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The Brandenburg Concertos: A New Interpretation

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THE AUTOGRAPH SCORE of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos is dated 24 March 1721. In an elegant French dedication Bach explains that the collection of six concertos was the result of a commission from Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, whom he had met two years earlier — probably while in Berlin to collect a new Mietke harpsichord for his employer Prince Leopold of Cöthen.

Musicologists and performers have always found it impossible to explain the wayward variety of the Brandenburg Concertos, often concluding (in desperation) that the diversity of the pieces must be the very quality which binds them together. The fact that Bach presented the Margrave with a score rather than parts is in itself significant, and the works were in any case unsuitable for the Margrave's small musical establishment. There is no evidence that the Margrave either thanked Bach or paid him a fee for the commission.

The pieces were certainly not written especially for the collection. It seems that Bach chose from already-existing instrumental sinfonias and concertos, most of them probably originally written for the court band at Cöthen. He did revise the ones he included, and occasionally the nature of his revisions might be seen to corroborate some of my thoughts on the collection as a whole; for I believe that Bach, in collecting together these particular concertos as a special presentation set for the Margrave, was devising for him a kind of musical triumph, a 'procession' of tableaux similar in overall plan and intellectual content to the allegorical courtly triumphs, pageants, tournaments and entertainments produced to celebrate important affairs of state.

There had to be six concertos. Zarlino had devoted an entire chapter of his *Istitutioni harmoniche* to the importance of the number six in nature, art and music, and similar discussions in the works of Lippius, Matthaeis and Walther would suggest that 17th- and 18th-century composers regarded the use of the number as a *signum perfectionis* — hence the custom of including six pieces in collections of instrumental music.

Bach was honouring the Margrave as an Ancient hero, but the presentation volume was also an object for study and contemplation. As in *Vanitas* paintings, the numerous symbols and allegories of the collection were open to a variety of interpretations — and they were also a means of moral instruction. Like the paintings the score was intended to be 'read', the various symbols interpreted not only according to traditional associations but also according to the Margrave's personal perceptions, the depth of his knowledge and his powers of reason. The true creativity was the responsibility of the 'reader', and happened as analogies were discovered and meanings understood. The symbols and metaphors were intended to bring pleasure because the 'reader' was delighted by the understanding of the analogy presented. Only a wide-ranging study of the cultural and courtly milieu in which Bach worked and was educated can reveal the secrets of this most enigmatic of collections.

Rhetoric

It is now accepted that much of Bach's music was written for small ensembles — often soloists playing one to a part. The orchestra at Cöthen was of modest size, though the players were of high quality, and their numbers were further reduced in the period when some of the Brandenburg Concertos were written. Many problems of balance and texture disappear when the Brandenburgs are performed in this way, and far greater flexibility is possible — in fact, the pieces emerge as true 'musical conversations', for Bach, like his contemporaries, wrote with the concepts and figures of oratory and rhetoric and the doctrine of affections as bases for his compositions. It can be difficult for performers today to appreciate quite how much a 17th- or 18th-century musician's approach to composition and performance could be influenced by such non-musical considerations, but the study of Latin was of prime importance in the curriculum of most educational establishments, and the works of Cicero and Quintilian led to the application of rhetorical principals throughout the arts.

Of the five divisions of the art of rhetoric, two were applied to musical composition (*inventio* and *dispositio*) and three to performance (*elocutio, memoria* and *actio*). The starting point for a composer was the choice and exploration of *loci topici* — the various aspects of the text or subject matter on which the new work was to be based. Hopefully, from these deliberations would be found the inspiration necessary to invent a few strong musical figures which, with skill, imagination and training, could be developed into a movement or whole composition. Thus a musical discourse was constructed in the same way as a formal speech, and composers found an astonishing variety of figures which imitated the sounds of the natural world, projected moods and emotions or represented allegorical and mythological figures.

Even the smallest detail of a musical composition had its rhetorical counterpart. During the Renaissance the strengthening of the relationship between words and music had led to the development of a vocabulary of musical figures which enhanced the direct communication of the text. Later, these ideas were applied to instrumental music of all kinds. The musical figures associated with certain words had become so well-known that performers of sonatas and concertos were expected to recognise them and to project the emotions or *Affekts* implied by them in the same way as singers of cantatas or opera arias. A deeper knowledge and understanding of 17th- and 18th-century attitudes to rhetoric, *Affekt* and symbolism in musical composition might lead to a rather different assessment of many Baroque works and their performance.

In Germany especially this musical rhetoric became so important that it was studied, classified and described in numerous treatises, and its axioms applied to the composition and performance of works as diverse as opera arias, cantatas, instrumental sonatas and concertos. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, was designed to appeal to the emotions as well as the intellect, and was employed by the musical theorists as justification for the emotional effects of music. Besides the surviving textbooks on musical rhetoric there is plenty of evidence in Mass-settings, cantatas, odes and operas that German composers were often obsessed with the concept of using stock musical figures to enhance the meaning of words. And they frequently went further, not only representing in music a variety of spiritual and emotional states, but also finding ways of portraying crowds, battles, waves, breezes, birds, storms, and a host of allegorical figures.

Allegorical Drama and Serenata

An important influence on Bach's cultural outlook must have been the performance of plays, often written in the form of the *Trauerspiel* — an obsessively allegorical five-act tragedy where history, human events and the pomp and power of a ruler are subject to decline and death. Such dramas were a product of the German middle classes, written for occasional performance at schools and universities and acted by students before the assembled nobility and burghers. The plays were full of lavish spectacle, the appearance of allegorical and supernatural figures and comic interludes. Princely authority was glorified in elaborate scenes while at the same time the transience of earthly glory and its dependence on blind Fate was a dominant theme — the great in station, driven by their passions, were depicted as subject not to any moral judgement but only to the inscrutable deity Fortune. Bach was of course no stranger to the Classical and mythological subjects treated by the writers, not least for having received a sound humanistic education at the Lateinschule followed by a particularly enlightened curriculum at the Lyceum.

There is also the later evidence of Bach's own secular cantatas or serenatas (several written in the form of the *dramma per musica*, though there is no development of character), many of them unknown and ignored today. The occasions for which they were written are of no interest and the Princes and university professors they praised so extravagantly (and with such outrageous imagery) have long since been forgotten.

In 1718 and 1721(?) Bach wrote cantatas honouring the Prince at Cöthen, and between 1725 and 1749 he wrote at least ten cantatas celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, Royal visits and homage ceremonies for the University, the Thomasschule and the Royal House at Leipzig. There were more, but their music is either lost or known to us only through other works and nine of them express homage to Princely patrons at Cöthen or Dresden. In these works we constantly find such allegorical and mythological figures as Fortune, Gratitude, Fame, Time, Diligence, Virtue, Pleasure, Fate, Phoebus, Flora, Aeolus, Pallas, Pomona and Zephyrus.

Court Spectacle

Renaissance and Baroque court festivals and spectacles usually included three main elements: a triumphal entry procession, competitions and games of skill, and dramatic presentations of

allegorical pageants and tableaux symbolising some flattering reference to the ruler. Other elements included banquets (often with dramatic interludes or music between courses), horse-ballets, operas, comedies, dances, masques, water pageants and fireworks.

The most important element was the processional entry, first a manifestation of medieval feudalism and later an emulation of the Imperial Roman triumph. The Renaissance developed the procession into an allegorical spectacle where the ruler was presented as an Ancient hero, and the focal point of the procession was the various pageant-wagons, decorated with Classical allusions and containing actors, singers and musicians personifying allegorical and mythological figures. A wagon decorated as Mount Parnassus, with musicians representing the nine Muses, was a particularly popular tableau in 17th-century German processions.

The medieval tournament was turned into a highly organised and stylised pageant of mock combat — again usually reflecting mythological themes. The horse-ballet mirrored the movement of the heavens and symbolised cosmic harmony (and the hoped-for peace and good fortune to be brought by the ruler). Examples from 17th- and 18th-century German court spectacles include:

Festivities for the Baptism of Maximilian Emanuel von Wittelsbach, son and heir to Prince-Elector Ferdinand/Munich 1662 The theme of the festival linked the Wittelsbach family to Theseus and included a performance of the opera *Fedra incoronata* by Kerll. "The entrance and exit procession took place with magnificant music along with the sounds of trumpets and timpani, also tall triumph wagons... After a musical combat yet another procession came... consisting of court musicians." The various tableaux included Medea, Amazons, Theseus, Hippolytus, Eurypylus (son of Neptune), Perseus, Hercules, Atlas, Castor and Pollux, Pandora, the King of Thessaly and the Argonaut's ship — and a number of different instrumental ensembles were involved.

Festivities for the State Visit of the Brothers of the Duke of Saxony/Dresden 1678 Apart from the usual Masses, races and games of skill there was a long allegorical procession on the theme of the influence of the seven planets on Man's fate, with pageant wagons for the Muses, Diana and Mars. Later in the procession came singers accompanied by cornetts and curtals, and last of all a group of musical 'peasants' playing shawm, bagpipe and fiddle. The climax of the festivities was a performance of a seven-act opera-ballet on the influence of the seven planets, with music by Bernhard.

Carnival Festivities at the Ducal Court/Dresden 1695 This was by all accounts the most elaborate and impressive event of its kind ever staged in Dresden. The main entertainment was a procession of pagan gods and godesses. Music formed an integral part of each tableau, and the instruments employed were determined by the character of their deity. The pageant included the Seven Deadly Sins (bagpipes), Mars and Bellona (trumpets, shawms and timpani), Neptune with nymphs and satyrs (oboes and bassoons), Bacchus with bacchantes (oboes, bagpipes, fiddles, lute, guitar, harp and triangle), Ceres (oboes and bassoons), Apollo (lute) and many, many more.

There were similar well-documented festivities in Dresden in 1697, 1709 (again with Parnassus and the Muses) and 1719. The marriage of Prince Friedrich August II of Saxony and Maria Josepha of Austria was one of the major political and social events at the Dresden Court. A cycle of elaborate festivities took place between the winter of 1718 and September 1719, and the theme was again the influence of the seven planets and their associated deities on the fate of Man. One afternoon there was a performance of Heinichen's *La Gara degli Dei* (The Contest of the Gods) sung by Mercury, Apollo, Diana, Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn. The work was introduced by a prelude which featured a sonata for two horns, solo violin, oboe and strings, and ended with a coda for strings and horns. Not Brandenburg I, unfortunately, but this kind of performance does offer a context for speculation concerning the likely origin of the work and the character of the Brandenburg set as a whole.

Vanitas

Memento mori — "remember that you will die" — was an important theme in Renaissance and Baroque visual art and became a northern European obsession in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. The establishment of the 17th-century still-life as an independent genre can be linked with the iconography of the *Memento mori* tradition through the *Vanitas* painting. With a human skull as centrepiece *Vanitas* paintings served to remind people of their mortality. Other common motifs can be categorised into three main areas:

The pleasures and preoccupations of earthly existence

Books, documents, scientific instruments, valuables and collectables such as shells, precious metals and money, pipes and tobacco, musical

instruments (particularly violins, recorders, shawms, trumpets and lutes), weapons and armour, food and drink, small statues and games.

Death and the transience of earthly life

Bones, hourglasses, candles, oil-lamps, soap bubbles, flowers and glasses (the latter often broken, tipped or half-empty).

Redemption and Resurrection

Wheat, laurel and ivy (often beneath or crowning the skull).

Written messages are sometimes found among the documents. The most prevalent comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, VANITAS ET OMNIA VANITAS. Others include MEMENTO MORI, VITA BREVIS ARS LONGA and SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI. Throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes the writer emphasises the idea that everything accomplished on earth is in vain, including power, riches, possessions and even knowledge.

A further essential aspect of the *Memento mori* metaphor is that it is at the same time a reminder of life. While warning the viewer of the brevity of earthly life and the vanity of pomp, glory and material possessions it suggests that death brings eternal life. Quite apart from the *Vanitas* still-lifes themselves, portraits of all kinds also included *Memento mori* objects. Those who commissioned portraits were generally those with power, wealth and earthly possessions, in direct conflict with the teachings of the Church. *Memento mori* images were a way of countering a life of excess with humility.

Much of what had been written about painting before the 17th century was taken from texts on rhetoric and language — especially Aristotle's *Poetics*. The Baroque idea that a painting was to be 'read' was a natural continuation of the concepts of *picture poesis* adopted by 15th- and 16th-century artists. Images were regarded as language, with the same ultimate goals of persuading, delighting and teaching the viewer; so the still-lifes were to be 'read' not as narrative allegories or even as symbol sets, but rather as complex metaphors — the viewer associating one thing with another. Thomas Aquinas argued that intellectual truths were learned through the senses, so visual metaphor was as important to the acquisition of knowledge as aural — and he stated that "the very hiding of truths in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds...".

I will show that the Brandenburgs contain these metaphors, to be read by sensitive and "thoughtful minds". Whether they were all intended by Bach is another matter. His son Leopold Augustus, his wife Maria Barbara and his brother Johann Christoph all died during the two years which elapsed between the Margrave's commission and the final presentation of the score in 1721. These losses in his immediate family must have made him especially sensitive to death and the afterlife at this time. But the same symbols were employed throughout the arts — Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593 described the allegorical figures of the Virtues and Vices, the Seven Liberal Arts, the Four Seasons etc., and quickly became the standard reference work for all artists — so a musical allegory involving vice and virtue, for example, is bound to throw up the same symbols as the *Vanitas* paintings. Even though the Vanitas subtext may have been to a large extent accidental, it is worth pointing out the symbols. Bach would have been aware of them, as would the Margrave and any other "thoughtful minds" of the time. For the Margrave the *Vanitas* symbols in the Brandenburg set would have functioned in the same way as the inclusion of *Memento mori* objects in the portraits of the wealthy and powerful.

Brandenburg Concerto I: The Triumph of Caesar

Horace Fitzpatrick suggested that the size and grandeur of a nobleman's hunt became a symbol of his wealth and social status because of the enormous expense of horses, hounds, hunters, musicians and horns. The mounted hunt ceremony also reflected worldly virtue in the Baroque — a mixture of chivalry, bravery and industry — and the ceremonial and signalling functions of the hunting-horn came to symbolise aristocratic values. So the sound of the horn would have represented the very essence of nobility to an 18th-century listener.

This is all very plausible and probably true, but performers and scholars searching for extra-musical significance in the Brandenburg set took the interpretation at face value and assumed that Concerto I was an evocation of the Margrave's nobility and his prowess in the hunt, which led in turn to the conclusion that the set simply dealt with the virtues or qualities associated with Princes — including the hunt, the waging of war, sentiment and pastoral benevolence. The piccolo violin of Concerto I was explained away as a French dancing-master's fiddle and the unnecessary (for a concerto) series of French dance movements and *Polacca* were seen to represent the Margrave's 'courtliness' and 'modernity'. Then the little fiddle was connected with the *Polacca* via Telemann's brief description of music-making in Polish taverns until someone

pointed out that it is actually silent during the very movement it should be leading. In fact, the instrument only really has anything special to do in the third movement. A number of other puzzles and anomalies remain (and not just in the first Concerto) which normal analytical scholarship has so far failed to address.

I believe that the larger signalling horn was developed and introduced into the hunt in the first place because of old associations with the Roman triumphal entry — the hunt being regarded as a kind of triumphal progress. Ancient brass instruments (the curved *cornu* and *buccina* and the straight *tuba*) were well known from bas-reliefs of Roman military processions and triumphs. In Renaissance and Baroque art Fame's trumpet was always depicted as long and straight, so 'fantastic' stage-versions of the *cornu* or *buccina* often led the triumphal entries and processions which formed such an important part of 16th- and 17th-century court spectacle and celebration.

Roman reliefs and Renaissance paintings of the *cornu* in particular (often confused with the *buccina* in literary sources) show instruments which must have looked to Bach and his contemporaries remarkably similar to the large, hoop-like Baroque hunting horns with which they were familiar, so it is not surprising that horns were used to represent triumphal entries and worldly pomp and glory. Bach himself symbolises God's entry into the world as Jesus Christ in the *Quoniam* of the B-minor Mass with a horn obbligato. Fitzpatrick also points out that the horn fanfare at the beginning of the first movement of Brandenburg I is almost the same as an early 18th-century Saxon huntsman's greeting-call (unfortunately he does not cite a source). Bach uses the same fanfare again, this time played by a trumpet, in the aria *Grosser Herr und starker König* from Part I of the *Oratorium tempore Nativitatis Christi*; and though the trumpet symbolises royalty the use of this particular fanfare figure probably represents God's entry into the world. Written low in the trumpet's range, it suggests the horn register in which the call would more normally have been heard. So the first movement of Brandenburg I probably portrays a triumphal entry with two 'modern' representations of the Roman *cornu* blaring out fanfares at the head of the procession.

Concerto I existed first in a version containing only the opening movement, slow movement and minuet and trios — even the *Polacca* was missing. I believe that the original three-movement work may have been written as a functional accompaniment to an allegorical courtly triumphal entry (generally the Triumph of Caesar — Julius, Augustus or Trajan), possibly as part of an actual procession — in which case the orchestra would have been deployed on a pageant-wagon.

A Roman triumph started on the *Campus Martius* and slowly processed to the Temple of Jupiter where prayers were offered and sacrifices made. After the rowdy processional of the first movement (complete with turning chariot wheels and paeans of praise from the crowds) the second could well represent some kind of pagan religious ceremony. Bach may be symbolising pagan prayer by the use of a slow tremolo effect (bow/breath vibrato) in both the strings and oboes, a common Baroque device also used by Biber in his *Pauern Kirchfahrt* to suggest prayer accompanied by a soft tremulant organ. The following minuet and trios might then have been danced by the Prince and the courtiers who took part in the action.

It is of course possible that the work was conceived as a purely musical representation of the Triumph of Caesar. The minuet and trios would need some explanation, but this is easily found in the rhetorical process. Bach, considering ways of representing his *locus topicus*, might well have thought of Johann Melchior Caesar, court and cathedral Kapellmeister at Breslau, Würzburg and from 1683 Kapellmeister of Augsburg Cathedral. Caesar was a greatly respected composer and his music went on being popular well into the 18th century. His secular works consist mainly of dance suites, many of which contain pieces in the French style. Bach may have included the dance movements simply as a play on Caesar's name, and the minuet does provide a perfect opportunity for the horns to imitate the kind of simple parts the Roman *cornu* could probably play.

When Bach began to make his selection for the Brandenburg set this work would have been an obvious choice for the opening concerto — except that it could hardly be called a concerto! So Bach added a new third movement for *concertato* piccolo violin with horns, oboes, bassoon and strings, and extracted a solo part for the piccolo violin from the first violin part of the other movements.

The new third movement seems to have existed already as a chorus (now lost, but rearranged again later as a chorus in the praise *serenata* BWV 207); in the Brandenburg arrangement the piccolo violin must attempt to play the vocal parts, with some difficult double-stopping. According to Malcolm Boyd the original chorus was probably written in D major

but transposed up a minor third into F major to fit with the other movements. The new key would have made the necessary double-stopping more difficult on a normal violin, so Bach specified a small instrument tuned a minor third higher to make it easier.

Having constructed a three-movement concerto there was no longer any reason for Bach to retain the minuet and trios — but he did, including the piccolo violin in the minuet and adding a *Polacca* exactly at the centre of the dance-suite. He also rescored the second trio, replacing the *tutti* violins with *tutti* oboes. In suggesting why I must admit to some trepidation as my explanation is without doubt the most controversial and unsubstantiated part of this whole essay — but it is at least a logical argument which provides plausible answers to the many questions.

I believe that Bach, playing the rhetoric game again, came up with a different Caesar — this time Nero, who despite his many offences against humanity had the dubious merit of a passionate interest in music. He was also an easy prey for flatterers. Suetonius tells us that he had a husky voice which lacked body, and that he played the lyre and the bagpipe. Just before the end he made a vow to play the latter in a public music festival if he managed to keep his throne. He also arranged many musical victories for himself, both in Rome and Greece.

Bach would naturally have chosen a violin to represent Nero's lyre because of the symbolic tradition: Ancient lyre = Renaissance *lira da braccio* = Baroque violin. Is it an accident that the little fiddle sounds less refined than an ordinary one? Is it an accident that the solo part written for it always sounds difficult — even manic at times, however well-played? Is it an accident that, at the point where the soloist is given the opportunity for a cadenza, the other instruments hardly pause before interrupting? Nero was known to have employed his own claque, who would have been directed to applaud at the slightest opportunity. Having been victorious in the games in Greece Nero awarded himself a triumph, entering Rome in Augustus' triumphal chariot. His claque followed in the triumphal procession, shouting that they were "Augustus' men" celebrating his triumph.

Is it an accident that Bach retained the dance suite, so was able to insert a piece of 'bagpipe' music (the *Polacca*) near the end of the concerto? Is it an accident that the 'lyre' is silent when the 'bagpipe' is playing? And perhaps the rescoring of the second trio for horns and oboes is a fanciful but humorous touch representing the unlikely combination of Roman *cornu* and Greek *aulos* — the brash Roman dabbling with the arts of Ancient Greece.

In most depictions of Roman triumphs there is a small figure riding with Caesar and whispering in his ear: "Remember, you are only mortal, all this will pass." By including references to someone as despicable as Nero, Bach seems to be pointing a moral of his own: "See how power and glory can corrupt a mortal. Remember that you will die". And there are plenty of obvious *Vanitas* symbols in the work.

Brandenburg Concerto II: Fame, Homer, Virgil and Dante on Mount Parnassus

In Concerto II the trumpet must represent the allegorical figure of Fame — an old and firmly-established tradition. I know of several 17th-century celebratory or laudatory vocal works where Fame appears early in the proceedings, generally accompanied by other relevant allegorical figures such as Time, Fortune and Envy, all of whom wish to be associated with, and praise, the ruler or great man whose works are being celebrated. In one of Bach's later secular cantatas we find Fame, Fortune, Gratitude and Diligence praising a university professor! Similar characters must be represented here by the violin, oboe and recorder, and the various musical figures from which their conversations, arguments and soliloquies are constructed do nothing to weaken the hypothesis — note the almost endless series of flattering 'obeisances' (falling appoggiatura figures) made by Fame's associates in the second movement.

In Renaissance and Baroque art Fame's trumpet was always depicted as long and straight. If appearance was originally important to Bach or his employer — and I believe that it might have been both here and in Concerto IV — then he may have written this allegorical concerto for a (very unusual) straight F trumpet because the normal Baroque trumpet pitched in C or D would have been too long to play uncoiled. No 18th-century listener seeing a long trumpet could have failed to grasp the underlying symbolism of the piece, for Bach was working in a courtly milieu and writing for *Kenner* — men steeped in mythology and the Liberal Arts. Such symbols pervaded every part of their education and lives, and were common throughout literature, music, painting and sculpture.

Another reason for the uniquely high trumpet (and tessitura) demanded in this concerto could be the fact that Fame was often depicted leading

the illustrious dead or living (and sometimes the Seven Liberal Arts) up to Parnassus. She was also frequently associated with renowned historical figures, and who better to praise and glorify a ruler than the great poets of Antiquity — Homer, Virgil and Dante? All three are found on Parnassus with Apollo and the Muses, and the heroic characters dealt with in their epics would have made them eminently suitable for the task.

Homer was often depicted holding a stringed instrument, generally a *lira da braccio* (a reference to the ancient practice of accompanying the recitation of poetry with music), so the violin must symbolise Homer in this concerto. But what of Virgil and Dante — how could these great artists be represented by instruments traditionally associated with Dionysian pursuits?

Virgil made his name with the *Eclogues* or "Pastoral Poems", composed after the model of Theocritus. Most of the poems describe Arcadian or Italian scenery and the life and loves of shepherds. These were followed by the *Georgics*, a collection of didactic poems on farming. So the Pastoral symbolism long associated with reed instruments made an oboe the obvious choice for Virgil.

Dante was known for his devotion to Beatrice, his love poetry and his interest in courtship. In his *Vita nuova* it is difficult to distinguish between Dante the poet and Dante the lover because the lover, the protagonist, is himself the poet! The recorder, traditional symbol of Passion in Baroque art, must represent Dante here.

The high trumpet part might suggest that Bach wrote this concerto for a visit to Weissenfels, perhaps in 1713 — a visit which coincided with preparations for the birthday of Duke Christian on 23rd February. The great trumpet virtuoso Johann Altenburg led the corps of trumpeters at the Weissenfels court, and was renowned for his playing in the high clarino register. There is evidence that at least one of Bach's other works was performed at the 1713 celebrations — the so-called Hunting Cantata BWV 208.

Given the allegorical conceit of Concerto II it is no surprise that Bach should have included it early in the Brandenburg set. And then there is the *Vanitas* subtext, for as well as blowing or holding a trumpet Fame was often depicted sitting on a globe or wearing a crown — objects regularly included in *Vanitas* paintings to represent power and the possessions of the world. Violins and wind instruments also figured, symbolising Reason and Passion, and even the laurel crowns worn by the great poets on Parnassus were sometimes depicted to represent Resurrection.

Brandenburg Concerto III: The Nine Muses and the Harmony of the Spheres

Brandenburg III is scored for 3 groups of 3 violins, 3 violas and 3 cellos; the *tuttis* are written in 3 parts, each of these subdividing into 3 in the first movement; the form of the first movement is basically tripartite, and its principal musical figure consists of three notes supported by quavers moving in thirds. The work has often been described as a fanatical obsession with numbers or a reflection or meditation on the Trinity. But it seems more likely that the first movement of the concerto was conceived as an all-embracing musical portrayal of the speculative series of three octaves which, to the music theorists and philosophers of the 16th and 17th centuries, represented the nine orders of Angels in the Empyrean Heaven, the nine Spheres of the Ethereal Heaven and the nine regions of the Elemental World. Corresponding to these in microcosm were the three major divisions of Man into the intellectual or mental, the vital or spiritual, and the elemental or corporeal — Intellect, Soul and Body.

The Angels themselves were grouped into three hierarchies — Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones (surrounding God in perpetual adoration); Dominations, Virtues and Powers (governing the stars and the elements); and Princedoms (protecting the kingdoms of the earth), Archangels and Angels (divine messengers). It was also believed that the way in which harmony was established in the Angelic choirs was by threes.

It would have been impractical for Bach to write for 27 instruments — 9 are symbolic enough, and the three octaves (and the various hierarchic subdivisions) are represented by violins, violas and cellos. The universe was traditionally depicted by means of Apollo's lyre or a cosmic monochord, so Bach would naturally write for a string ensemble. Perhaps the movement was written for a ballet, or to accompany an allegorical tableau.

Boethius, Gaffurius, Kircher, Fludd and others supplied scales for the celestial spheres, and many of the figures in the first movement of Brandenburg III are built on or around scales. But I am sure that the movement symbolises the structure of the cosmos rather than the movement of the spheres — the hierarchy of existence expressed through the hierarchy of music.

Kepler described a cosmic harmony produced by the angular velocities of the planets through their elliptical orbits, and showed that each of the planets produced a 'song' — a sliding pitch-

change over a given interval rather than a steady note. He could not accurately notate this, but his verbal explanations are clear enough — Mars, for example, produced a *glissando* scale from F to C and back again! Each of Kepler's planets sounded a variety of notes, and the musical possibilities of the various sliding scales were inexhaustible. Most of the chords produced were dissonant, but once in many years the notes sounded by the planets combined to form a consonance.

The second movement of Brandenburg III is based on a rapidly rising and falling figure reminiscent of Kepler's planetary 'song' accompanied by a series of broken triads (consonances); the three cellos play in unison throughout, effectively reducing the number of moving parts to seven; and it is the only concerto movement by Bach to use the binary dance form of two sections, each repeated. I believe that the movement represents planetary motion, or the dance of the heavens. If so, then we may have at last not just one but two possible explanations for the problem of the 'missing' middle movement of this concerto.

Firstly, the harmony of the spheres derives directly from the perfection in form, proportion and number of the cosmic design, so the motion of the seven planets would follow immediately after Bach's (God's?) burst of creative activity on the number 3 in the first movement. Perhaps the two chords marked Adagio which separate the movements were meant to suggest the concept of duality, essential to cosmic manifestation — Alpha and Omega: God is the beginning, and the beginning is the end; God is the end, and the end is the beginning. Such statements commonly appear with the numerous charts, lyres and cosmic monochords used by the theorists to illustrate the correspondences between music and the hierarchy of existence.

Secondly, the gyrating (astrological) bodies of the second movement could also represent Fortune — who bestowed her favours by chance, interrupting the normal pattern of events at random. This could also explain the sudden and unprecedented disruption of the anticipated three-movement concerto form.

What has all this to do with the Margrave? Since Capella's *De nuptiis* the nine spheres had been linked with the nine Muses, who in turn were regarded as the very same beings as the Angels of monotheism. Interestingly, the Greek *angelos* translates as "messenger". The Muses appeared as messengers who accosted chosen human beings such as poets or musicians, charging them with a divine mission. The fact that the Margrave was well-known as a patron of the arts and invited Bach to send him some compositions would liken him to one of the Muses. Furthermore, the Muses were particularly popular in 17th-century German processions, and the movement of the heavens (cosmic harmony) symbolised the peace and prosperity brought by the Prince's rule.

There is evidence to suggest that the two concerto movements originally existed separately and were brought together especially for the Margrave. Bach might well have incorporated this newly-constructed 'astrological' concerto into the Brandenburg set as both a compliment and a subtle warning to the Margrave to remember that, for all his greatness, he was only a man, dwarfed by the grand design of the cosmos and subject to the caprices of Fortune like any other.[1]

Brandenburg Concerto IV: The Musical Contest between Apollo and Marsyas

Apollo, as patron of music and poetry and leader of the Muses, embodied the civilised and rational as opposed to the darker Dionysian aspects of Man's nature. In the legend of the musical contest between Apollo and the satyr Marsyas (enormously popular after 1500) the former played a lyre and the latter an aulos — so stringed instruments came to represent reason, harmony and order, while winds symbolised passion, drunkenness or amorous pursuits.

Marsyas' pipes had been invented by Pallas Athena and almost played themselves. For some time the Muses (competition judges) favoured Marsyas, so in order to win Apollo was forced to resort to outrageous tricks — playing his instrument upside down, singing to his own accompaniment and finally flattering the Muses with praise of Olympus and Helicon.

In Renaissance and Baroque art the most frequent substitute for the Dionysian aulos (often represented in mythological scenes by instruments which were part of contemporary musical life) was the phallic recorder, sometimes depicted in pairs because the aulos was a double

[1] In the light of my "astrological" interpretation of this concerto it seems appropriate to add a thought-provoking personal note. We recorded Brandenburg III for DECCA L'Oiseau-Lyre on the third day of the third month of 1993 — and it was the third session of the recording. The schedule had been dictated by the availability of the hall and the players, and no-one noticed the significance of the date until the morning of March 3rd itself.

A number of other composers clearly employed astronomy as a *locus topicus*, and Bach's own *Goldberg Variations* are based on an allegorical ascent through the nine spheres of Ptolomaic cosmology.

pipe; and the *lira da braccio* or violin (the latter thought to have been invented by Orpheus) usually replaced the obsolete lyre as the instrument of Apollo.

I would suggest that the *locus topicus* for this concerto was the musical contest between Apollo and Marsyas, symbolising the conflict between Reason and Passion. This would certainly explain the unusual choice of instruments and the occasional immoderate virtuosity of the violin writing (Apollo's tricks); and the way Bach writes for the pair of recorders strongly suggests a double pipe, with scale passages and arpeggios in one part against long notes (drone) in the other, and passages in thirds and in unison.

The idea of two recorders representing Marsyas' double aulos could also shed some light on the vexed question of Bach's unique and perplexing demand for *fiauti d'Echo* which occurs in the title of the concerto (though he calls simply for *fiauto* 1^{mo} and *fiauto* 2^{do} in the score).

It is possible that Bach had come across recorder players who, by binding two differently voiced instruments together, could produce an echo effect by playing first on one, then on the other. We know that Drumbleby, the English pipe-maker, showed Pepys such an instrument; Paisible was renowned in London for his performances on the "echo flute"; and Hawkins states that John Banister's son was famous for playing on two recorders at once.

Marsyas' aulos was a double pipe, so two recorders joined together would have appeared to an 18th-century onlooker a more convincing and evocative substitute for it than a single instrument — and many 16th- and 17th-century paintings show two recorders, shawms or trumpets being held and even (though only symbolically!) played by one person.

Of course two players are required to perform Brandenburg IV, but the underlying meaning of the work would have been instantly clarified by performance on 'double pipes'. And although the outer movements were probably played on the loudest of each joined pair it would have been possible to exaggerate slightly the echo effects of the second movement. Such experiments are more difficult today — few players will tinker with expensive and often irreplaceable instruments — so the concerto is usually performed (as it must also have been frequently in the 18th century) on two normal treble recorders without loss of effect. In any case, it must have been only the 'fantastic' appearance of the instruments that was really important, for when Bach rearranged the concerto for harpsichord and two recorders he no longer specified *fiauti d'Echo*, though the musical requirements were the same. Apollo's *lira* substitute was gone, so there was no longer any need for 'double pipes'.

This concerto would have been an obvious candidate for the Brandenburg collection; competitions and tournaments played an important part in court spectacle, Apollo (the Margrave) won and the Muses managed yet another appearance. A violin and one or two recorders were frequently included in *Vanitas* paintings to represent the opposing forces of Reason and Passion, Virtue and Vice.

With its fountain-like figures and self-indulgent solo episodes in the first movement, echoes and flourishes in the second and fugal writing in the last the concerto is a rhetorical tour de force — and a true contest between virtuoso soloists. The violin definitely wins in the end, but the recorders take the initiative in the passionate second movement.

Brandenburg Concerto V: The Choice of Hercules

Pieter Dirksen has recently suggested that this concerto was originally written for performance by Bach himself in Dresden in 1717, where he was to have competed with the French keyboard virtuoso Louis Marchand. This theory is entirely speculative, but as Dirksen points out, a number of unique features of the concerto can be explained by it, including the often-mentioned unidiomatic, reserved treatment of the violin which is so obviously calculated to focus attention on the harpsichord:

1. The surprising presence of the flute. The earliest other dateable works by Bach which include flute parts are two praise-*Serenades* from around 1722. The French flute virtuoso Buffardin joined the Dresden Hofkapelle in 1715, and he had been the teacher of Bach's brother Jakob in 1712. The violinist Johann Pisendel was another of Bach's early Dresden friends. Is it coincidence that the two *concertante* parts of the concerto require their respective instruments?
2. The written out 'cadenza', much shorter in the original version. Vivaldi's *Grosso Mogul* concerto was almost certainly the model for this, and a cadenza is also a typical feature of many of Vivaldi's 'Dresden' concertos.
3. The mixture of national styles. In the second decade of the 18th century Dresden was at the centre of a musical conflict between the French and Italian styles. Bach's concerto is perhaps a contribution to this discussion,

juxtaposing and combining both French and Italian elements.

4. The theme of the slow movement of Brandenburg V is based on a Fugue for organ by Marchand himself.

There are still a number of puzzles. What does the Vivaldi-like *concitato* (agitated, warlike) opening *tutti* represent? Why the gentle persuasiveness of the flute and violin entries after such an agitated opening? Why was the 'cadenza' extended by so many extra bars in the Brandenburg version of the concerto?

Bach later employed a flute in warlike contexts, once to represent the defeat of enemies, but there it probably symbolised the fife. Then again, a flute appears in another cantata accompanying Gratitude. In another cantata a violin plays the obbligato for Pallas Athena (Minerva), and here I began to understand the significance of the Dresden competition and the various *Affekts* of the music — each protagonist's entry more desperate to persuade, more insistent than the last. Bach's *locus topicus* for this concerto must have been "The Choice of Hercules", sometimes known as "Hercules at the Crossroads" and widely popular in Renaissance and Baroque art. The fact that Bach later wrote a secular cantata on the same subject (*Hercules auf dem Scheidewege* BWV 213) lends some force to the assumption.

The allegory depicts Hercules seated under a tree choosing between Virtue and Vice, each of whom tries to persuade him to follow her. One of the most common attributes of Vice is the satyr's pipe, represented in the concerto by the flattering, ingratiating flute; Virtue often took the form of Minerva herself, the godess of war, personification of wisdom and patroness of learning, arts and crafts. Like Apollo, Minerva was regarded as a benevolent and civilising influence, and like Apollo could be represented by a *lira* or violin. She was generally depicted dressed in armour, with spear, shield and helmet, and like violins and recorders these objects are found in *Vanitas* paintings. Minerva may be accompanied by a man crowned with laurel and holding a book (more *Vanitas* symbols) — the poet who will tell of Hercules' deeds; and overhead Fame blows her trumpet or Time looks down, signifying that Hercules will be remembered for eternity. Hercules might show some slight inclination towards Vice, but of course he chooses Virtue. In some of the paintings the portrait of a Prince or nobleman is substituted for Hercules.

Bach, about to undergo a test, obviously saw himself as a Hercules exploring the possibilities of French and Italian music (not really Vice and Virtue — this is only an allegory, after all). Having chosen Virtue at the end of the first movement he goes on to combine the two styles in a model of stylistic versatility and *goûts réunis*.

This concerto was yet another obvious choice for the Brandenburg set. It's another contest piece; the Margrave replaces Hercules (Bach) as the hero who chooses Virtue over Vice (at least at the end of the first movement), and his fame lives for ever, at the same time enough of the *Vanitas* symbols are present to point the moral. In fact, Hercules himself often appears in paintings, engravings and friezes on the *Vanitas* theme. Hercules, as the personification of physical strength and courage, came to represent the Christian triumph of good over evil, which in turn led to the popularity of "Hercules at the Crossroads" in Renaissance and Baroque art. The figure of Hercules came to represent virtue, wisdom, knowledge and fame.

It is also important to consider the position of this concerto in the set, for the figure of Hercules also symbolises the humanistic side of *Memento mori* — THE END CROWNS THE WORK. Through his labours, Hercules, by his constancy and fortitude, conquered evil. Virtue overpowered Vice, just as man can conquer vice and obtain virtue by his good works. Thus the spirit of the humanistic artist or scholar can survive through honourable work, and his name will survive on earth after his death through the fame brought by his works. A 17th-century Christian humanist did not have to choose between religion and philosophy, and Hercules embodies this blend perfectly.

The Italian-style *concitato* ritornello of the first movement symbolises the warlike Minerva, and the 'cadenza', along with most of the harpsichord figuration of the first movement, must represent the disturbed and (very) indecisive state of Hercules' mind. Perhaps by extending the 'cadenza' Bach was not only improving on what Richard Taruskin has called a "conglomeration of shallow fireworks and harmonic barbarities... poor music by any standard", but also suggesting that the worldly Margrave would take much longer to come to a decision![2]

[2] In the secular cantata mentioned above Vice is represented by flats and Virtue by sharps. In the Brandenburg set the three concertos dealing with earthly concerns (a Roman triumph; the great poets of Antiquity; The Three Quick and the Three Dead) are all written in flat keys. The three concertos based on mythology (the nine Muses; Apollo and Marsyas; Hercules) are written in sharp keys.

Another link: the principal musical figure of the first movements of all the concertos is based on the natural notes of the trumpet's harmonic series — an expression of heroism.

Brandenburg Concerto VI: The Meeting of the Three Quick and the Three Dead

In the last of the Brandenburg Concertos the lack of violins leads to an overall low pitch and sombre sonority, both traditionally associated with death. Philosophers like Descartes believed that Man experienced feelings of despair due to a depression of the soul or spirits, and 16th- and 17th-century composers expressed this through low-pitched music written for sombre sounding sackbuts, viols and organs.

Bach's use of viols in similar contexts confirms the symbolism — the *Trauer-Ode* of 1727 includes two viols and two lutes and shares many musical figures with the first movement of this concerto. The repeated quavers played by the viols here represent the relentless passing of time — clocks are an omnipresent reminder of earthly transience in *Vanitas* paintings, and the same repeated quavers appear in Biber's Requiem in f minor and Bach's own *Actus Tragicus*.

The idea of the triumph as an allegory was given literary expression by Dante and Petrarch. Illustrations of the latter's *Trionfi* began to appear in the 15th century, and from this grew the idea of the triumphal pageant-wagon bearing an allegorical or mythical figure surrounded by appropriate attendants and attributes. The Triumph of Death is normally represented in the illustrations by a skeleton holding a scythe and an hourglass, but some later tableaux were based on other death allegories. In some triumphal processions the figure of Death was followed by that of Eternity, a religious allegory depicting the triumph of the Christian faith.

This concerto was probably written in the first place for Prince Leopold of Cöthen, a keen viol player. I cannot help but see parallels between the work and "The Meeting of the Three Quick and the Three Dead", a popular allegorical theme in literary and visual sources of the 17th century. Three young Princes (2 violas and cello), returning carefree from the chase, meet three cadavers (2 viols and violone). The death figures warn the Princes to repent, for wealth and beauty vanish — all must eventually succumb to death.

The ecstasy and peace of the second movement must represent the blissful redemption of the souls of the three Princes after repentance. The viols are silent here, and by analogy (according to the allegory) the violone also, which helps to solve one more of the Brandenburg mysteries: there is no indication in Bach's score that the violone should be silent in the Adagio, but if the continuo bass-part is doubled (whether at 8′ or 16′ pitch) by a bowed bass then a number of unwanted dissonances occur between the continuo and the cello line.

In the final gigue-like movement the Princes (violas and cello) laugh and dance joyfully together, with occasional jerky movements (a suggestion of the Dance of Death?) from the cadavers (viols) — perhaps Bach's *locus topicus* was a vision of the lambs of God gambolling in the fields of heaven.

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