

**Notes on the Program**  
**By Aaron Grad**

**The *Brandenburg* Concertos**

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH**

Born March 21, 1685 in Eisenach, Germany

Died July 28, 1750 in Leipzig, Germany

Instrumental works represent a tiny sliver of the music composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, who spent most of his professional life serving Lutheran churches. Many of the surviving scores date from a brief period between 1717 and 1723, when he worked for the secular court of Prince Leopold of Cöthen. In those years Bach created the Cellos Suites, the Violin Sonatas and Partitas, and perhaps his most celebrated instrumental collection: the *Brandenburg* Concertos.

The *Brandenburgs* owe their existence to Bach's 1718 journey to Berlin to buy a new harpsichord. While there he had an opportunity to perform for Margrave Christian Ludwig, the Duke of Brandenburg, and the encounter stuck with Bach as a possible job lead. Following up more than two years later—after Prince Leopold married a woman uninterested in music—Bach assembled six *concerti grossi* and sent them off to the Duke of Brandenburg with a most obsequious dedication, which he signed, “With unparalleled zeal, Your Royal Highness’ very humble and very obedient servant, Johann Sebastian Bach.”

Bach's efforts proved to be fruitless, and the *Brandenburg* Concertos lived on with no help from their namesake. (The duke never responded, and when he died the manuscript was tossed into a bargain bin of miscellaneous sheet music.) Bach did manage to mount performances using the court musicians in Cöthen, and soon enough he was hired to direct music for the churches of Leipzig, the position he held for the rest of his life.

***Brandenburg* Concerto No. 3 in G Major, BWV 1048 [1721]**

Instead of the typical *concerto grosso* setup of a solo group within the orchestra, the Third *Brandenburg* Concerto treats all members of the ensemble as soloists, with independent lines for three violins, three violas and three cellos supported by the *basso continuo* accompaniment. The equitable distribution of the material is especially clear in the first movement, in which the primary motive—a three-note figure that drops to the lower neighbor note and then returns to the starting pitch—cascades through the different voices.

The central *Adagio* movement consists simply of two linking chords, sometimes elaborated by an improvised cadenza. The concerto closes with a barreling *Allegro* finale, its tempo and character matching the reeling giges that conclude most of Bach's dance

suites.

### ***Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major, BWV 1050* [1721]**

The Fifth *Brandenburg* Concerto features flute, violin and harpsichord as soloists. Such a trio was a common chamber music ensemble at the time, playing works known as trio sonatas. What is remarkable about this concerto is that the harpsichord functions as more than a supporting accompanist: It contributes whirlwind solo lines, and it issues a monster of a cadenza at the end of the first movement. This use of the harpsichord as a solo instrument foreshadows the seminal keyboard concertos Bach later assembled in Leipzig.

The middle movement, labeled *Affettuoso* (“with feeling”), presents the soloists without the accompanying strings. Unlike a trio sonata, in which the harpsichord would typically have just a bass line with the right-hand harmonies filled in *ad libitum*, the harpsichordist’s right hand plays its own melodic line that intermingles with the flute and violin. In the finale, a fugue reinforces the equal footing of the voices. The violin and flute take the first two entrances, and the harpsichord jumps in with the third and fourth voices of the fugue.

### ***Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat Major, BWV 1051* [1721]**

The Sixth *Brandenburg* Concerto limits its palette to the lower strings, including instruments from the viol family that have fallen out of fashion. With the violins absent, the two top lines go to instruments labeled *viola da braccio*, or viola “on the arm”—meaning violas in the modern sense, held like violins. Joining as a third solo voice is a cello, also from the violin family.

The accompanying lines, marked *viola da gamba* and *violone*, indicate bowed instruments that have frets tied to the fingerboard, and that are held upright (“da gamba” means “on the leg”). The inclusion of relatively simple *viola da gamba* parts may have been an attempt on Bach’s part to include his employer, Prince Leopold, who played the instrument reasonably well. In modern practice, two cellos and a contrabass substitute for the viols.

A distinguishing aspect of the first movement is its very slow harmonic motion in the *tutti* sections, with persistent pulses holding steady while the violas add decorative filigree. If this was one way to avoid straining a less confident viol player such as the prince, the middle movement solves the problem by eliminating the viols entirely. The violas spin out long lines that rise into the violin’s usual register, supported by walking cello lines and spacious accompaniment from the *basso continuo*. The finale is another festive dance in the style of a gigue, in which the soloists elaborate the main theme with passages of flowing sixteenth-notes.

## **Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major, BWV 1047 [1721]**

For the Second *Brandenburg* Concerto, the distinctive solo group consists of trumpet, flute (substituting for the original recorder), oboe and violin. The trumpet Bach wrote for was a natural instrument without valves, meaning that the range was confined to the notes of the overtone series extending up from the instrument's fundamental pitch. The low overtones are spaced widely, as in the typical intervals of bugle calls, so to play melodies with adjacent notes requires accessing the higher harmonics. Playing in this *clarino* range of the natural trumpet requires extreme control and strength, and it produces one of the most bright and penetrating of all musical colors, lending the sonic palette of the Second *Brandenburg* Concerto its particular brilliance.

The jubilant opening movement makes up for the mismatched strength of the solo instruments by separating the voices out for individual statements and contrapuntal sparring. The more delicate aspects of the flute, oboe and violin emerge in the middle *Andante* movement, in which a walking bass line supports polyphonic weavings. A heralding call from the trumpet announces the *Allegro* third movement, initiating a rowdy finale that serves as a bookend to the unbridled joy of the opening movement.

Incidentally, the Second *Brandenburg* Concerto holds the unique distinction of being the work of human creation intended to demonstrate to anyone listening in deep space the presence of intelligent life on Earth. It is the first selection of music broadcasting from the Voyager Spacecraft, a vessel launched in 1977 that has since traveled beyond our solar system.

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