

BACH 716 - J. S. BACH (1685-1750): Harpsichord Concertos and Solos

On December 2nd, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque Age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, at barely 25 a relative youngster like Bach and indeed seven years Bach's junior.

The Prince was the son of a Calvinist, and as the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendors of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen. However, the young Prince's religious beliefs did not bar him from enjoying a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions.

Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the "Grand Tour of Europe", first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy where he studied Italian secular music with great interest, returning by way of Vienna. He had well-developed musical tastes, and he returned from his Grand Tour determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level, to which end he stretched the limited budget of his miniature Court to provide an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin. In fact it was during the Prince's Grand Tour in 1713 that news came to him of a golden opportunity: when Wilhelm I of Prussia came to power, he dismissed his father's Court Capelle, and Prince Leopold was able to tempt many of the best musicians from Berlin to Cöthen.

During this period Bach wrote and performed much of his Chamber Music; Violin Concertos, Flute, Violin, and Trio Sonatas, Solo Keyboard Music, the Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin, the Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello, the Six Brandenburg Concertos, and probably the Orchestral Suites. Nor were Bach's Instrumental Works to be heard only in Court performance. When the Prince traveled, Bach and some of the best Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding harpsichord) would accompany him on his extensive journeys.

Twice they visited the Spa town of Carlsbad in Bohemia, the meeting place of the European aristocracy, in 1718 and 1720. These were dazzling aristocratic gatherings of Counts, Princes and Noblemen, where musical concerts were organized daily in which resident and visiting musicians participated. Here Prince Leopold was able to show off the talents of his small orchestra under its brilliant Capellmeister, J.S. Bach.

In December, 1721, however, the Prince married. And for Bach this was to be an unfortunate event, as the new Princess disapproved of and actively discouraged her husband's musical activities. Thus it was that just over a year later Bach took up a new position as Cantor of St Thomas' Church, Leipzig. A major advantage of this new post was the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Leipzig itself, a stimulation for Bach himself and for his growing sons.

At the beginning of the 18th century Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state, with Leipzig as its economic capital. The city's three-times-yearly fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzigers had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life. The city itself was famous for its beauty and cleanliness, set in rolling countryside by the Pleisse River, the city walls surrounded by elegant treed walks and formal pleasure gardens.

A major source of musical entertainment was provided by the Collegia Musica - secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed University. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. Various such groups came and went. The first one was established in 1702 by the redoubtable Georg Philipp Telemann. After Telemann left Leipzig the leadership of his Collegium was taken by Balthasar Schott, the Neukirche Organist. In the spring of 1729, Schott moved to a new position in Gotha, and Bach then took over directorship of the Collegium Musicum of Leipzig.

The story of Bach's Collegium Musicum is closely bound to a Leipzig coffeeshop-proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann. The Collegium Concerts were given on Zimmermann's premises, probably under his auspices. During the winter, the group played every Friday night, from 6 to 8pm, in Zimmermann's Coffee House on the fashionable Cather Strasse, close to the central Marktplatz. In the warmer months, the music was moved outdoors, to Zimmermann's Coffee Garden "in front of the Grimma Gate, on the Grimma Stone Road" - so the address is given in contemporary reports, with Summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm.

That Gottfried Zimmermann was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a competent musician, is indicated by the fact, as confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was "a *clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity*" which made it a Leipzig attraction in itself. An even finer 3-manual instrument was obtained in 1733.

Two types of Concerts were given: *Ordinaire*, the normal regular performances and *Extraordinaire* for special celebrations (King's Birthdays, etc.), and were usually marked by elaborate festive Cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor.

At the regular Concerts Bach provided mainly instrumental music, including clavier works drawn from his *Clavierübung* and the "48". The need for instrumental pieces provided Bach with the opportunity to revive much of his Cöthen and Weimar work; though his Concerti for one or several Harpsichords were receiving their first performances, they were in fact adaptations of earlier (eg. Violin) Concertos, or from Concertos by other composers (eg Vivaldi). Occasionally, too, vocal music might be given; such an example is the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211, first presented in 1732.

It is also on record that works of Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were performed here. Admission was charged for the *Extraordinaire Concerts*, and also for those occasional "Special Concerts" (*Sonder-konzerte*) which featured distinguished visiting artists. The regular Concerts were probably free.

These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular coffee shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual diversions offered there. The performances of the Collegium were, in fact, hardly different from what we consider to be normal concert procedure today. Indeed, the word "Concert" began to be used expressly in connection with the Collegium during its later years.

The schedule of weekly performances, the composition of new works, rehearsing them, arranging programs, etc., reveals that the Collegium Musicum was no mere diversion for Bach. The fact is that this was, for much of his later life, his central artistic activity, the church becoming almost peripheral. In his years with the Collegium Bach satisfied a side of himself that certainly must have lain dormant since the happy and fruitful period at Cöthen. He remained its director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741.

Another major pre-occupation of Bach during the 1730s and 40s was the four semi-educational groups of works known under the general heading of *Clavierübung* or *Keyboard Exercise*. Having completed his *Forty-eight Preludes & Fugues* Bach set about creating a series of works demonstrating the whole range of Keyboard Art, published eventually as four volumes of the *Clavierübung*. **Part I** contains the Six Keyboard Partitas (available on BACH 704-5). **Part II** contrasted two national styles: the Italian Concerto on this present disc, and the French Overture. **Part III** consisted of Chorale Preludes for the Organ, with the monumental Prelude & Fugue BWV 552. **Part IV** presented the famous *Goldberg Variations*.

The Italian Concerto, published by Christoph Weigel Jr, Nuremberg 1735, was enthusiastically reviewed by J.A. Scheibe, who wrote: "... *preeminent among works known through published prints is a clavier concerto of which the author is the famous Bach in Leipzig. Who is there who will not admit at once that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a well-designed solo concerto? But at the present time we shall be able to name as yet very few or practically no concertos of such excellent qualities and such well-designed execution. It would take as great a master of music as Mr. Bach, who has almost alone taken possession of the clavier.*"