



Bach Unbuttoned

ANA DE LA VEGA

ALEXANDER SITKOVETSKY · RAMÓN ORTEGA QUERO

CYRUS ALLYAR · JOHANNES BERGER

WÜRTTEMBERGISCHES KAMMERORCHESTER HEILBRONN



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major (for Flute, Violin & Harpsichord), BWV 1050

- | | | |
|---|---------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro | 9. 22 |
| 2 | II. Affetuoso | 5. 54 |
| 3 | III. Allegro | 5. 11 |

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G Major (for Violin, Flute & Oboe), BWV 1049

- | | | |
|---|-------------|-------|
| 4 | I. Allegro | 6. 38 |
| 5 | II. Andante | 3. 43 |
| 6 | III. Presto | 4. 28 |

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major (For Trumpet, Flute, Oboe & Violin), BWV 1047

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------|
| 7 | I. [Allegro] | 4. 35 |
| 8 | II. Andante | 3. 46 |
| 9 | III. Allegro assai | 2. 41 |

Concerto for Two Violins (Flute & Oboe) in D Minor, BWV 1043

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|-------|
| 10 | I. Vivace | 3. 34 |
| 11 | II. Largo ma non tanto | 6. 15 |
| 12 | III. Allegro | 4. 38 |

Suite No. 2 in B Minor (For Flute, Strings & Basso Continuo), BWV 1067

13 VII. Badinerie

1. 24

Total playing time:

62. 26

Ana de la Vega, flute

Ramón Ortega Quero, oboe

Alexander Sitkovetsky, violin

Johannes Berger, harpsichord

Cyrus Allyar, trumpet

Württembergisches Kammerorchester Heilbronn



Ana de la Vega
© Günter Atteln

The magnificent statue of J.S. Bach outside St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig is, from afar, everything we expect: arresting, austere, and commanding. The godfather of Western classical music tradition, the master of perfection, precision and balance, towers over us and reminds us who is in command of the ship.

Not only that... of who built the ship.

From the start of our musical studies we are taught to approach Bach with so much respect we almost fear him. 'The composer of the church', 'the composer of purity and genius', 'the composer who reveals all your inadequacies because he is so perfect and you are not'...

With Mozart you are allowed to have fun: he was naughty and giggled a lot. With Bach you are to kneel on one knee and feel guilty for any ill-spoken note: he was THE composer of the church and order.

Yet when you come closer to the statue, you see that this man's buttons are done up incorrectly.

Standing under the great Carl Seffner statue in Leipzig, I felt I understood for the first time not only the master, but the man.

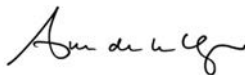
We hail Bach as the foundation of our musical canon, the perfecter of the tonal harmony system, the master of polyphony, but sometimes we forget to acknowledge Bach the Revolutionary, Bach the Pioneer. He was, by many accounts, an emotional and passionate man, who threw toys out of the cot when things didn't go his way and frequently challenged the Leipzig governmental officials who employed him, causing havoc and unrest in the city, and drew swords with a bassoonist in Arnstadt who wanted revenge after Bach had publicly criticised the latter's poor execution of

one of his solos (likely from a draft version of Cantata BWV 150).

Let's take the case of the Brandenburg Concertos: he wrote several of them starting c. 1719 whilst employed by the generous Prince Leopold of Köthen. Leopold bought him the newest instruments, employed for him numerous wonderful musicians, and spent 1/3 of his wealth yearly on music! But when Leo started to lose his dollars, J.S. bundled up the 6 masterworks, whipped up to Brandenburg on Leopold's credit card, and gushingly gave them to the Graf of Brandenburg as a job application. Whatever the exact circumstances of the genesis of the Brandenburg Concertos and their dedication to the count may have been, we know this: Bach had more cheek than we allow him, and perhaps we need to remember this when we play his music.

Regards to instrumentation, in those days it was usual to play a musical line on the instruments available, depending who was among your castle staff and up to the job. Hence we have taken similar licence, playing Brandenburg no.4 with flute and oboe (instead of two flutes), and the famous double violin concerto with two different melodic instruments, that happened to be 'at hand'. Ramón Ortega and I continue to enjoy exploring the possibilities of flute and oboe in combination, and so after considering the endless examples of J.S. Bach swapping instruments for one another and re-arranging concertos to suit a particular soloist, we conclude he would not have been a snob to the idea. In fact, the Brandenburg concertos celebrated on this album are essentially a darling exploration of wild and new instruments in combination.

For me, Bach's music is indeed pure perfection, balance and genius. But it is also an expression of the crying soul of a father who buried half his children, of the enthusiasm of a man who experimented with the newest instruments of his day; of a cantor who wrote masses so enormous in their conception they weren't even possible to play within Lutheran church possibilities at that time... and finally, of an artist who didn't have time, or care, for doing up his buttons.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ramón Ortega', written in a cursive style.



Ana de la Vega
© Boaz Arad

The connections between **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) and the flute continue to intrigue music historians and performers. In practical terms Bach himself had only a passing familiarity with the flute. However, he met and worked with several renowned flautists and flute makers, who exposed Bach to the instrument's evolving design and its ability to embrace different stylistic demands. Particularly to be noted are Bach's visits to the French-inspired court at Dresden in 1717 (where he met Pierre Buffardin, Johann Joachim Quantz, and Johann Martin Blockwitz) and a famous encounter in 1747 with Frederick the Great, an accomplished amateur flautist who employed Quantz as well as Bach's own son, Carl Philipp Emanuel.

Through such interactions Bach was kept intimately aware of developments in flute construction and playing technique as the transverse ("side-blown") flute gradually superseded end-blown recorders in performing wind repertoire. At the

same time, music throughout the German lands revealed a growing influence of both Italian and French styles. We can observe Bach's adoption of these national trends in his keyboard music, for example, though it influenced his work in other genres as well. The flute itself underwent numerous developments in order to manage both the glittering virtuosity of Italian string writing, inherited above all from Corelli and Vivaldi, as well as the softer strains of French vocal art, which favored a lower pitch range and more rounded, subtle tone.

In addition to several sonatas for flute and keyboard, Bach also featured the flute in orchestral works, where timbral contrasts help illuminate oppositions in solo versus ensemble writing. These developments span his compositional career and are perhaps best epitomized in the six Brandenburg Concertos, BWV 1046-1051, written in Cöthen around 1721. Bach's employer, Prince Leopold, maintained a strong chamber orchestra populated by musicians



Alexander Sitkovetsky
© Vincy Ng

who had left Berlin when that city's musical scene took a downward turn. This time in Cöthen offers a small window during which Bach could indulge Italianisms; nearly all of his instrumental concertos, including the Brandenburgs, originated between 1717 and 1722.

Each Brandenburg Concerto explores varying degrees of coordination between the soloists (“*concertino*”) and the full ensemble (“*ripieno*”), as well as different combinations of solo instruments. Bach didn't always have many musicians at his disposal in Cöthen. But those few musicians—whose ability clearly compensated for their scant numbers—helped inspire fabulous, diverse scorings. Particularly striking is **Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major**, in which the four soloists represent four different timbres: brass (trumpet), reed woodwind (oboe), non-reed woodwind (flute), and string (violin). Bach delights in all possible pairings and alternates with remarkable

frequency between *solì* and *tutti* forces.

The central Andante presents a three-voice canon for flute, oboe, and violin with continuo accompaniment; solo trumpet and ripieno are tacet. The D-minor tonality and defining motive, including the A to B-flat semitone, establish a dolorous mood. Beneath the canonic imitation in treble lines, Bach grounds the harmonic structure on a “walking bass” that moves in continuous eighth notes. As the finale begins, the solo trumpet strides forth from the very first moment, as if sitting out the slow movement was not altogether to its liking. However, a more serious polyphonic game is afoot, and Bach could not resist the opportunity to compose a four-voice fugue for his soloists. This brilliant finale merges two defining principles of Baroque music, as the rich counterpoint developed in central and northern Germany combines with the sectional, *solo-tutti* contrasts of the 17th-century Italian concerto.



Ramón Ortega Quero
© Boaz Arad

A further step is taken in **Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G Major**, which showcases two solo flutes (originally recorders, in fact) along with solo violin. The violin receives occasional moments to shine and plenty of shimmering passagework. But its true role is to support Bach's brilliant wind writing. Their close counterpoint draws the ear, and the first movement's most appealing moments come when Bach pares the texture down to just flutes. The slow movement offers a study in chromatic writing and emotional *gravitas*. Bach maintains the full ensemble texture, even though this would provide a conventional time during which the flautists could catch their breath. Instead, all instruments dwell on a theme built of two-note slurs, enveloping the movement in countless sigh gestures. A final flourish and a "Phrygian" half cadence complete the impression of an antique-sounding Adagio. This mood is cast off by the lively, skipwise motion of the ensuing finale. At first, the flutes remain silent until all fugal entrances

have occurred. Flutes do eventually enter and create the finale's finest moments in episodes based on canon and free counterpoint. Bach's ability to sustain harmonic tension through suspension chains ensures that the dynamism continues up to the final cadence.

Bach's earliest use of transverse flute in an ensemble setting may be the captivating **Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major**, a draft of which dates to 1719. Several aspects of this concerto deserve comment. First, Bach achieves a dovetailing of thematic heads and tails in the first movement that strongly influenced the "classical" concerto strategies of Mozart and Haydn. Moreover, the slow movement's trio texture and the finale's soloistic opening are both noteworthy. However, nothing grabs our attention like the unaccompanied keyboard cadenza in the first movement. Indeed, some listeners regard Brandenburg No. 5 as a keyboard concerto in all but name. For



Johannes Berger
© Aaron Kreidel

ears accustomed to Mozartian cadenzas, Bach's achievement will hardly sound new. But such a structural interruption was unprecedented in ensemble concertos of the early 18th century. It is not the music per se that is remarkable, but the bold assertion of one voice above the many-voiced texture of the *concerto grosso*. Bach makes the keyboard part far more active rhythmically than the others throughout the first movement. Thus, from the start he plants a seed for the keyboard's eventual liberation from the other players. Imagine Bach himself directing a performance from the keyboard, simply indulging his improvisatory fancy at this point. Imagine, as well, the chagrin of flute and violin soloists during this display, awaiting a chance to somehow get back in, rolling their eyes as the "old man" goes off on another tangent.

The second movement offers a broad meditation in B Minor. Many phrases begin with imitation between flute and violin,

whereas the keyboard now stays modestly in the background. After cadences in a series of closely-related keys, Bach returns to the main theme in B Minor for the final phrase. It is not a full-scale recapitulation, as will become *de rigueur* in the later 18th century. Still, the rounded return of the main theme/key gives a satisfying degree of polish.

The finale opens with counterpoint between flute and violin, joined after eight measures by the keyboard. The ripieno does not even come in until the first strong cadence in a secondary key. Even though the full ensemble plays a majority of the time thereafter, Bach's opening paragraph for the soloists gives them a marked prominence. At one point he flirts with another keyboard cadenza, but the other players, by now, are wise to his tricks. They seize the first possible moment to jump back into the action and carry the movement through to a strident, ensemble finish.



Cyrus Allyar
© Kinga Szczurowska

During the late-18th and early-19th centuries, concertos evolved into musical dramas, pitting soloist against orchestra in a battle for control of the tonal structure. Composers and audiences preferred this tension — between the one and the many — over the Baroque idea of *concerto grosso*, in which a group of soloists periodically emerge from, and recede back into, the full ensemble. Although some composers, including Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms, continued to create concertos for multiple soloists, ensemble concertos were essentially a thing of the past by the time Mozart died.

For Bach, writing concertos between 1720 and 1750, all options were still on the table. He composed numerous concertos for one, two, three, and even more soloists. Decisions regarding instrumentation could be dictated by a prominent individual performer or merely the players on hand that day. For instance, we know that Bach conceived the **Double Concerto in D Minor, BWV**

1043 (ca. 1730), with a particular musician in mind: violinist Joseph Spiess had been recruited to Cöthen from Berlin in 1714. Yet the tradition of adaptation, of changing solo parts from one instrumental family to another, goes back to Bach himself, who frequently re-scored many of his own concertos. Thus the Double Concerto makes an appealing vehicle for solo flute and oboe, as on the present recording.

From the start we hear how Bach uses Vivaldi as both inspiration and foil. Where Vivaldi would have opened such a piece with a canon (that is, imitation between parts playing the same notes), Bach raises the ante by starting with a fugue (imitation at different pitch levels). Already during the first solo episode he injects a new theme marked by large leaps and wonderful two-part counterpoint between the soloists. Bach structures his phrases so that *ripieno* and *concertino* will converse with one another, creating seamless forward motion all the way to the end.

In the Largo Bach spins out an endearing melody based on a simple falling line. Underneath, careful listeners may pick out the same fugal relationship upon which Bach constructed the opening of the first movement. Of course, there is something to be said for just attending to the sheer serenity that unfolds here. Sustained notes are wonderfully offset by the lilting meter (12/8). With a full central section based upon a different theme and a coda at the end, this slow movement is more substantial than most in this genre.

Vivaldi's spirit comes through most clearly in the brilliant finale, which Bach begins as a tight canon. All the Vivaldian conventions are found here — rapid triplets, imitation between the parts, chains of dissonant suspensions and sequences — combined with Bach's impeccable sense for colour via key changes. It takes the right gesture to end such a vigorous Allegro, and Bach rises (or

better yet, *falls*) to the occasion with a short descending motive that hones in on the final chord.

Jason Stell





Württembergisches Kammerorchester Heilbronn

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This album was recorded in the Aula of the Bildungscampus in Heilbronn, Germany, in November 2020, with kind support from the Dieter Schwarz Foundation.

Johannes Berger plays a harpsichord after Michael Mietke, by Matthias Griewitz



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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

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|-------|--|--------|
| 1-3 | Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major, BWV 1050 | 20. 33 |
| 4-6 | Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G Major, BWV 1049 | 14. 51 |
| 7-9 | Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F Major, BWV 1047 | 11. 04 |
| 10-12 | Concerto for Two Violins (Flute & Oboe) in D Minor, BWV 1043 | 14. 28 |
| 13 | “Badinerie” from Suite No. 2 in B Minor, BWV 1067 | 1. 24 |

Total playing time: 62. 26

Ana de la Vega, flute
Ramón Ortega Quero, oboe
Alexander Sitkovetsky, violin
Cyrus Allyar, trumpet
Johannes Berger, harpsichord

Württembergisches Kammerorchester Heilbronn

On her third PENTATONE album Bach Unbuttoned, Ana de la Vega brings together a group of exciting young soloists and the WKO Heilbronn to present a lively and fresh perspective on Bach as man and composer. The programme contains three Brandenburg concertos, a unique rendition on flute and oboe of the double violin concerto, as well as the breath-takingly virtuosic Badinerie for flute.