



George Malcolm



Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach in 1685, and died in Leipzig in 1750. Altogether he wrote fifteen keyboard concerti, of which seven were for solo harpsichord, three for two harpsichords, two for three and one for four, along with two triple concerti for flute, violin and harpsichord. In every instance the scoring is for an accompaniment of string orchestra only, except in the F major transcription of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 4, where two flutes are added.

However, of the fifteen concerti only four are believed to have been written for the keyboard in the first place, while six are known to be transcriptions of concerti written for another instrument. The remaining four are believed to have been written for other instruments as well, but the original versions have since been lost.

The two concerti on this record fall into this last category. They were both almost certainly written as violin concerti in their original versions, as can readily be seen from the nature of the solo part, especially in the slow movement, and in fact two earlier versions of the D minor are still in existence as a keyboard concerto, which show by comparison with the final version how skilfully Bach made the work more and more appropriate to the keyboard with each revision.

Nearly all the keyboard concerti are assumed to have been written between 1729 and 1736, and the D minor and E major are believed to date from between 1730 and 1733. At this time Bach was firmly established as Cantor of St. Thomas's church in Leipzig, a post he held from 1723 until the end of his life. At the same time he taught in the Church School, and unlike many composers and soloists he was very highly regarded for his genuine skill as a teacher. Similarly although his virtuosity as an organist brought him considerable fame during his lifetime, contemporary reports lead one to believe that his ability as a soloist on the harpsichord and clavichord was in no way inferior.

With characteristic perception and economy he found cause to use the material in these two concerti for yet further compositions. The first movement of the D minor concerto occurs again as an introductory movement to Cantata No. 188 – "Ich habe meine Zuversicht auf meinen treuen Gott gericht't" and the first two movements were used in Cantata No. 146 – "Wir müssen durch viel Trübsel in das Reich Gottes eingehen". The first movement of the E major concerto forms the introductory sonfonia of Cantata No. 169 – "Gott soll allein mein Herze haben", transposed down a tone, and the second movement is used as the basis of an aria in the same cantata – "Stirb in mir, Welt", with 8 bars added in the middle. The third movement also is used in Cantata No. 49 – "Ich geh' und suche mit Verlangen".

To say he used these works in his Cantatas does not mean that they were employed in

exactly the same form. The transcriptions are made with the greatest care, and in Cantata No. 146 the solo part is transposed down an octave and given to the organ. A four-part chorus is then added to the second movement and the result is extremely effective.

The two concerti on this record are very different from each other in sentiment. The D minor is a gigantic and powerful work, with a brooding darkness of mood which spans all three movements. The bold but brief opening ritornello sets the scene for the very elaborate solo part, and the minor mode is very rarely disturbed by occasional very brief modulations to the major.

The slow movement is the only instance among Bach's harpsichord concerti of a work in a minor key having its slow movement in the minor as well. The effect of this is to intensify even further the power of the work, and the opening ritornello, given as in the first movement in unison, is followed by a long and sad passage from the soloist over a repetition of the ritornello in the bass. As the movement proceeds the writing for the soloist becomes increasingly ornate, until a short cadenza leads to the final statement of the opening theme.

The finale is a brisk 3/4 movement, once more in the minor. Whereas in the first movement the mood was darkened even more by the solo instrument being generally confined to a medium and low tessitura, here the shadows are partially lifted by the harpsichord's frequent sallies to the upper reaches of the keyboard, and after a short but powerful cadenza this magnificent concerto is brought to a conclusion worthy of its grandeur.

The E major concerto is altogether in a different mood. Whereas the D minor is monumentally impressive for its strength and profundity, this second concerto is a much more relaxed and cheerful work. The extended first movement is full of genial contributions from soloist and orchestra alike, and the second movement takes the form of a Siciliano. This beautiful movement has an arpeggiated part for the soloist in the orchestral introduction, before the strings give way to the timeless beauty of the long cantilena from the harpsichord which forms the bulk of the movement. Throughout this section the orchestra simply points the harmony four times in each bar, while the soloist wings his way freely almost as though he were improvising through a variety of keys, before giving way to the final restatement of the opening theme.

The finale is a cheerful uncomplicated movement in 3/8 with the harpsichord anticipating the orchestra by one beat each time the main subject appears. The long opening section is followed by a brief middle section mostly in a variety of minor keys which comes to rest on a cadence in G sharp minor. The final section is simply a "notatim" repeat of the first and brings the work to a predictably bright and happy conclusion.

BACH HARPSICHORD CONCERTI

NO.1 IN D MINOR (BWV 1052) NO.2 IN E MAJOR (BWV 1053)

George Malcolm with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra conducted by Karl Münchinger

Harpsichord Concerto No 1 In D Minor, BWV 1052

1 Allegro 8:30

2 Adagio 7:35

3 Allegro 8:35

Harpsichord Concerto No 2 In E Major, BWV 1053

4 Allegro 9:05

5 Siciliano 5:35

6 Allegro 7:20

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