

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
December 14, 2003, 5:00 p.m. on PBS
Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center
Bach's Complete Brandenburg Concertos

The Holiday Season in New York brings with it certain well-established musical traditions: numerous performances in concert halls and churches of Handel's "Messiah"; dozens of performances by the New York City Ballet of Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker." A tradition of more recent vintage is the integral performance of all six of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has established the date of Sunday afternoon, December 14 for this year's continuation of that tradition, and we of *Live From Lincoln Center* will be at Alice Tully Hall that afternoon with our cameras and microphones to bring the performances directly to your living room screens.

The period of a half-dozen years between 1717 and 1723, when Johann Sebastian Bach served as Kapellmeister to the young Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cothen, was one of the most fruitful periods of the composer's creative life. The Prince himself was a talented musician with an abiding devotion to the arts and Bach's relationship with him was warm and friendly from the beginning. In this atmosphere were created some of Bach's most significant and attractive instrumental works, for at the court he had at his disposal some excellent solo instrumentalists and a fine orchestra.

In view of this background it may seem strange that during the Cothen period Bach produced six superb orchestral concertos that he dedicated not to his beneficent employer but to the Margraf Christian Ludwig, the youngest son of the Grand Duke of Brandenburg, whom Bach had met in Berlin in 1718. Scholars today seem to have rejected the older theory that Bach composed these works in fulfillment of a commission from the Margraf; rather, the general opinion now is that by 1721 Bach's relationship with Prince Leopold was no longer quite so cordial as it had been at first. The German musicologist Heinz Becker has suggested that Bach, having heard that the Margraf had a splendid small ensemble in Berlin, selected six concertos from among a larger number of similar works and had them published with a dedication to the Margraf. In effect, Bach offered these six works as testimonials to his ability as an orchestrator, with the clear implication that he would welcome an opportunity to go to Berlin and become the Margraf's Kapellmeister. This was not to be, however, and in 1723 Bach left Cothen to take up his duties as cantor of the Saint Thomas Church in Leipzig. There he remained until his death nearly thirty years later--years that shaped the main power of his later creative energy toward the composition of music for the church.

In the six Brandenburg Concertos Bach left the world a veritable syllabus of the art of Baroque instrumentation and a matchless demonstration of the various

textures and sonorities possible to the Baroque orchestra. With the possible exception of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos have come to be the best-known and most-recorded instrumental works of their period. Each of the concertos is scored for a different combination of solo instruments--and except for the Third and Sixth which call for strings only--they each conform to the normal Baroque concerto grosso pattern of pitting two contrasting groups of instruments against each other: a small group of solo instruments (called the concertino) contrasted with the larger body of players (called the ripieno).

The concertino instruments in the First Brandenburg Concerto are two "hunting" horns (without valves and capable of playing high upper register notes), three oboes, bassoon (which almost always doubles the cello part) and the now obsolete violino piccolo, a three-quarter-size instrument tuned a third higher than normal violin tuning. Except for period instrument performances, most performances today enlist the services of a modern violin.

The solo instruments in the Second Brandenburg Concerto are trumpet, flute, oboe and violin, with the trumpet part a real virtuoso tour de force. It is written in the highest register of the clarino, the highest-playing trumpet of Bach's time, and obviously was intended for a master of the instrument. Clarino players were able to produce their high notes through special training of the lips and breath. In our own time there have been several different approaches to solving the problem: Toscanini, for example, replaced the trumpet with an E Flat clarinet on occasion; and Pablo Casals, at one of his Prades Festival concerts, replaced the trumpet with a soprano saxophone. The final movement of the Second Brandenburg Concerto served as theme music for Bach lover William F. Buckley's long-running program on PBS.

The Third Concerto is the shortest of the six, consisting of only two movements for strings alone, separated by two chords. Bach quite obviously expected his performers to extemporize in those two chords in accordance with common Baroque practice. What to do is left to the performers: some in fact do embellish the music at that point, while others prefer the unadorned two chords. On the other end of the scale are musicians who interpolate a whole movement from another of Bach's works: Yehudi Menuhin used to insert an arrangement by Benjamin Britten of the slow movement from one of Bach's organ trio sonatas; Serge Koussevitzky habitually introduced a movement from one of Bach's Cantatas.

Two so-called flauti d'eco--echo flutes--and a solo violin form the concertino in the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto. Contemporary thought postulates that the flauti d'eco were recorders.

In the Fifth Concerto Bach elevates the harpsichord from its recessive role as accompanist and harmonic filler to that of the concertino's principal solo

instrument: the long and tension-laden harpsichord cadenza in the first movement is one of the most breath-taking moments in all music. The other two solo instruments are flute and violin. In the slow movement, as is true also of the Second Concerto, Bach dispenses entirely with the ripieno instruments and the entire musical argument is given to the solo instruments.

The Sixth and last of the works is scored for the lower and darker-hued string instruments. In the Third Concerto it is the bright, incisive tone of the violins that predominates; in the Sixth it is the characteristically deeper, more velvety sound of the violas that gives the work its special flavor.

To perform Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has assembled a whole galaxy of Artist Members and guests: flutists Demarre McGill, Tara Helen O'Connor and Ransom Wilson; oboists Randall Ellis, Mark Hill and Stephen Taylor; bassoonist Milan Turkovic; horn players Jennifer Montone and William Purvis; trumpeter Eric Aubier; violinists Ani Kavafian, Ida Kavafian, Cho-Liang Lin, Daniel Phillips and Joseph Silverstein; violists Paul Neubauer and Cynthia Phelps; cellist Fred Sherry; double bass player Edgar Meyer; and harpsichordist John Gibbons.

This, then, is the schedule and line-up for what promises to be a memorable concert by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on Sunday afternoon, December 14, brought to you as the next *Live From Lincoln Center* telecast. As always, I urge you to consult your local PBS station for the exact date and time in your area.

See you then!