

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major, BWV 1048, Mvt. 1

Bach composed this concerto sometime between 1714 and 1720. It was probably first performed either at Weimar or at Cöthen.

Background

We generally think of Bach's six "Brandenburg" concertos as a set. In 1720, Bach copied these works into a presentation manuscript as part of a job application for a position in the musical establishment of Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg. The Margrave did not offer Bach a job, but he did have the historical good fortune to save the manuscript! For that reason alone, his name has been applied to some of the finest orchestral music of the Baroque era. Bach's manuscript of "concertos for various instruments" is a collection of works written over a period of nearly a decade, for a wide variety of situations. It is not surprising that the range of musical styles contained in this set is so wide. The "Brandenburgs" contain both fine ensemble writing (as in No. 6) and awesome virtuoso passages (as in the famous harpsichord solo of No. 5 or the trumpet part of No. 2). The group also contains both dance music (No. 1) and masterful contrapuntal writing (as in the finales of No. 3 and No. 5). A few of the concertos are primarily chamber works that have been arranged for performance by a small orchestra. The dating of Concerto No. 3 is uncertain. Most of the Brandenburgs were composed after 1717, when Bach took a position as Kapellmeister (music director) to the provincial, but musically rich court of Cöthen. However, No. 3 may have been written even earlier, for the court of Weimar, where Bach served as organist, and eventually as concertmaster, from 1708 to 1717.

What You'll Hear

The Duke of Weimar's court favored Italian music, and this concerto has a distinctly Italian sound. The scoring is unusual, however: parts for three violins, three violas, and three cellos, with basso continuo. The usual form of a Baroque concerto calls for a small group of soloists to play in alternation with the full ensemble which plays repeating passages known as ritornellos. In the opening Allegro, Bach turns this on its head. The ritornellos are played in relatively simple three-part texture—but in the intervening sections, Bach writes a dazzling nine-part counterpoint. In effect, he calls on the entire orchestra as soloists. (Never one to avoid reusing good music, Bach recycled this movement as the overture to his Cantata No. 174 in 1729.)