

J.S. BACH - TRANSCRIPTIONS OF CONCERTOS

In 1708, Johann Sebastian Bach, then 23 years of age, arrived at the court of Weimar to start his employment. Five years earlier he had already worked in Weimar for a short time as court violinist. When he was eighteen he went first to Lüneburg, afterwards to Mühlhausen and was then appointed five years later as court organist and chamber musician in Weimar. The noticeably high salary that Bach was awarded illustrates how much the capacities of the currently young musician were already valued. In Weimar Bach and his wife Maria Barbara must have lived for some years under very favourable circumstances. Six children were born here, two of which (twins) died soon after birth. Catharina Dorothea, Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Gottfried grew up as healthy children in Weimar.

In his double function Bach could serve the court in a wide variety of ways. Not only was he responsible for the state of the organ in the court chapel but he was also consulted for advice as a specialist by towns in the vicinity. In addition he was called in to repair the court harpsichords. He had various pupils and maintained an intensive contact, both professional and in friendship, with Telemann (who was working at that time for some years in Eisenstadt), with the violinist Pisendel and also with his cousin Johann Gottfried Walther, the organist of the parish church (now known as the Herderkirche).

The ducal family of Saxe-Weimar loved music. The young prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, a half brother of Duke Ernst August (who ruled the duchy together with his uncle Wilhelm Ernst) was so passionate about music that he undertook an intensive study under among others, Johann Walther. During his short life (he died as a result of some unknown illness when he was eighteen years old) he wrote several compositions. Both Johann Ernst and Ernst August studied for several years in Utrecht. From there he travelled throughout the Netherlands and stayed regularly in Amsterdam where he must have listened to and probably even met the blind organist of the Nieuwe Kerk, Jan Jacob de Graaf.

De Graaf had a special reputation for his performances of the latest Italian concertos for organ solo, which were in circulation in Amsterdam soon after 1700. Amsterdam had become a centre for music printing after the publisher Estienne Roger had established himself there in 1697. The first edition of Vivaldi's *L'Estro armonico*, opus 3, was made by Roger in 1711. It consisted of 12 concertos for 1, 2 or 4 violins, string orchestra and continuo and it was dedicated to Ferdinand III of Tuscany. Not only was Vivaldi's name established in Europe because of these concertos, but above all, these were the concertos that were a true revelation for many composers as far as the modern Italian style of the time was concerned: the clear lyricism, the virtuosic dexterity, the well-defined line of structures, the strong accent on melodic phrases which were accompanied by rather simple, but none the less, appealing chords.

The young Johann Ernst must have returned home to Weimar in 1713 with copious new music pieces both in printed as well as in hand-written form. He probably then asked Bach (as well as his teacher Walther!) to transcribe these works for harpsichord or organ solo. This possibly served Bach as a dual purpose, for whilst assisting the step-brother of his employer, he got to know the tricks of the trade of the Italian concertos better. Often he went a step further than

the original work he was using by skillfully adapting the harmonies here and there, occasionally composing counter parts and especially in the slow movements of the concertos writing the ornaments out in full as much as possible. These concertos are a wonderful source of the art of ornamentation in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Based on the time of the visit of Johann Ernst to the Netherlands and the year when Vivaldi's concertos opus 3 were printed, we may surmise that Bach had the printed version of *L'Estro armonico*. Johann Ernst returned to Weimar in 1713 where he died in 1715. The remaining compositions that Bach had transcribed must have been received by him as hand-written copies, if not via Johann Ernst then at his request, or perhaps via a completely different route. These were quite normal procedures used well into the nineteenth century. It often took too long to wait for a printed version and therefore most music was circulated in hand-written form literally copied around the world.

As far as we know, Bach has re-written sixteen concertos for harpsichord (BWV 972–987) and five for the organ (BWV 592–596) during the years up until the death of Johann Ernst. Out of the total of 21 concertos, nine are definitely contributed to Vivaldi, five to Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar and furthermore one each to Alessandro Marcello, Benedetto Marcello, Georg Philipp Telemann and Giuseppe Torelli. The source is unknown of three concertos (BWV 977, 983 and 986); in the case of BWV 977 one assumes that it is an unknown concerto of Vivaldi. Two concertos by the young prince have been dealt with by Bach in two ways: the concerto in G major has become known in the version for organ as BWV 592 and in the harpsichord version as BWV 592a; Bach has arranged all three movements of the concerto in C major for harpsichord (BWV 984) and only the first movement for organ (BWV 595).

The Concerto in D major (BWV 972) is based on the ninth concerto from Vivaldi's *L'Estro armonico*, the Concerto in C major (BWV 976) on the twelfth from the same collection, and the concerto in F major (BWV 978) on the third concerto. Bach has made use of Vivaldi's opus 7 in the Concerto in G major (BWV 973). This work of Vivaldi was not published in Amsterdam until 1716 by Jeanne Roger, the daughter of Estienne Roger and therefore must have been already known until then as a hand-written version. The concertos in G minor (BWV 975) and in G major (BWV 980) are based respectively on the sixth and first concerto from Vivaldi's violin concertos opus 4, better known as *La Stravaganza*. This collection was published by Estienne Roger in 1714/15. It is likely that Bach has known these concertos as hand-written versions. This is also obvious from the differences between the handed-down manuscripts and the final printed versions. Bach had without doubt perused versions based on the Vivaldi manuscripts. Although as a rule, Bach retained the original key in his transcriptions, the concertos BWV 976, BWV 978 and BWV 980 were transposed by him from E major to C major, from G major to F major and from E flat major to G major.

The Concerto in D minor (BWV 974) is a transcription of the oboe concerto in the same key by Alessandro Marcello. This concerto was until recently (and actually still is...) attributed to his brother Benedetto Marcello. The first printed edition of Marcello's meanwhile famous oboe concerto appeared around 1716 at Jeanne Roger's in Amsterdam. This publication also contained concertos from others such as Vivaldi, Albinoni, Veracini and Valentini. The

Concerto in C minor (BWV 981) is by Benedetto Marcello; it is the second concerto from his opus 1 (Concerti a cinque con Violino e Violoncello obbligato) which was published in Venice in 1708. Bach has transposed the original key of E minor to C minor.

The Concerto in B minor (BWV 979) is most probably based on a concerto by Torelli. The authorship of Torelli is queried in a six-part violin concerto in D minor. A similar discrepancy exists with the Concerto in G minor (BWV 985). Although not absolutely definite, the source is more or less accepted as a violin concerto by Telemann. In such a case one has to base one's judgement entirely on the comparison of styles.

Finally there are the concertos by Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar. When Bach first came into contact with this musically gifted youth, Johann Ernst was twelve years old and Bach eleven years older. Johann Ernst did not live in the residential palace in Weimar where Bach was officially in service to the not so cheerful Wilhelm Ernst, but in the nearby, so-called, Rote Schloss. He lived there with his half-brother Ernst August who was just three years younger than Bach. In the Rote Schloss the musical atmosphere was much more relaxed than in the palace. Both Bach and his cousin Johann Walther, who gave lessons regularly to Johann Ernst, must have enjoyed the inspiring, musical atmosphere there.

The concertos in B flat major (BWV 982) and in D minor (BWV 987) are based on the concertos opus 1 no. 1 and no. 4 by Johann Ernst. They were published in Frankfurt three years after his death. The remaining two concertos, in C major (BWV 984) and in G major (BWV 592a) are unpublished concertos by the prince. It is quite obvious from each of these works how much the young aristocratic composer had mastered the Italian music of his time, just like his aristocratic fellow-composer, the four years older Count Unico Willem of Wassenaer, who would do the same a short time later in the Netherlands. It is obvious that here we are not dealing with 'masterworks' but with mere youthful tokens of musical aptitude. A young man like Johann Ernst could never have trained as a professional composer; likewise Unico Willem of Wassenaer, for whom, if he had lived longer, composing would have remained for him too, just a pleasant spare-time activity.

Nevertheless, that Bach chose four of his concertos for transcription was a kind gesture towards a seriously ill member of his employer's family. This gesture to a pupil of his beloved cousin was possibly extended because he was himself fond of the boy and in this way he could demonstrate his affection for the family of his employer. Whatever the reason, even if he could have really dissected Johann Ernst's works, he has not done so in the harpsichord versions, only in the Organ Concerto BWV 595 (see above). Was this done out of respect for the dying prince or was rewriting it for harpsichord an adequate purpose in itself? Johann Ernst would have been pleased with this. And what about Bach himself? All the concertos that he composed afterwards prove how quickly he had mastered the Italian style and furthermore how adeptly he has stamped his complete characteristic and unique mark on them. The transcriptions for Johann Ernst have certainly helped him on his way!

Leo Samama, 2005

Translation Elly Leegte