

Saturday, July 18, 2009, 7:30 PM
Chapel Hill, Shandon

***Concerto in d minor for Violin, Oboe,
Strings and Continuo, BWV 1060*** (c. 1736)

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750)

The Baroque attitude toward music was fundamentally different than that of today: modern composers usually write with an eye toward posterity, whereas the average Baroque composer did not expect a specific work to be performed beyond the occasion for which it was written. Therefore, Bach and other musicians were inveterate recyclers: they did not hesitate to borrow freely from past pieces in order to craft “new” compositions. At some point during Bach’s peripatetic career, it is believed that he wrote a concerto that featured an oboe and violin as soloists, perhaps as part of his prolific output while employed at Cöthen by the music-loving Prince Leopold. When Bach subsequently moved to his final position in Leipzig, he took on the enormous burden of providing new music every week for the city’s four churches. On top of this taxing responsibility, Bach also participated in Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum, a secular ensemble of college-age musicians who met at a local tavern to play “modern” music. Several Bach scholars have argued that Bach rewrote the old oboe and violin concerto as a “new” piece that featured two harpsichords. Only the two-harpsichord version has survived to the present day (as BWV 1060), but several editors have “de-constructed” this keyboard version in order to recreate the lost concerto. The resurrected version works very well, since the distinctive sounds of the oboe and violin speak clearly above the orchestral texture.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat Major, BWV 1051 (1721)

BACH

Nearly everyone has received a gift that just isn’t usable, which then sits in a closet until it’s finally carted off to Goodwill. This seems to have been the situation for Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg: he met Johann Sebastian Bach sometime in 1718 or 1719 and—impressed by Bach’s abilities—he asked Bach to send him some music. (Bach was currently employed as the Cöthen Kapellmeister for Christian Ludwig’s nephew Prince Leopold.) For Bach, “life intervened”: not only did an infant son die a few months later, but so did Bach’s wife in 1720. It wasn’t until 1721 that Bach gathered up six fine examples of his concerto grosso writing (pieces that featured small groups of soloists as well as an orchestra) and sent them to the Margrave. However, the Margrave’s small complement of household musicians could not possibly have performed any of the concertos, so the gift languished, unplayed, in the Margrave’s library; they were appraised at only 24 Groschen when the Margrave died. Fortunately, one of Bach’s pupils, Johann Philipp Kirnberger, purchased the score and gave it to his pupil, Princess Anna Amalia, who preserved the work in her own extensive library—thus protecting the “Brandenburg Concertos” for posterity and eventual rediscovery.

When most Baroque composers put together a set of concerti grossi, each of the works in the set would usually feature the same soloists. Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos were an unusual hodge-podge of instrumentation, however, and thus *Concerto No. 6* has an unexpected scoring: it calls for two violas, a cello, two violas da gamba (cousins of the cello), and a violone (a cousin of the string bass). Scholars suspect that the simplicity of the gamba parts made them playable by Bach’s employer, Prince Leopold; Bach also omits the gambas and violone from the central movement, making their performance task even simpler. Although the ensemble (surprisingly) omits violins altogether, Bach lets the deeper string instruments “dance” in a lively gigue to conclude the concerto.

Double Concerto for Two Violins and Strings in d minor, BWV 1043 (1730-1)

BACH

The same Collegium Musicum in Leipzig that featured the debut of the two-harpsichord version of BWV 1060 also hosted performances of many other works by Bach, among them the *Concerto in D minor for 2 Violins, BWV 1043*. It was long believed (beginning with the early biographer Philipp Spitta) that this concerto was written while Bach was in Cöthen, but more recent scholars have suggested that it premiered in Leipzig in the early 1730s; in turn, it was adapted as a two-harpsichord concerto (BWV 1062) around 1736. Regardless of its origin, it is clear why Bach would be eager to make use of it more than once. Its three movements maintain a perfect balance between the paired soloists and orchestra, and the central movement is a masterful expression of poignant loveliness.

Copyright © 2009 by Dr. Alyson McLamore