through the nineteenth century. In this piece, for the first time Bach elevated the harpsichord from its rank-and-file role as a member of the continuo group (the back-up ensemble that provided the harmonic support in nearly all music written in Bach’s day) to a featured part. Joined by two other soloists, the flute and the violin, the keyboard here enjoys its first great starring role, not only sharing the spotlight, but even dominating the action at times. It’s likely that the fancy two-manual harpsichord Bach picked up in Berlin gave him the idea of showing it off in an unusual way, but he cannot have known how the gesture would influence music after his death.

The slow middle movement—one of only a handful in Bach’s output marked affettuoso (affectionate, tender)—is a lovely air scored for just the three soloists. The way Bach ingeniously divides the material among the three, sometimes pairing flute and violin, sometimes the keyboard with one of the other instruments, gives this music such endless variety that we scarcely notice that the orchestra itself is silent. The finale, reuniting all the players, is a kind of da capo aria, with the entire beginning section repeated at the end. The keyboard quietly steals the spotlight again in the middle, and, even though the flute and the violin quickly regain their rightful places as fellow soloists, the concerto form itself would never be the same again.

In the Second Brandenburg, Bach writes for his most unconventional solo group of all, an unprecedented quartet of flute, oboe, violin, and trumpet (the brilliant, high-flying clarino trumpet that is one of the most extraordinary sounds in baroque music). The concerto is an ongoing negotiation (on Bach’s part) between the different sonorities of these instruments, and he has a gift for writing brilliant and idiomatic music for what is essentially an oddly matched quartet. (He also includes unusually detailed dynamic markings to help make everything audible.) In the Andante, Bach leaves out the trumpet altogether and simply composes chamber music for the three other players, accompanied only by continuo. The outer movements reveal Bach’s knack for balancing textures and his ingenuity for finding common ground instead
of emphasizing differences. Despite Bach’s diplomacy, however, the final Allegro unmistakably belongs to the trumpet.

The Third Concerto, thought to be among the earliest of the six, is scored for a nine-fold group of strings—three each of violin, viola, and cello. Its inherent homogeneity of sound challenged Bach to create remarkably diverse sonorities and continuously changing textures. Bach spins the contents of each movement from just one or two simple themes, handed off from one group of players to another, eventually involving the instruments in what seems to be all possible permutations. There’s no clear-cut, consistent designation of soloists; the assignments change from page to page. The standard black-and-white contrast of the typical concerto grosso—the entire ensemble alternating with the solo group—is blurred here by the music’s ever-evolving nature and by Bach’s fascination with endlessly varied shades of gray. Both fast outer movements travel the wide spectrum from assertive unison passages to intricate polyphony, and from full orchestral splendor to the conversational intimacy of chamber music. One curiosity, still unsolved: in place of a conventional middle slow movement, Bach writes just two chords—those that would normally provide the movement’s final cadence—leaving musicians, possibly beginning with the margrave’s own, to wonder what the great master himself might have wanted. Spoiler alert: at these performances, Nicholas Kraemer will either improvise at this point, or, depending on the spirit of the occasion, join Stephanie Jeong in the Largo from the Violin Sonata, BWV 1019, which concludes with the very cadence Bach specifies in the concerto.

The relationship between soloists is different in each of the Brandenburgs; in the Fourth Concerto, they switch roles as the work progresses. The violin dominates the opening Allegro (although at first it sounds as if the two flutes will have more to play). Then in the slow middle movement, it’s the flutes who share the spotlight, while the violin, except for one measure, is relegated to doubling the orchestral violins or simply playing the bass line. The violin takes the lead once again in the finale, although the real marvel of that movement is the way everyone, soloists and orchestra players alike, joins as equals in one contrapuntal web.

The Allegro is one of the longest movements in any of Bach’s concertos, partly because the opening paragraph—the traditional ritornello that introduces the main themes—is unusually spacious, with at least five different motifs to be developed. Bach then builds a very large structure, with six statements of the ritornello alternating with free and highly inventive episodes to create a monumental movement of surprising lightness. The Adagio is the only Brandenburg slow movement that doesn’t switch to a smaller cast of characters, instead calling for the entire ensemble (although, by reversing the solo roles, Bach subtly changes the complexion). The spirited finale isn’t dance music, as was the norm, but something more substantial and meaty. With its grand proportions and unusually serious fugal writing, this movement is one of the few finales in eighteenth-century music to carry as much weight as its opening movement counterpart—here, as in so many areas, Bach anticipating the accomplishments of Mozart and Beethoven.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.