In 1717 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, barely twenty-five years old, the son of a Calvinist. 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, returning by way of Vienna. So he would have been thoroughly familiar with the latest European fashions in music.

The young Prince 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. He had returned from his Grand Tour, inspired particularly by the music and musicians or Italy, and determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level. Unlike most Princes of his time, he was a player of considerable proficiency on the harpsichord, the violin and the viola da gamba, and contrary to current Court etiquette he played quite freely and informally with his Court musicians, treating them entirely as his equals. He soon became very friendly with his new Capellmeister, having a high regard for him, and would often ask his advice on various matters.

Life at Cöthen was informal and easy-going; in this happy atmosphere Bach's days were completely devoted to music. During this period a large number of Bach's Sonatas, and in particular the three for Viola da gamba or Cello and Clavier, stem from his years in Cöthen. Bach surely wrote the latter with his patron in mind, for the prince would have been a ready and skillful performer either on the gamba or at the keyboard. In addition, the orchestra boasted a virtuoso cello and gamba soloist, Christian Ferdinand Abel, who could have played the works with Bach.

The question of performance on the gamba or cello is very much a matter for the performer's preference, there being also one or two subtle differences between the two instruments. The cello is slightly more outspoken than the gentle, reserved quality of the viola da gamba; vibrato on a viola da gamba is limited by frets, and the gamba with its less-arched bridge enables performance of fuller chords with greater ease.

In these Sonatas, however, Bach makes only occasional use of double and triple stopping by the gambist or cellist and, instead, provides textural interest through a written-out part for the right hand of the keyboard, the left supplying the bass line and additional harmony. The result was something of a novelty in Bach's time, when the harpsichord normally supplied only chordal accompaniment in the form of continuo.

The combination of a single string line with two hands results in what amounts to a Trio Sonata in which the three parts are of equal musical value. Indeed, the first Sonata, BWV 1027, in G Major, also exists in a version for two flutes and a keyboard playing a figured bass (BWV 1039, see BACH 706). It was quite normal in Baroque times for instrumentation to be changed at will to suit preference or circumstance - this same Sonata also exists in a version for organ or pedal harpsichord (BWV 1027a, see BACH 738).

The first two Sonatas employ the typical four-movement church sonata plan with alternating slow and fast movements, but the third takes the more "modern" approach of omitting the initial slow movement. In each work, elements of Bach's characteristic Baroque style prevail - extensive polyphony, fast harmonic rhythm, incisive fugue themes, continuously active rhythms - but never without a variety of mood and structure or a diversity of instrumental treatment.

For the **Three Concertos** transcribed for **Solo Harpsichord** we step back in time to Bach's previous appointment at the Wilhelmsburg Court at Weimar between 1708 and 1717, his employer being Duke Wilhelm-Ernst.

It has generally been accepted that Bach's transcriptions were simply learning exercises. However the level of composition already reached and evidenced in his Weimar instrumental and organ works hardly shows need for simple transcription as a means of further education. More likely was the challenge of accurately transforming an orchestral concerto, with its alternation of soloists and full orchestra, into a work for solo instrument, albeit a two manual harpsichord with its ability to couple keyboards for a tutti effect. The technique of rendering an orchestral form as a solo harpsichord piece would be re-visited many years later at Leipzig with the Italian Concerto, BWV 971.

The first Concerto, BWV 981 is transcribed from a work by Alessandro Scarlatti, while the remaining two Concertos are transcriptions of works by Duke Wilhelm-Ernst's musically talented young Nephew Prince Johann-Ernst (1696-1715) who was also studying keyboard and composition with Bach's Cousin J.G. Walther.

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**Gunnar Johansen** makes judicious use of his Speerhake Harpsichord's full range of sonorities including the 16', as evidence has shown Bach himself would have done. Gunnar Johansen can also be heard in a program of Bach's lesser-known Harpsichord Works on **BACH 732**.