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### The Social And Religious Designs Of J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos

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## Bach's Musical Contexts

Tubby the Tuba, at a rehearsal, sitting forlornly in the back row of the orchestra: “Oh, what lovely music.” (Sighs.)

Peepo the Piccolo, rushing to Tubby's side: “Here, what's the matter?”

Tubby: “Oh, every time we do a new piece, you all get such pretty melodies to play. And I? Never, never a pretty melody.”

Peepo, arms stretched out: “But people don't write pretty melodies for tubas. It just isn't done.”

Paul Tripp, *Tubby the Tuba*

*Tubby the Tuba* captures powerfully the enculturated notion of the orchestral hierarchy. As Tubby's story goes on to show, there is, of course, no inherent technical reason why tubas should not be highlighted with pretty melodies in orchestral music; it just “isn't done.” Further explanation is hardly needed.

J. S. Bach would apparently not have been moved by an appeal to tradition. He at times assigns highly unconventional roles to the instruments in his orchestras. To consider one of the most extreme examples: in the alto aria from his church cantata *Du sollt Gott, deinen Herren, lieben*, BWV 77, Bach takes the trumpet from its then conventional, D-major-trumpets-and-drums, regal, festive context and has the instrument perform a melancholy, tortured obbligato in D minor. To consider another extreme instance, one to be examined at length in chapter 1: in the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto, Bach has the violas—at the time rank-and-file, accompanimental, orchestral instruments—play brilliant solo parts, and the violas da gamba—prestigious, solo, chamber instruments—play routine, violalike accompanimental parts.

Scholars have for a long time been puzzled by such scorings. The usual approach has been to argue that special biographical circumstances must account for them. Alfred Dürr observes that since the idea of a trumpet obbligato seems obviously rather ill-suited to Bach's aria text in cantata 77, there may have been external factors to ac-

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count for his choice of this instrument.<sup>1</sup> As for the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto, Friedrich Smend provides the generally accepted explanation for its scoring.<sup>2</sup> He argues that whenever Prince Leopold of Köthen (Bach's employer at the time the Brandenburg Concertos were compiled) with his favorite instrument, the viola da gamba, wished to take part in the music making, Christian Ferdinand Abel, the court viola da gamba player, would of course have to move over to the second chair. If the prince took part as a soloist, it was a matter of honor for his court conductor Bach to do the same on his preferred instrument, the viola. In that case, the solo violinist in the orchestra, Joseph Spieß, would have to assume the position of second viola. The chamber musician Christian Bernhard Linigke played the cello. Bach knew how to write a piece in such a way that no excessively demanding passages were assigned to the prince, who was thus spared the embarrassment of exposing his technical limitations to his chamber musicians. The striking scorings in the Brandenburg Concertos can be easily explained: "Bach was *merely* adapting to the circumstances of performance at Köthen and the constraints imposed on him there."<sup>3</sup>

Dürr and Smend provide plausible enough answers to the question of why Bach's music is the way it is, but I would prefer to ask a different, if somewhat related question: what does Bach's music mean when it is the way it is?<sup>4</sup>

Bach's trumpet obbligato in cantata 77—or, to be more precise, his specific treatment of the instrument there—probably did in fact have something to do with internal factors. The aria text reads, "Oh, there bides in my loving still nothing but imperfection." What more effective way was there at the time to help express this imperfection than to have the natural (valveless) trumpet struggling through material that is exceedingly unnatural for the instrument?

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Dürr, *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach*, rev. ed. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1985), p. 571.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Smend, *Bach in Köthen* (Berlin: Christlicher Zeitschriftenverlag, 1951), p. 24; *Bach in Köthen*, trans. John Page, ed. and rev. Stephen Daw (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Smend, *Bach in Köthen*, ed. Daw, p. 41 (my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> The same sorts of problems surface in research on the reception of Bach's music after his death. See Michael Marissen, "Religious Aims in Mendelsohn's 1829 Berlin-Singakademie Performances of Bach's St. Matthew Passion," *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993): 718–26.

In the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto, Bach reverses the functions of violas and gambas, something that, as will be explained in detail in chapter 1, relates to internal aspects in the music—namely, a formal reversal in Bach's application of the syntactical properties of ritornellos and episodes in Vivaldian concerto style. The structure and scoring of Bach's concerto are significant (whatever the technical capabilities of its original players may have been), for they project alternative hierarchies to the ones accepted at the time.

One cannot, of course, prove that any sort of interpretation conveys incontrovertibly the sense of Bach's music. Considering questions of signification in Bach's concertos, however, turns out actually to be no more speculative than the generally accepted, ostensibly more straightforward idea that Bach was simply adapting to external performance constraints. Smend, for example, neither presents hard evidence leading us to conclude that Leopold would have been an incompetent gamba player nor demonstrates that Bach preferred the viola per se (the reason Bach reportedly preferred this instrument was that it put him in the middle of the harmony,<sup>5</sup> which means that in the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto he would probably have most enjoyed performing one of the gamba lines).

In this study of the Brandenburg Concertos, I will explore social implications both of Bach's treatment of various instruments within the hierarchical figuration of eighteenth-century court ensembles and of his handling of Vivaldian concerto style. There is nothing essentially new in this, for general observations on various sorts of analogies between politics and music were made by a great number of baroque music theorists. Volker Scherliess's research on the subject provides quotations from, among others, Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia universalis* (Rome, 1650), Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi's *Historia musica* (Perugia, 1695), Zaccaria Tevo's *Musico testore* (Venice, 1706), Johann Mattheson's *Vollkommener Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739), Johann Gottfried Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732), and John Hawkins's *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London, 1776).<sup>6</sup> Richard Leppert recently has argued also

<sup>5</sup> See the citations in chapter 1, n. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Volker Scherliess, "Musica Politica," in *Festschrift Georg von Dadelsen zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Thomas Kohlhasse and Volker Scherliess (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1978), pp. 270–83.

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along general lines for this sort of view of baroque music, and Günther Hoppe has documented Leopold of Köthen's interest in such matters.<sup>7</sup> John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, in a forthcoming book on the history of the orchestra, plan to center more specifically on contemporary understandings of the structure of instrumental court ensembles.<sup>8</sup> Spitzer is writing a chapter investigating the metaphors that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers employed to describe the orchestra,<sup>9</sup> and he has found that by far the most commonly used metaphors in the baroque period had to do with hierarchies, such as those of the army and of society.

In chapter 3, I will explore via his documented reading of Lutheran theology some indications that Bach himself considered the figuration of his orchestra in similar terms to the contemporary social hierarchy. Although readers may find them inherently interesting, it is probably worth exploring these nonmusical indications also on account of the powerful skepticism among many current scholars toward social interpretations of Bach's instrumental music. While any form of historical grounding is of course welcome, I would point out that the standard musicological practice of requiring proof from contemporary verbal sources (treatises, letters, etc.) for new interpretive approaches may in some sense be to take a premise for a conclusion: the practice can make it more difficult to see music itself as a formative contribution to cultural history.

All of this is not to suggest that Bach's orchestra ought to be viewed as a direct representation of society; rather, early eighteenth-century

<sup>7</sup> Richard Leppert, "Music, Representation, and Social Order in Early-Modern Europe," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 25–55. Günther Hoppe, "Köthener politische, ökonomische und höfische Verhältnisse als Schaffensbedingungen Bachs (Teil 1)," *Cöthener Bach-Hefte* 4 (1986): 13–62, at pp. 30–31, citing Staatsarchiv Magdeburg, Abt. Köthen. A1 Nr. 22<sup>II</sup>, fol. 18, which transmits a lecture pointing out correspondences between politics and music that was given during Leopold's coronation ceremonies.

<sup>8</sup> Zaslaw has discovered, incidentally, that the now generally accepted distinction between orchestral and chamber music did not hold in the early eighteenth century: the word *orchestra* did also clearly refer to ensembles in which there was only one player per line in the score. My thanks to Professor Zaslaw for pointing this out to me.

<sup>9</sup> Spitzer has presented a preliminary version of this work as "Speaking of Orchestras," 5 November 1993, national meeting of the American Musicological Society, Montreal. On this topic of orchestral metaphor more generally, see also Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 65–67.

orchestral and social structures should both be seen as products of certain modes of hierarchical thinking.<sup>10</sup>

We should not assume, however, that the Brandenburg Concertos no longer “worked” at all if they were performed outside of the social contexts of the courts for which they were conceived (Sachsen-Weimar and Anhalt-Köthen) or outside of the courtly contexts for which they were revised (for Christian Ludwig, the margrave of Brandenburg in Berlin, as well as, presumably, for Prince Leopold of Köthen). In reperformances and adaptations, for example, for the bourgeois context of Bach’s coffeehouse concerts or church services of eighteenth-century Leipzig (where there was no court),<sup>11</sup> the pieces might have lost something of their former social significance. This does mean, therefore, that the pieces never really had any such import. (In a new context, they could also even have gained other sorts of significance that they did not originally possess: for example, the musical power of Bach’s dense counterpoint might have become a more striking feature for the audiences of the 1730s and 1740s, and in this context the procedures of his concertos might be considered reactionary in comparison to those then being composed according to the simpler orientation of the developing *galant* style.)

<sup>10</sup> On this way of looking at both society and art works as products of historical shifts in thinking and attendant behavior, see Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners* (vol. 1 of *The Civilizing Process*), trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1978). On the structural significance of prestige in eighteenth-century Europe, see Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1983), chap. 3, “The Structure of Dwellings as an Indicator of Social Structure.”

<sup>11</sup> During his tenure in Leipzig, Bach arranged the first movement from an early version of the First Brandenburg Concerto as the *sinfonia* to the cantata *Falsche Welt, dir trau ich nicht*, BWV 52; the third movement from the First Brandenburg Concerto (or its vocal source? see chapter 1, n. 22) as the opening choruses to the cantatas *Vereinigte Zwietracht der wechselnden Saiten*, BWV 207, and *Auf, schmetternde Töne der muntern Trompeten*, BWV 207a; the third trio from the First Brandenburg Concerto as a *ritornello* in cantatas 207 and 207a; an early version of the first movement of the Third Brandenburg Concerto as the *sinfonia* to the cantata *Ich liebe den Höchsten von ganzem Gemüte*, BWV 174; and the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto as an F-major concerto for harpsichord, two recorders, and strings, BWV 1057. I will use the terms *earlier version* and *later version* for convenience but do not wish thereby to suggest that there are ideal works that undergo successively better or worse realizations. Strictly speaking, the First Brandenburg Concerto and cantata 207 do not represent different versions of one ideal musical work but are two different pieces of music with many notes and rhythms in common. Each version carries its own meanings.

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One other related matter should be mentioned here. Because I have not been able to come up with a better designation, I will occasionally be using the common but unfortunate term *extramusical* to refer to the aspects of Bach's music that are concerned not simply with the notes. As the philosopher Lydia Goehr has recently reminded us, however, what we call extramusical ideals were regarded in the premodern understanding—to use standard philosophically precise terminology—as constitutive of the musical.<sup>12</sup> Before the nineteenth century, highly regarded music was discussed much more in terms of its functions (social, political, religious) than, as it is today, in terms of its internal, formal coherence. It was not until around 1800 that the idea of art for art's sake and the concern with individual works became regulative concepts in Western music. Goehr captures well the essentially social nature of the ongoing enterprise of finding definitions, and thereby apologia, for music: “The constant bid to define and redefine the concept of music derives from a need to convince the higher echelons of the establishment that certain musical practices are among those that are respectable and civilized. To establish the respectability of a given form of music one must make explicit what this kind of music involves as music.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, before about 1800 what we today quite misleadingly call extramusical factors made music respectable (accordingly, instrumental music had a relatively low status), whereas after 1800, they were typically seen as a detriment to “serious” music—hence their being designated “*extramusical*” (accordingly, instrumental music achieved a relatively high status).

A FEW WORDS are in order about how this book has been organized. The central idea is that Bach's unusual treatment of instruments and handling of forms are less significant in and of themselves than in relation to one another. This premise has had certain consequences in determining which of the many possible topics surrounding the Brandenburg Concertos ought to be pursued here.<sup>14</sup> I have discussed

<sup>12</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), especially chap. 5, “Musical Meaning: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> For more general guides to the concertos, see John Alexander Fuller-Maitland, *Bach's “Brandenburg” Concertos* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929); Peter Wacker-

organological problems, for example, only when they have immediate bearing on the interpretation of relationships between structure and scoring.<sup>15</sup> Thus, some consideration is given to identifying Bach's *Fiauti d'Echo* in the Fourth Concerto and classifying the violone and gamba parts in the Sixth. I did not delve into other long-standing organological issues, however, because their solution would have no bearing on the interpretive strategies adopted (e.g., the issue of whether the Fifth Concerto has anything to do with the large and expensive Mietke harpsichord Bach is known to have obtained from Berlin in 1719 is not taken up, because it would not affect the interpretation).

Similarly, I have explored only selected text-critical problems. For example, errors in the previously reported manuscript transmissions of the Sixth Concerto are pointed out in considerable detail,<sup>16</sup> because they directly affect the issue of Vivaldi reception in Bach. Substantial errors in the reported transmissions of other concertos go unmentioned, however, on account of their lack of relevance to the broader interpretive discussion.

Finally, I have also somewhat narrowly discussed stylistic influences on Bach's concerto procedures. As is outlined toward the beginning of chapter 1, Antonio Vivaldi played a significant role in the history of the baroque concerto by developing specific innovations in the form of this genre. Determining to what extent Bach absorbed them directly from his contact with Vivaldi's music, or secondhand through other composers, is mostly unimportant for the purposes of the interpretations explored here (Bach and his German contemporaries knew that the new formal procedures of the German concertos in the

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nagel, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Brandenburgische Konzerte* (Berlin: Bote and Bock, 1938); Rudolph Gerber, *Bachs Brandenburgische Konzerte: Eine Einführung in ihre formale und geistige Wesensart* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1951); Norman Carrell, *Bach's "Brandenburg Concertos"* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963); Elke Lang-Becker, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Die Brandenburgischen Konzerte* (Munich: Fink, 1990); and Malcolm Boyd, *Bach: The Brandenburg Concertos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Boyd's study is the most informed and insightful.

<sup>15</sup> A survey of organological issues in Bach research will be provided in Daniel Melamed and Michael Marissen, *J. S. Bach: A Guide to Research* (New York: Garland, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> This concerns Heinrich Bessler, ed., *Johann Sebastian Bach, Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke (Neue Bach Ausgabe)*, vol. 7, part 2: *Sechs Brandenburgische Konzerte, Kritischer Bericht* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1956).

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1710s were Vivaldian in origin, and, in any event, they were all almost certainly familiar with Vivaldi's published concertos). And in considering relationships between scorings and structures in Bach's concertos, I have considered the role of scoring practices in other German composers to be less important than might on the face of it seem warranted. It is true that German composers personally known to Bach, like Georg Philipp Telemann and Johann Georg Pisendel, wrote Vivaldian concertos with various, even peculiar, combinations of wind, string, and brass instruments. But I considered their relevance to the present discussion of Bach to be limited, because what I took to be significant was not the mere presence of rich combinations of instruments in Bach's concertos (similar to his German contemporaries, especially in Dresden<sup>17</sup>) but his treatment of the scorings (rather different from the German contemporaries). That is, I viewed Bach's music to reflect less a straightforward continuation of the orchestrational practices of his native colleagues than an unprecedented critical commentary on the structures of courtly hierarchy. It seemed to me that Bach's formal indebtedness to Vivaldian models, though widely acknowledged, has been underestimated and that his orchestrational indebtedness to German contemporaries, though not so widely acknowledged, is easily overestimated.

The complex of various sorts of issues surrounding the First, Fourth, and Sixth Concertos was sufficiently wide-ranging to warrant devoting extended discussions to each of these works individually in chapter 1. Because of the more limited number of relevant problems attending the Second, Third, and Fifth Concertos, however, it was possible to discuss these works within chapter 2, which is devoted to the collection as a whole. Chapter 3 concludes by exploring the religious contexts for Bach's music as social critique.

I have been able to keep musical examples to a minimum, because it is assumed that readers will have ready access to a study score of the Brandenburg Concertos.

<sup>17</sup> This has been pointed out, for example, by Rudolf Eller, "Vivaldi and Bach," in *Studi di Musica Veneta Quaderni Vivaldiana*, vol. 1: *Vivaldi Veneziano Europeo*, ed. Francesco Degrada (Florence: Olschki, 1980), pp. 55–66; and Ortrun Landmann, "Einige Überlegungen zu den Konzerten 'nebenamtlich' komponierender Dresdener Hofmusiker in der Zeit von etwa 1715 bis 1763," *Studien zur Aufführungspraxis und Interpretation von Instrumentalmusik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, no. 20: *Die Entwicklung des Solokonzerts im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Eitelfriedrich Thom (Michaelstein/Blankenburg, 1983), pp. 57–73.