

### **Johann Sebastian Bach – Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D BWV 1050**

The position of the Margraves of Brandenburg in politics and power cannot be underestimated. The Margraves had the role of defending and extending their borders for which they were granted the right to be Electors of the Holy Roman Emperor. Since the 1200's Brandenburg's importance as the northern sector of the Imperial cloak remained undiminished. Under the 'great elector' Frederick II, the territories and rights of the Brandenburg court extended to Prussia allowing Frederick's son Frederick III to assume the title Frederick I, King of Prussia.

Along with politics and power at court, came elaborate musical establishments – seen as a mark of cultural status. Frederick was a patron of the arts, employing fine musicians and building extraordinary palaces like Charlottenburg, named after his wife. However, when Frederick was succeeded by his son Frederick William, the emphasis on culture was dismantled almost entirely and the new heir strove for military prominence. As a result a number of musicians – out of work in Brandenburg – found their way to Anhalt-Cöthen where the young prince Leopold was an avid patron of music. So it is that Johann Sebastian Bach found his way to Cöthen as Music Director in 1717.

Leopold encouraged the musicians a great deal – playing with them in concert from time to time and making sure they had the finest instruments and good sustenance. As a result of this patronage, Bach's music flourished in this period – in which all these so called 'Brandenburg' Concerti were written.

On inheriting the kingdom of Prussia, Frederick William allowed his uncle Christian Ludwig to retain the palace and the title of Margrave of Brandenburg. In 1719, Bach –sent by Leopold to 'try out' and acquire a brand new harpsichord in Berlin – had a chance meeting with Christian Ludwig, who, being dutifully impressed with Bach's prowess asked for some compositions.

Bach delayed in responding for a number of reasons, two of them intensely personal. He had suffered the loss of an infant son in 1719 and was to suffer the loss of his wife in 1720. In 1721, the prince Leopold took a wife who - as sometimes happens in these situations – revamped the bachelor's lifestyle. She objected to the vast sums of money being lavished on court musicians and it was clear that Bach was on his way out. In a bid to get a posting in Brandenburg – Bach remembered the request of Christian Ludwig and sent him a beautifully bound volume of six of the best concerti written in Cöthen. Bach's dedication to the Margrave follows below

*“As I had the good fortune a few years ago to be heard by Your Royal Highness, at Your Highness's commands, and as I noticed then that Your Highness took some pleasure in the little talents which Heaven has given me for Music, and as in taking Leave of Your Royal Highness, Your Highness deigned to honour me with the command to send Your Highness some pieces of my Composition: I have in accordance with Your Highness's most gracious orders taken the*

*liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which I have adapted to several instruments; begging Your Highness most humbly not to judge their imperfection with the rigor of that discriminating and sensitive taste, which everyone knows Him to have for musical works, but rather to take into benign Consideration the profound respect and the most humble obedience which I thus attempt to show Him.”*

Either through lack of interest or inability to sustain musicians, on the part of Brandenburg—nothing came of this job hunt – but the name Brandenburg was immortalized. In 1723, the prolific Bach wrote the ‘St. Matthew Passion’ in three weeks and presented it as a sampling of his composition, to the masters at St. Thomas’ in Leipzig. He was to remain in Leipzig until his death.

The fact that Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 is one of the six sent to the Margrave does distinguish it as a work in which Bach had taken tremendous pride. The arrival of the new harpsichord and the fine playing at Cöthen, meant that full expression could be given to his motifs – and the harpsichord part is virtuosic – on occasion putting it at odds with the ‘ripieno’ in a way that heralds the rise of the modern piano concerto. The second movement is a more balanced solo trio of violin, flute and harpsichord which gives way to a lively fugal third movement no less in its mathematical complexity than its permeating drive. It is no wonder that Bach had the unbridled homage of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Wagner.

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