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

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major, BWV 1047

The dates of composition and first performance of the Second Brandenburg Concerto are unknown. The score calls for solo flute, oboe, trumpet, and violin, with strings and continuo. Performance time is approximately thirteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto (as arranged for orchestra by Felix Mottl) were given at Orchestra Hall on March 7 and 8, 1913, with Harry Weisbach, Alfred Quensel, Joseph Schreurs, Alfred Barthel, and Edward Llewellyn as soloists, and Frederick Stock conducting.

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 mention them.) Only the Fifth 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. 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. 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.

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 belongs unmistakably to the trumpet.

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