



Bach Harpsichord Concertos
Francesco Corti il pomo d'oro



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Harpsichord Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, BWV 1052

1	I. Allegro	7.12
2	II. Adagio	6.38
3	III. Allegro	7.22

Harpsichord Concerto No. 2 in E Major, BWV 1053

4	I. [Allegro]	7.54
5	II. Siciliano	3.53
6	III. Allegro	6.10

Harpsichord Concerto No. 7 in G Minor, BWV 1058

7	I. [Allegro]	3.24
8	II. Andante	4.50
9	III. Allegro assai	3.48

Harpsichord Concerto No. 4 in A Major, BWV 1055

10	I. Allegro	4.04
11	II. Larghetto	4.42
12	III. Allegro ma non tanto	4.04

Total playing time: 64.08

Francesco Corti, harpsichord
il pomo d'oro

il pomo d'oro

Violin 1: Evgenii Sviridov, Dimitrios Karakantas, Esther Crazzolaro

Violin 2: Anna Dmitrieva, Maria Grokhotova, Lathika Vithanage

Viola: Stefano Rossi, Lola Fernandez

Cello: Marco Ceccato

Double Bass: Vanni Moretto

Harpichord: Julio Caballero

Cover image:

Italian Landscape with Draftsman (1650 - 1692) by Willem de Heusch (1625 - 1692)



J. S. Bach's keyboard concertos hold a special place in any harpsichordist's heart. As much as they are regularly performed and recorded, a number of questions surrounds them, and a new recording constitutes a good occasion to take a fresh look at old uncertainties.

A fairly large group of sources is available to us, notably an autograph orchestral score dating from the late 1730s, yet some information is missing from those sources and assumptions have to be made.

The choice between a minimal orchestra and a larger ensemble is a particularly thorny topic, since very little direct information survived from the performances at the Zimmermansches Kaffeehaus. The two alternatives are justifiable both historically and musically, but a performer can't afford the luxury of avoiding a decision. What is the ideal solution, then?

An autograph set of parts for the BWV 1055 concerto containing a continuo part written for a second keyboard instrument supports a performance with a large ensemble. I decided to record in this first volume the four concertos that in my opinion benefit the most from the sound of a full orchestra, leaving for the second volume the ones that work better in a chamber setting.

Because the solo parts of concertos BWV 1053 and 1058 share many similarities to 1055, we have added a continuo part as well, following the model of BWV 1055. I'm convinced that the performances at the Leipzig coffee house were flexible and would naturally follow the availability of instrumentalists (and instruments!) on the days of performance. Bach certainly was, after all, a deeply practical man. This recording wants to follow a flexible approach toward some open issues of performance practice.

For tempo choices, I have turned to the information we have from treatises of Bach's time, in particular for the moderate tempos of Andante and Siciliano are reported as being quite fast compared to today's common practice.

Some movements in the concertos recorded here are in da capo form, and I couldn't resist the temptation for introducing some variations. C. Ph. E. Bach, among many others writers, considers them indispensable, and the fact that slightly different versions of some concertos exist, is enough of a hint to me that this music was to some extent subject to the performer's spontaneous inspiration, and I cannot imagine an 18th-century musical performance missing some form of rhetorical Variatio, especially when the form itself calls for it.

Luckily, we are in good hands: Bach's endless fantasy in his written-out ornamentations (particularly impressive in

his treatment of chorale melodies) provides us with an endless source of musical ideas to be inspired by.

Having to pick a few people from the many that helped this project, I wish to thank here Andrea Restelli and Maurizio Manara for making their beautiful instruments available for the recording, Julio Caballero Pérez for his patience with the tuning under quite extreme conditions, and Andrés Locatelli for his unconditional support and his loving contribution to this recording.

Francesco Corti

The first true harpsichord concertos

During the early 18th century, Italian instrumental concertos were taking Germany by storm. **Johann Sebastian Bach** first took notice during his tenure at Weimar (1708-1717) when he transcribed Venetian string concertos for solo keyboard. His self-imposed task — much like a co-author or translator — was to adapt idiomatic string writing to the keyboard and infuse it with what mattered most to him: counterpoint and motivic development. During subsequent positions in Köthen (1717-1723) and Leipzig (1723-1750), Bach continued to explore and adapt the Italian precedent to suit his own style. At Leipzig, ostensibly consumed with sacred music, Bach still recognized that concerto Allegros could double as introductions or overtures to church cantatas. Moreover, his involvement with that city's Collegium Musicum, a performing ensemble founded by Telemann in 1702, provided

ready occasion and need for larger chamber works. Bach directed Collegium performances throughout the 1730s and, in 1738, harvested the fruits of his efforts, compiling a manuscript collection of six concertos for harpsichord solo with ripieno strings, BWV 1052-1057.

It must be pointed out that none of these concertos were newly composed in the 1730s. In fact, each one is based on a previous string or wind concerto by Bach or another composer. The original sources still exist for several concertos, such as BWV 1054 and 1057, and we can thereby pinpoint Bach's adaptations and alterations. This link offers a fascinating window into his working method and goals in undertaking the Collegium arrangements. But for many of the pieces, including BWV 1052, 1053, and 1055 recorded here, the original source is lost. Scholars can only speculate, piecing together fragmentary clues to identify or reconstruct something of the model. After a false start of sorts (see comments

below regarding BWV 1058), Bach decided to open the collection with the **Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052**. As mentioned above, it probably derives from a lost violin concerto of unknown authorship. Bach clearly liked the inherent qualities of the main theme, with its alternation between rising/falling contours and its characteristic syncopated leap. But credit for those features must go to the unidentified composer of the original concerto. What Bach did with this material, of course, is wholly his own, and that can be appreciated in the modulations, motivic development, and toccata-like cadenzas that set BWV 1052 apart.

Certain passages will not come across on the keyboard as they would on the violin. For instance, at the first solo cadenza in A Minor, the repeated pitch surrounded by upper- and lower-neighbor notes is idiomatic for the violin; the repeated A would be played as an open string, enhancing its resonance against the neighboring “stopped” or fingered tones (a





technique called *bariolage*). On harpsichord the effect can only be approximated, perhaps by use of separate manuals. On the other hand, there are times when Bach has substantially recomposed the keyboard's left hand to bolster the counterpoint. Such richness of texture — for example, the thick chords that punctuate the finale's second cadenza — simply cannot be achieved on the violin.

There is a corollary to this borrowing of source material, for Bach himself had already used portions of the D-Minor concerto in two sacred cantatas. The first two movements, transposed down a whole step, convey a dark, weighty expression that suits the central message of Cantata 146: "We must pass through great sadness in order to enter God's kingdom." Around the same time he used the finale as an organ prelude for Cantata 188, "Ich habe meine Zuversicht" (I have my confidence). Thus, although his motivation to pull this material together for a keyboard concerto

in the 1730s was primarily practical (i.e., Collegium performance), we can suggest an expressive interpretation by tracking the material's previous incarnations in other contexts.

The second work in the collection, the **Concerto in E Major, BWV 1053**, likely derives from a lost woodwind work possibly dating to Bach's Weimar period. As with BWV 1052, he had previously used some of this material in two cantatas (in this case, BWV 49 and 169). The tonality is not a common one for the era, meaning other E-major works may come to mind — as they probably did for Bach himself. The first Allegro highlights an arpeggiated main theme redolent of the great Partita for unaccompanied violin in this same key, whereas extensive two-part counterpoint in the keyboard solos posits the E-major Invention as an inspiration, conscious or otherwise.

Bach grows more adventurous and interesting as he moves beyond the opening minutes of the broad Allegro, reaching into other keys (such as C-sharp and F-sharp Minor) to present developed cadenzas and more thoughtful handling of the ripieno strings. He also resisted the temptation to insert a formulaic slow movement. Where others may have relied on a decorated chord progression, ending with a simple Phrygian half-cadence, Bach revels in a lengthy siciliano led by solo harpsichord. This dance type carried significance for Bach, who relied upon it for particularly affecting moments in other compositions. At the end, he rounds the concerto off with a lively Allegro in triple meter. The original source for this E-major concerto is no longer extant, so we cannot trace Bach's reworking in detail. But the final result stands fully on its own, needing no additional reasons to justify a position in the current repertory.

That same assessment pertains equally to the **Concerto in A Major, BWV 1055**. As this concerto bears no relation to any known work, it is perhaps the easiest one to judge on its own merits. Yet opinions vary widely, with two noted Bach scholars holding opposite views: Ludwig Finscher feels the A-Major quite straightforward and "not very characteristic" of Bach's style, whereas Werner Breig lauds its concentrated motivic development as "among the most mature" of Bach's efforts in the genre. Certain features argue for substantial new material having been added in the 1730s. For instance, the powerful Larghetto — with hints of siciliano topic and doleful "lament" bass progression — parallels the slow movement from BWV 1053, both of which are not typical for early 18th-century Italian concertos. In the opening Allegro, Bach brings solo and ripieno forces together at the very outset, creating substantial doubling between the harpsichord's treble part and the first violin but also hindering the independence of the

strings. During the finale, Bach handles this relationship more successfully by allowing true moments of dialogue in the midst of an exhilarating Allegro. The virtuosic theme, idiomatic for the violin, does two things that benefit the whole: it helps Bach avoid favouring the keyboard too much, and it forces him to continue asserting the ripieno as an equal partner in this conversation.

In a careful examination of Bach's manuscripts, Werner Breig outlines what he believes was the method used in both BWV 1053 and 1055. First, Bach copied out the upper strings of his model, then added harpsichord treble and bass, and finally thickened the texture by inserting a string bass part. The string bass generally provides foundation for tutti sections, whereas the harpsichord fulfills that role during all solo passages. This was an area in which Bach's contribution was profound — breaking the left hand out of its accompanimental role and weaving it fully into the contrapuntal fabric around it. As these concertos from

the 1738 manuscript were perhaps the first true harpsichord concertos in existence, such a detail directly influenced later efforts from Bach's sons to Mozart and beyond.

With the **Concerto in G Minor, BWV 1058**, we are at last on firmer ground regarding Bach's original source. In this case, his own past comes in for updating: the beloved Concerto in A Minor for violin and strings, BWV 1041. Evidence indicates that Bach prepared BWV 1058 *before* BWV 1052-1057; it had been planned as the opening work in a collection of keyboard concertos — probably six, as was his custom. But with the G-Minor concerto completed, Bach only drafted a single movement of BWV 1059 before stopping. (Speculating about why he did not complete BWV 1059, while interesting in itself, remains beyond the scope of these notes.) Instead, he turned his attention to the six concertos, BWV 1052-1057, which were moved to the front of the manuscript when it was bound. A great deal of the success achieved by

BWV 1058 must come from its source being by Bach himself. He knew these themes intimately, had ruminated on their motivic possibilities, and had a complete formal structure already in place. This is most evident in the poignant slow movement. All of the features that attract us — the stately pulse, the suspension figures, a highly decorated solo line — are taken note for note from its violin predecessor. What remained for Bach was to develop the keyboard's left hand during passages, mainly in the outer movements, where the existing bass line was not sufficiently robust to pair with an active treble part. The opening ritornello is wonderfully expansive, stretched by harmonic sequence and both an evaded and a deceptive cadence. The concluding Gigue sprints by in passages of continuous sixteenth notes, which Bach did his utmost to transfer effectively to the keyboard.

At times the solo harpsichord completes a phrase begun by strings, creating a

stark contrast of timbre that would not have occurred when the solo part was carried by violin. Many will prefer the sound of the original violin concerto over this arrangement, but two things are certain regarding Bach's project from the 1730s: first, any additional opportunity to experience BWV 1041/1058 is a welcome one; and second, these Collegium arrangements often represent our only chance to hear concertos that would otherwise be lost to history.

Jason Stell

Acknowledgments

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Product management **Kasper van Kooten**

This album was recorded in Toblach, Gustav Mahler Hall, Kulturzentrum Toblach, 1-5 March 2019.

Francesco Corti plays an Andrea Restelli 1998 harpsichord, after Christian Vater. Continuo parts are played on an Andrea Restelli 2000 harpsichord, after Michael Mietke, ca. 1710.

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

1-3	Harpichord Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, BWV 1052	21. 12
4-6	Harpichord Concerto No. 2 in E Major, BWV 1053	17. 57
7-9	Harpichord Concerto No. 7 in G Minor, BWV 1058	11. 58
10-12	Harpichord Concerto No. 4 in A Major, BWV 1055	12. 50

Total playing time: 64. 08

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