



RETROSPECT
ENSEMBLE

Johann Sebastian Bach
Harpsichord Concertos

Matthew Halls harpsichord / director



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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750) Harpischord Concertos

Matthew Halls *harpischord/director*

Sarah Sexton *violin I*

Daniel Edgar *violin II*

Emilia Benjamin *viola*

Jonathan Manson *cello*

Timothy Amherst *double bass*

Rebecca Miles *recorder I*

Ian Wilson *recorder II*

Recorded at St George's Church,
Chesterton, Cambridge, UK
27th – 29th September 2011

Produced and recorded by Philip Hobbs

Assistant engineer: Robert Cammidge

Post-production by Julia Thomas,

Finesplice, UK

Design by Vikki Adamczyk

Group artist photography by Dr Stephen

Page (www.fatkoala.biz)

Cover photography by John Haxby

Harpischord: double manual instrument
by Ian Tucker (after Ruckers/Hemsch)

Pitch: A = 415 Hz

Temperament: 1/6 comma circulating

Keyboard technician: Edmund Pickering

With thanks to:

Leila Abu-Sharr & Mark Younger

Andrew & Cindy Peck

Peter & Sarah King

John & Christine Love

Brian Mace

Rosemary & William Marshall

Nick & Janet Taylor

Terence & Diana Kyle

Concerto VI in F Major, BWV 1057

①	I Allegro	(7.05)
②	II Andante	(4.04)
③	III Allegro assai	(5.02)

Concerto in G minor, BWV 1058

④	I Allegro	(3.39)
⑤	II Andante	(5.58)
⑥	III Allegro assai	(3.32)

Concerto I in D minor, BWV 1052

⑦	I Allegro	(7.13)
⑧	II Adagio	(6.09)
⑨	III Allegro	(7.47)

Concerto IV in A Major, BWV 1055

⑩	I Allegro	(4.11)
⑪	II Larghetto	(5.01)
⑫	III Allegro ma non tanto	(4.10)

TOTAL TIME 64:24



Johann Sebastian Bach

Harpsichord Concertos

One of Johann Sebastian Bach's many duties in Leipzig during the period 1729-1741 was to lead the Collegium Musicum, a group of musicians which met on a weekly basis to perform the most fashionable music of the time. Founded by Georg Philip Telemann in 1703, the Collegium comprised visiting virtuosi, home-grown instrumentalists and members of the Bach family who met on Wednesdays at four o'clock for open-air performances if the weather was favourable. In more inclement weather they might meet instead in one of Leipzig's coffee houses on a Friday evening. By the time Bach assumed control of these performances the Collegium was supported by the local businessman Gottfried Zimmermann and performances took place either in his garden in Windmühlgasse or in his coffee house on Katherstraße. There is no evidence that entrance fees were ever charged for any of these concerts and access was open to men and women alike. Zimmermann's support even extended to the purchase of larger instruments that musicians either might not be able to afford or to transport easily. These instruments included violoncellos, violones and, of course, harpsichords. In 1733 a new series of Collegium Musicum concerts was even advertised as follows:

'It will begin with a fine concert, to be continued weekly, therein a new harpsichord, the like of which has never been heard in these parts before; and the friends of music as well as virtuosos are requested to attend.'

It is surely not too fanciful to suggest that the presence of such wonderful instruments, provided free of charge by a committed patron, might have been part of Bach's motivation to compile such a large number of harpsichord concertos specifically for performance at these Collegium gatherings. It is significant however that Bach, the revered organist, seems often to have led these events not from the keyboard but from the violin. Although somewhat surprising to us, from the eye-witness accounts provided by his son Carl Philip Emmanuel, we are left in no doubt as to the abilities of his father as a string player:

'In his youth, and well into old age, he played the violin with a clear, penetrating tone.'

There is little doubt too that J. S. Bach's concertos often took pride of place during these Collegium performances, although it is generally accepted that most were written much earlier, probably during Bach's time in Weimar (1708-1717) and Cöthen (1717-1723) and were simply re-worked for performance in this new situation. At the time of their composition in the first few decades of the eighteenth century there were many newly-published collections of Italian concertos in general circulation, and these provided a major source of inspiration for the prodigious young composer and performer. Bach undertook a tireless study of Vivaldi's music and in his own compositions he often borrowed material (such as bass lines and fugue subjects) directly from the concertos of Albinoni. His fascination with the structural principles of the Italian concerto is self-evident in his own concerto writing, stretching the inherent possibilities of the ritornello form to new heights of complexity and invention.

Bach's harpsichord concertos also hold something of a special place in the history of music. With them Bach essentially initiated a new genre – that of the keyboard concerto – which in the hands of later Viennese Classical composers would become one of the most popular and prominent types of solo concerto. During his time as court Kapellmeister at Cöthen (1717-23) he wrote his celebrated *Brandenburg Concertos* and it was in the fifth of these concertos that we first find Bach exploring the possibilities of the keyboard as a legitimate solo instrument. Although in that particular instance the keyboard forms just one part of a trio of solo instruments, the fifth *Brandenburg Concerto* is very often referred to as the first major keyboard concerto. Although slightly misleading in some ways, it does draw us towards an appreciation of the landmark status of that particular work.

CONCERTO VI IN F MAJOR, BWV 1057

The Concerto in F Major, BWV 1057 survives in a rough autograph manuscript that is believed to date from around 1738. The manuscript comprises a set of six harpsichord concertos (also including BWV 1052 and 1055) that were presumably being prepared for performance by the Collegium Musicum. The F Major Concerto is the final concerto of the six and is also the largest in scale, including as it does two recorders in addition to the usual four-part string ensemble. This is a reworking of pre-existing material, Bach here re-visiting and arranging his fourth *Brandenburg Concerto* which was written almost twenty years previously while he was working at Cöthen.

Bach's early years at Cöthen were among the happiest of his career. His employer, Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, was a man with a profound passion for music who played viola da gamba and harpsichord and apparently sang in a beautifully trained baritone voice. Bach arrived there from Weimar in 1717 and his primary function was to lead the *cappella* of instrumentalists (at that time among the finest in Europe) and to compose instrumental music to be performed at court. Bach later said of this period:

'There I had a gracious prince, who both loved and knew music, and in whose service I intended to spend the rest of my life.'

Although the *Brandenburg Concerto* belong to Bach's happy early Cöthen period, they were commissioned not by Prince Leopold, but by Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg. Bach had met the Margrave whilst accompanying the Prince on a visit and it was in 1721 that Bach presented his *Six concerts avec plusieurs instruments*, and dedicated the scores to him. In fact, even these concertos seem to have been a collection of pre-existing works which Bach brought together and bound in a set (though they may have been heavily revised for the occasion). The later F Major Harpsichord Concerto that Bach prepared for Leipzig's Collegium Musicum can thus be seen as a reworking of a reworking, and a typical example of Bach's constant recycling and adapting of his own music. In this version the keyboard dominates even more than the violin does in the *Brandenburg Concerto*, with Bach giving it some of the original recorder material as well as making the keyboard the foundation of the entire ensemble.

CONCERTO IN G MINOR, BWV 1058

This concerto is another re-working of a famous pre-existing model: the wonderful A minor Concerto for solo violin BWV 1041. It seems likely that the A minor Violin Concerto was itself composed for the Collegium Musicum. This means that Bach, by arranging it for harpsichord, was presenting music his audience had heard in the relatively recent past. One simple reason for this could be that the original violin concerto was a big enough success that Bach felt confident his audience would enjoy this new arrangement. Apart from lowering the piece by a tone from A to G, the biggest difference between the two versions is the expansion of the solo part, which now becomes truly idiomatic for the harpsichord in a way not seen in some of the other transcriptions.

The solo part flows between left hand and right hand in a very satisfying way and on the occasions when the melody is placed firmly in the right hand, the left does far more than simply shadow the string bass line.

The sublime slow movement also gains a change in texture and impact through its transfer to harpsichord. The *forte* and *piano* markings can be exaggerated even more than on a violin due to the keyboard instrument's capacity for percussive playing, and the solo part is also altered to be through-composed, now playing a florid continuo part even in passages where the violin previously had rests. In this movement we can see how Bach fully believed that the harpsichord had the potential to play in just as vocal a manner as the violin or oboe. For him the inherent quality of the harpsichord – a plucked note that rapidly decays – should be no obstacle to that.

The final rumbustious triple-time movement shows as clearly as anything Bach ever wrote his debt to the concertos of Antonio Vivaldi. The virtuosically ornamented chains of suspensions over slow but driving harmonic progressions that are the Italian composer's trademark are imitated here to wonderful effect, although it can clearly be said that Bach's natural flair for contrapuntal and chromatic colour adds considerably to the Italian style.

CONCERTO I IN D MINOR, BWV 1052

Of the fourteen harpsichord concertos (written for one, two, three and even four harpsichords), the Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052 deserves special mention. It is in many ways the most virtuosic and highly developed of the seven concertos for solo harpsichord and is written in the dramatic key of D minor – a particular favourite of the composer and one that Bach's contemporary Johann Mattheson said had the capacity for expressing such diverse things as great heroism, contentedness and a wonderful gravity. The solo cadenzas in the outer movements aside, the accompanying instruments are intimately involved in the development of this highly dramatic work. The opening movement is characterised by its rather austere and extensive unison passages – heard first in the opening bars. The solo harpsichord enters surprisingly at bar seven and from this point on we know that Bach is taking us on an unpredictable ride, with themes twisting unexpectedly and instruments entering at unforeseen moments.



The sublime *Adagio* that follows once again explores the potency of simple unison writing, the opening passage being characterised by its quirky melodic leaps and general sense of harmonic unsettledness. When the harpsichordist's right hand eventually enters it does so rather in the style of a chorale prelude, soon developing into a coloratura-style solo voice. This is surely one of Bach's most poignant slow movements; it appears also in the cantata *Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal* (BWV 146), in which Bach superimposes a four-part vocal chorale and gives the harpsichord melody to the organ. The final triple-time *Allegro* is a musical white-knuckle ride, with its persistent dancing rhythmic figures and fanfare-like interjections from the solo harpsichord. It contains some of the most challenging and exhilarating writing for the harpsichord, revealing the unrivalled abilities of the composer as a phenomenal virtuoso at the keyboard. Again, Bach re-used this musical material in his cantata *Ich habe meine Zuversicht* (BWV 188), the opening movement of which takes the form of a sinfonia for strings and solo organ.

Some scholars have claimed that musical connections exist between this concerto and Vivaldi's '*Grosso Mogul*' Concerto (RV 208) which Bach himself transcribed. The extent of the connections to that specific work is difficult to substantiate, but the overall influence of Vivaldi's style is clear. Bach, normally the devoted contrapuntalist, opens both the first and second movements with expanded passages of stark unison, a decision that increases the impact of the florid harpsichord writing when it finally enters. It is the drama of the dialogue between strings and soloist that Bach is exploring, sometimes keeping the forces distinct and separate, at other times merging them into one performing group. In this concerto we can see Bach taking the rare decision to favour drama and impact over the effortlessly complex counterpoint that was his natural musical language.

CONCERTO IV IN A MAJOR, BWV 1055

The Concerto in A Major, BWV 1055 is amongst the most exuberant and cheerful of all the keyboard concertos. Composers and theorists of the time often commented on the affective quality of different keys, with A Major being commonly regarded as an optimistic key. Christian Schubart even wrote in 1806 that A Major includes the capacity to express (amongst other things):

'...satisfaction with one's... state of affairs; hope of seeing one's beloved again when parting; youthful cheerfulness and trust in God'

While one must bear in mind the personal nature of such views, the vivacious and lively character of the opening movement of this concerto coincides neatly with the commonly held view of the key. The interplay between the keyboard and strings is very different to that of the Concerto in A minor: here the harpsichord takes the role of 'first among equals' rather than that of pure soloist and it is not placed in opposition to the string ensemble. Indeed, there are even clear echoes of smaller-scale sonata writing as the first violin steps apart from the string ensemble to become at times a true partner of the keyboard.

The exquisite *Larghetto* in the relative key of F-sharp minor that follows has the air of a melancholy pastorale with its gently lilting ternary rhythms. The cantilena weaved by the soloist here is supported by a luscious string accompaniment, exploring rich and often highly chromatic harmonies. The entire concerto is believed to have been adapted from a now-lost concerto for oboe d'amore, and it is in this slow central movement that one sees this most clearly. The slowly unfolding melody bears all the hallmarks of Bach's many cantata movements featuring oboe obbligato, or even closer still, to sinfonias such as those found in his *Easter Oratorio*.

The final movement, with its fast scale passages, dancing triplets and heavily ornamented solo writing, is dazzlingly virtuosic. One can again see the oboe-based origins of this movement in the opening harpsichord melody, in which the right hand plays the lyrical oboe tune while the keyboard player's left hand tends simply to double the bass line of the string ensemble. It could be argued that had the work originally been conceived for harpsichord, the instrument would have opened in a more idiomatic way. On the other hand, Bach's decision to use the harpsichord in this way gives us an insight into his view of the instrument and tells us that he felt it had the capacity to be truly lyrical and vocal.

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RETROSPECT
ENSEMBLE



RETROSPECT ENSEMBLE

Launched on 1st May 2009, Retrospect Ensemble gave its inaugural UK performance at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, opening the festival with a critically acclaimed performance of Handel's late masterpiece, *Jephtha*. Shortly afterwards they made their Edinburgh Festival debut with soprano Carolyn Sampson.

Founded by Matthew Halls, Retrospect Ensemble is embarking on a new journey for both its musicians and audiences – exploring the repertoire of four centuries and embracing the practices, styles and aesthetics of former ages with renewed vigour and a fresh approach. The choice of the name Retrospect Ensemble ensures that the group need not restrict itself to one particular historical period nor to a rigid configuration; concerts range from small chamber ensemble to full orchestra and choir.

This versatility has led to the formation of a small fixed personnel group, Retrospect Trio, in which Matthew Halls is joined by three of Europe's leading period string specialists: Matthew Truscott, Sophie Gent and Jonathan Manson. The group's debut recording of Purcell's exquisite *Ten Sonatas in Four Parts* was chosen as 'CD of the week' by The Sunday Times and selected as 'Editor's Choice' by Gramophone, in addition to being nominated for a Gramophone Award in the Baroque Instrumental Category. Their second recording of the *Twelve Sonatas in Three Parts* received an International Record Review Outstanding Award.

Retrospect Ensemble's first release in a series of collaborations with the innovative label, Linn, is a recording of Bach's *Easter and Ascension Oratorio* which has received excellent reviews.

In addition to its London concert series at Wigmore Hall, the ensemble has appeared at many festivals including Spitalfields Music, Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music, Bath Bachfest and MAFestival Bruges.

For further information and news of forthcoming concerts and recordings, please visit: www.retrospectensemble.com



Matthew Halls directing Retrospect Ensemble © 2009 Stephen Page www.fatkoala.biz

MATTHEW HALLS *harpsichord/director*

Matthew Halls is one of Britain's most exciting young conductors as well as a leading harpsichordist and organist. He was Associate Director (2005-2007) and Artistic Director (2007-2009) of The King's Consort before taking up his current position as Artistic Director of Retrospect Ensemble. He studied at Oxford University, was organ scholar and later assistant organist at New College, and graduated with a first class degree in music. Whilst completing postgraduate research at Oxford he was also director of music at the University Church in Oxford. In 1998 he joined the European Union Baroque Orchestra, with whom he toured extensively throughout Europe and the Middle East. Since leaving this orchestra he has enjoyed a busy and exciting career, playing with many of the world's leading period instrument orchestras, including the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, Les Arts Florissants, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, the Academy of Ancient Music, the Theatre of Early Music, Montreal and the New York Collegium. As a soloist he has appeared at the Cheltenham International Festival; Handel Festival, Halle; Enescu Festival, Bucharest; Ottawa International Chamber Festival; Lamèque Festival, New Brunswick and Bermuda Festival.

As Artistic Director of The King's Consort he appeared in many of Europe's leading festivals and concert venues (including the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam; La Cité de la Musique, Paris; and Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels) and broadcast extensively both on television and radio. His world première recording of Handel's *Parnasso in Festa* for the Hyperion record label was met with great critical acclaim. In addition to his work with Retrospect Ensemble and The King's Consort, he has conducted numerous other period instrument ensembles, such as The English Concert, Portland Baroque Orchestra, USA, and Holland Baroque Society. He will succeed Helmuth Rilling as Artistic Director of the Oregon Bach Festival in 2013.

Now firmly established as a conductor of international repute, he has made significant débuts with orchestras such as Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Hessischer Rundfunk Sinfonie Orchester, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo, Iceland Symphony, Het Residentie Orkest, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Bach Collegium Stuttgart, Colorado Symphony, Houston Symphony and Tonkünstler Orchestra. Recent highlights include débuts with the BBC Scottish Symphony, Bergen Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra Washington, Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic and Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestras.

Matthew is also active in the opera world as a freelance conductor and chorus master, working regularly at De Nederlandse Opera and the Nationale Reisopera in the Netherlands, the Komische Oper in Berlin and the Bayerische Staatsoper, as well as with English Touring Opera and New Chamber Opera. He has made recent débuts with opera companies such as Händel-Festspiele Halle, Salzburg Landestheater and Central City Opera Colorado, all of which resulted in immediate re-invitations.

Matthew was a tutor at St Peter's College Oxford and taught harpsichord at Oxford University. He is also a tutor for the European Union Baroque Orchestra and regularly teaches on summer schools and courses such as the Jerusalem Early Music Workshop and the Dartington International Summer School.

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