

## **A conductor-less slant on the Brandenburg Concertos**

John Eliot Gardiner

Up to now I have resisted the urge to record Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. For what is a conductor to do in this repertoire? Concertos 1 and 2 are the only ones grand and complex enough for the presence of a non-performing instigator and co-ordinator to be useful. These I have conducted several times over the years, and have enjoyed grappling with their interpretative challenges. In 2000 I had the chance to conduct the first movement of Concerto No.3 in its expanded version as the prelude to Bach's Pentecostal cantata BWV 174. This brilliant piece now features a pair of horns and three oboes (as in Concerto No.1) and we performed and recorded it on Whit Monday 2000 as part of the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage. All the other concertos are intrinsically chamber music, though at times they seem on the verge of a proto-orchestral sound in the way they pile up motivic and chordal effects. I have studied and admired them (and even played viola in Concerto No.6), but to me they belong in a conductor-free zone.

This consideration meant transferring the responsibility of performance to the hand-picked musicians of the English Baroque Soloists, and in the first place to their brilliant leader, Kati Debretzeni, a true *Konzertmeisterin* and the inspirational presiding virtuoso of this project. She and they have given long and loyal service in our other Bach projects – the cantatas, Passions and masses; here was their chance to have the floor to themselves for once, and to dance out this quintessentially dance-inspired music. For I am convinced that when playing these concertos musicians need to think, breathe and move like dancers. If you follow the directions that John Playford gave for English figure-dancing in his *Dancing Master* (1651), you should begin by 'honouring' your partner and 'setting' to him or her in a movement of

courtesy. Just as in concerted music, figure-dancing requires rhythmical and physical phrasing, fluidity and exact timing, as well as a perpetual awareness and adjustment of your position relative to the other dancers. Translated into musical terms it is all a matter of balance, listening and discretion, of gauging when to make your solos stylishly expressive and poetic, of judging the precise moments for robust intervention, and knowing when a self-effacing restraint is the order of the day. In other words you need to identify the underlying *Affekt* which gave rise to Bach's notes in the first place, and then to respond to it in the way you play them, being alert to the way certain rhetorical turns of phrase reflect specific gestural images. You need to be open to that 'perpetual interchange of feelings' from which, Quantz tells us, a performer 'should know how to judge which is the feeling behind each idea, and to govern his expression accordingly'.<sup>1</sup>

My role, then, was to facilitate and encourage, as well as to give the players some feedback on how their sounds were succeeding in 'consorting' as well as 'competing' with one another, and whether the expressive gestures and rhythmic underpinning of the music were being fully realised to everyone's satisfaction. It also meant ensuring that the physical deployment of the players on the concert platform provided the most coherent and balanced way for the sometimes strange juxtaposition of instruments to reach the audience.

What to me is so striking about the Brandenburg Concertos is the way Bach takes an up-to-the-minute genre – the ritornello form of the concerto pioneered and patented by the Italians of Vivaldi's generation – and turns its conventions on their heads. Put simply, he teases us, the listeners, by setting up certain expectations of pattern and phrase-length and confounds them through his unpredictable and unconventional realisation. Bach had no interest in merely aping the latest craze, which in terms of his own compositional resources must have struck him as shallow and regressive. Nor was he willing to

jettison the earlier German tradition of instrumental ensemble music. Yet without a doubt his encounter with Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico* in 1713 was both a liberation and a kind of epiphany. Laurence Dreyfus puts it this way: 'Instead of copying a set of crude, superficial formulas, Bach discovered within Vivaldi a kind of harmonic laboratory providing insights into the nature of tonality, a kind of simulacrum of thorough bass that could produce insights into the secrets of a God-given art. Concertos were therefore not so much a modish fashion to be emulated until tastes changed or reason intervened... but a set of procedures that enriched Bach's own approach to invention.'<sup>2</sup>

From now on Bach showed that he was technically capable of rising to any challenge, in any style or genre. No other set of concertos can compare with his for diversity of instrumental make-up, for the prominence and variety of wind instruments, or for the myriad textural contrasts that this allows. At a time when things were moving towards a standardisation of the Baroque orchestral apparatus, Bach was bucking the trend. For him each movement of each concerto posed a different set of structural and dynamic problems, and therefore a separate series of compositional challenges.

Some of Bach's instrumental combinations are highly experimental and, at first glance, improbable. Who else could have imagined placing a fragile recorder alongside a brilliant clarino trumpet in high F, in addition to an oboe and violin (in Concerto No.2), and could then make sense of this highly unorthodox meshing of timbres, all within a detailed dynamic scheme? As Johann Mattheson observed, it needed 'a practised master' to keep 'a *flute douce* or other gentle Instrument from being drowned out by the trumpet'.<sup>3</sup> It has only been in the last twenty or so years that specialist natural trumpet players have trained themselves to play at high altitude and with a silvery delicacy so as not to obliterate the recorder.

On the face of it, introducing two horns to the normal court band

of oboes and strings (in Concerto No.1), though unusual, is not completely eccentric (indeed it was soon to become the norm in Haydn's day) until you realise that the music Bach assigns them is set in a different rhythm and with a different thematic content from all the others. There is something of a court-versus-country battle for supremacy going on here, as though a refined conversational exchange in a drawing room had been rudely interrupted by two horn-playing hunters, returning sweaty from the chase and subversively blowing their whooping tantivies. They are gradually 'tamed' by the other more genteel instruments, before breaking out once more in a final, rebellious blast in the third couplet of the rondo-like minuet, this time recruiting the three oboes as their raucous accomplices.

Perhaps only Bach could have thought of pitting his most virtuosic violin against two recorders (in Concerto No.4) and making their interchange work successfully despite their differing dynamic capabilities, and then introducing further antiphonies as the recorders pair up against the two ripieni violins. No-one had previously thought of giving such multiple, seemingly contradictory, roles to the harpsichordist as Bach does in Concerto No.5. Starting out as one of three equal concertino players, it soon becomes clear that this is not just a single voice but one capable of providing the full harmony. After pushing his way to the front in the first movement to become the out-and-out virtuoso, complete with written-out cadenza, in the second his role is reduced (initially at least) to that of a modest accompanist.

Most improbable, and in some ways the most enchanting of all in its low-pitched sonorities, is Concerto No.6, a highly experimental work in which Bach features two solo violas against the throbbing accompaniment of two viola da gambas, cello, violone and harpsichord. Profiting from the examples of late seventeenth-century music he had encountered as an adolescent – the way composers such as Johann Theile or Johann Philipp Förtsch juxtaposed pairs of violas and viola da

gambas, for instance – Bach expands these possibilities in startling new directions. He ensures that the opening dialogue between the violas (a canon only a quaver apart!) has a gritty, furrowed-brow quality, as though neither instrument were willing to concede the right to establish or impose the down beat. Yet suddenly the clouds part and we are introduced to those magical, lyrical episodes, relaxed and sublime, in which the violas shine, as they do throughout the slow middle movement. All this helps explain why Bach himself preferred to play the viola, and indeed one way of judging him and a small number of other composers – my list would include Purcell, Rameau, Handel (when he can be bothered), Mozart, Berlioz and Brahms – is on how well they managed to write for that instrument.

Rehearsing these concertos in September 2008 in the elegant Mirror Room of the princely castle in Cöthen brought home to me just what an exceptionally happy, as well as creative, period this was in Bach's life (1717-1723). After ending his time at the Weimar court disgraced and under lock and key, here he was in the prime of life, suddenly surrounded by hand-picked virtuoso musicians with whom he could engage and experiment more or less at will, under the benign eye of Prince Leopold, a thoroughly decent and genuinely music-loving patron. We should never forget, then, that for all its ingenuity, elegance and craft, this is essentially dance music. On occasion it is the Baroque equivalent of jazz or even rock 'n' roll. If you are inclined to doubt this, just listen to the third movements of Concertos 1 and 3, how the music whirls and spins until it becomes airborne, and then re-routes itself in sturdy counter-rhythms in the bass line or by breaking out in a rash of collective hemiolas. This is the man who in performance, whether playing or conducting, 'watched over everything, calling his musicians back to the rhythm and the beat of the pulse... the rhythm taking possession of all his limbs.'<sup>4</sup> You can hand the palm to Vivaldi for the mysterious pathos of his slow movements and the surface brilliance of

his foot-tapping motor rhythms, but when it comes to hitting a propulsive rhythmic groove, no-one is a match for J S Bach.

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1. Johann Joachim Quantz: *Essay*, 1752, XI.5
2. Laurence Dreyfus: *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, 1996
3. Johann Mattheson: *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre*, 1713, p.285
4. Johann Matthias Gesner, 1738, *Bach-Dokumente II*, pp.332-3

## **Reflections on the Brandenburg Concertos**

### **Anneke Scott *horn***

Despite its ancient origins, the introduction of the horn into a formal musical setting came quite late, with Bach being one of the first composers to write for the instrument. With this in mind I often feel as if the horns come quite literally crashing into Brandenburg No.1! The opening 'calls' have been traced to original hunting calls, and could well have been recognisable to eighteenth-century audiences – it feels as if Bach really was bringing the horn players straight from the field into the concert room. As a horn player it's easy to feel a bit of a hooligan in the opening bars, an utterly disruptive influence, but very quickly we have to change character and interact with the more 'refined' (or house-trained?) oboes and strings. There are various possible responses to the opening fanfares, and players sometimes try to minimise the confusion and chaos that the conflicting lines cause, but this seems to lessen both the impact and the contrast that I hope we achieve in this performance.

### **Neil Brough *trumpet***

Brandenburg No.2 lets us hear the trumpet as we never hear it in the religious works. It is a departure from the brilliant, glorifying gold and silver of D major and C major into the stratospheric (for the trumpet) but softer, silky key of F. The angelic trio of trumpets often representing the Holy Trinity step aside and the trumpet is here almost like a character in a play, interacting with the other characters of violin, recorder and oboe.

What makes this piece so fiendishly difficult to perform is not only the very high tessitura but the length of time the trumpet plays without rest and the delicate balance between the trumpet and the three other solo instruments. It is important to try to set aside our modern

perception of the trumpet, especially high trumpet playing where there is such an influence of jazz and film scores, where influential players have pushed the boundaries higher and louder. As such this piece is often regarded, wrongly, as a trumpet concerto: from our modern understanding it was often (though less so nowadays) thought impossible for an oboe, a recorder and a single violin to match the trumpet's volume – it was thought they would simply be drowned out. In fact it shows Bach's incredible skill as a composer that he is able to exploit this combination of instruments, and through historical study and by playing real old instruments we now know that the sound of the trumpet in Bach's time was not only bright, glorious and heroic, but in the hands of the highly skilled 'clarino' players who existed in Saxony at the beginning of the eighteenth century could also be as soft as a flute and as sweet as an oboe. It is this soft, sweet approach I try to take here, mingling, almost dancing with my fellow soloists, moving gracefully in and out of the texture, leading, then supporting each in turn.

### **Michael Niesemann *oboe***

One of the most fascinating aspects of Bach's music is that both the musician and the listener become, for a limited time, part of a *perpetuum mobile*, an eternal rhythm. Once you experience this, you don't ever want it to stop; it feels like making contact with the root of everything. In the middle of the first movement of Brandenburg No.5, for example, a mesmerising passage occurs where the solo instruments repeat several different rhythmical patterns for twelve bars like the ticking of an eternal clockwork.

Bach's music contains not only the eternal and the deeply moving but also cross-rhythms, groove and breakneck speed, attributes, you could say, of modern jazz. Perhaps that's why so many jazz musicians are inspired by his music.

Bach's music far surpasses issues of instrumentation. It works with completely different instruments: Bach himself used the first movement of Brandenburg No.3 for a *sinfonia* to Cantata BWV 174, adding three oboes and two horns, and he replaces the solo violin from Brandenburg No.4 with the harpsichord for his F major harpsichord concerto BWV 1057.

The oboes fulfill a quadruple role in Brandenburg No.1, being part of the string section as well as their counterpart, and of course a concertino/solo instrument as well as a match for the horns. Similarly in No.2, the oboe is partner to the trumpet but also, in the slow movement, switches roles (unfaithfully) to become a companion for the violin and recorder.

The variety of Bach's use of the oboe makes the performance of his music a great challenge for any oboe player and probably one of the most rewarding.

### **Malcolm Proud *harpsichord***

When Bach prepared his dedicatory copy of the Brandenburg concertos he took the opportunity to make a number of revisions. In the first movement of the fifth concerto he rewrote the 19-bar episode for solo harpsichord, and the new version of this virtuosic passage now formed the central part of a 65-bar episode, the outer sections of which were in a more contrapuntal style and thematically related to the rest of the movement; as a result, the transitions between tutti and solo sections sound smoother than in the earlier version. Perhaps Bach's reason for lengthening the solo passage was to show his appreciation of the Mietke harpsichord recently acquired from Berlin for the Cöthen court orchestra. The finale, a lively gigue, also contains an episode for solo harpsichord, but this time in the form of a short canon: a moment of 'learning' deftly slipped in.

Nowadays, Brandenburg No.5 is often described as the first

keyboard concerto and the passage for solo harpsichord in its first movement as a cadenza. In fact, this is very much a concerto of the ritornello type, with a soloist group consisting of transverse flute and violin as well as harpsichord. Besides, the subtle emergence of the harpsichord out of the texture, as the other instruments fade away, is quite unlike the grand announcement by the full orchestra of the cadenza in a typical piano concerto by a later composer.

Normally Bach liked to direct the Cöthen orchestra while playing viola, but in this concerto he played the demanding harpsichord part himself. This explains the absence of a second violin from the ripieno, as the second violinist had to replace Bach on viola, an indication of the chamber music scale of the work. Indeed, Bach reduces the number of players to just the three soloists for the central *Affettuoso* (affectionately), a marking which seems particularly apt for music composed at Cöthen where, for once in his life, Bach was properly appreciated by his employer, the music-loving Prince Leopold.

### **Jane Rogers *viola***

I often wonder what Bach would have thought about performing all six Brandenburg concertos in one concert, as is so often done these days. As principal violist it is a real marathon because one is involved in every piece. Pacing oneself is a priority, in order to leave enough energy for No.6, which is often programmed towards the end of the evening. This is easier said than done, as all six concertos demand total commitment from everyone involved.

It is particularly important to find two viola players whose sounds match as the parts in Brandenburg No.6 are so equally written. For this project, Stella Wilkinson and I decided to commission violas from the Polish maker Jan Pawlikowski. It was an interesting and rewarding venture. The instruments complement each other and the gambas very well, enabling a more blended, consort-like effect. I have always loved

the rich sound-world of Brandenburg No.6, and although I normally prefer to be in the middle of the orchestral texture, it is refreshing to take a different role. To play this particular concerto is to feel thoroughly understood as an instrumentalist – it is so well written and a pleasure to perform.

### **Kati Debretzeni *violin***

Bach must have relished the exploration of form, instrumentation and content when conceiving the six Brandenburg concertos. Each of them stands on its own, and there are no two alike. In the year 2000, during the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage, we presented them separately, as part of programmes which had less than a full concert's worth of cantatas surviving for a particular Sunday. This year, exploring them as a set, the quirks and the variety became ever more evident and intriguing.

Coincidentally or not, the third concerto is obviously and unashamedly based on the number three. It is scored for 3x3 solo instruments (three violins, three violas, three cellos) and continuo. The dactylic opening motive (comprising three notes), a rhythmic constant throughout the movement, repeats three times, displacing the barline to the middle of the second bar. The next melodic figure appears again three times, whilst the second half of the opening phrase comprises 3x3 half bars. Bach must have had fun! This concerto is also the most joyously dance-like in the set, the first movement an earth-bound peasant feast, the last keeping feet lightly in the air. The instruments are used alternatively in groups of three or as individuals imitating and chasing each other. Thus the composer is not the only one having fun - we definitely did too, especially when encouraged by John Eliot to explore some latent hemiolas in the last movement! In between is an enigmatic middle section - the only one notated as two cadential chords marked *Adagio*, surely an invitation to improvise a few bars. In this performance we present a written-out improvisation loosely based on

the opening bass line of the *Grave* from the second sonata for solo violin.

With respect to the variety of form, Concerto No.4 is no exception: it starts off with an indomitable flourish from the two recorders, then the solo violin joins the party. Thus we are thrust *in medias res*, the solo instruments immediately taking centre stage in place of the customary orchestral introduction. It is the only movement of the set in 3/8, implying a steady, lilting character, and is followed by an introspective, sarabande-like second movement, again treated to a special feature: the soloists echo each part of the opening phrase and keep interpolating throughout, extending time and form and confounding the listeners' expectation. The third movement starts with a strict, contrapuntal, *stile antico* fugue-like exposition, which is unique in the set. As a violinist, the wonderfully idiomatic virtuosity of Bach's writing is a particular challenge and a joy to perform. Harpsichordists can relish it too: the fourth is the only Brandenburg concerto which Bach rearranged for his weekly concerts at Zimmermann's coffee house in Leipzig later in his career, this time replacing the solo violin with a harpsichord (presumably played by himself), and adding a few flourishes for good measure.

The challenges of approaching the concertos as a set in live performance are many. What string forces should be used? What is the optimal set-up on stage for the two rampaging horns in No.1? How to balance a trumpet and a recorder playing in parallel thirds in No.2? How to set the best pace for each movement so as to maintain the ever-present rhythmic drive and dance without tripping over? What should be done about inconsistencies of slurs and ties in Bach's beautiful presentation autograph, as in the second movement of No.5? These were just a few of the decisions facing us as we performed the six concertos first in Cöthen's intimate Spiegelsaal (a momentous occasion, as this is where they were first performed), then in three different

venues around the Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa, then in a church acoustic at Spitalfields in London and finally in a 'proper' concert hall at the Cité de la Musique in Paris. As John Eliot took the view that Nos 3-6 are essentially chamber pieces, we explored the music without being conducted, a departure from the usual EBS setting. However, most of us took part in the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage and had played Bach's sacred works under John Eliot's guidance on a yearly basis since. Thus we all spoke the same 'EBS Bach language', one based primarily on dance and rhythm. It was an immensely gratifying journey, with much experimentation, which John Eliot helped and encouraged throughout the rehearsals. He took the conductor's stand in Nos 1 and 2, whilst sitting in the audience (an unusual place for a conductor!) in the rest.