

Royal Court of Brandenburg (St. John's)

Thursday, November 15th, 2018

Together, the Brandenburg Concertos comprise a set of six orchestral compositions dedicated by J.S. Bach to Prince Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg in the spring of 1721. These works are not “concertos” in the sense we think of them today, with a single soloist in front of the orchestra. Instead, these pieces represent an older tradition of “concerted music,” in which a small group of featured players (the “concertino”) converse against a background texture of strings and harpsichord (the “ripieno”). Both of the concertos on tonight's program are in the key of G major and feature a standard three-movement concerto format in which two up-tempo movements are separated by a slow movement in the middle. In *Concerto No. 4*, the concertino consists of a violin and two flutes, which are accompanied by a string quintet and harpsichord. By contrast, *Concerto No. 3* features nine solo strings in familial groupings (3 violins, 3 violas, and 3 celli) with bass and harpsichord accompaniment. Because there are no specifically designated soloists, Bach spreads the spotlight throughout the ensemble (especially among violins and violas), finding a variety of different lead and accompaniment voice combinations.

Though written earlier than Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Trumpets* is much closer to our modern conception of a “concerto,” in which virtuosic soloist(s) are featured with orchestral accompaniment. The piece shares the same three-movement construction as the Brandenburg examples, however the slow inner movement is given short shrift in favor of the flashy outer movements which provide ample opportunities for the trumpet soloists to showcase their skills. As you listen to our soloists tonight, keep in mind that the trumpets in Vivaldi's day would have been so-called “natural” horns, meaning that they would not have been equipped with any valves. (Valved brass instruments did not become common until the mid-nineteenth century). That means that all of the different pitches on the instrument would have been controlled solely by the manipulation of the player's lips inside the mouthpiece.

The “suite” or “partita” was one of the most popular instrumental forms during the Baroque period (roughly 1600 to 1750). The format consisted of a prelude or overture followed by a series of contemporary dances drawn from the high societies of Europe. In fact, many of the names of these dances still bear the names of their countries of origin, such as *Allemande* (from the French for “German”) or *Polonaise* (from the French for “Polish”). Bach's “Air on the G String” is modeled on earlier French and English “airs,” which typically consisted of lament ballads with simply folk-inspired melodies. The “Badinerie,” on the other hand, takes its title from a French word for “joking” and is the lively precursor to the nineteenth-century “scherzo” movements that came to appear in the symphonies of Beethoven and his contemporaries.