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J.S. Bach as a Religious Storyteller – The Second Brandenburg Concerto

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Background

Johann Sebastian Bach's employment under Prince Leopold would have been drastically different from his past church employments in Weimer and Arnstadt. Instead of writing chorales, and other sacred music settings, his focus would have been instrumental music, such as concertos, for the entertainment of the aristocracy. Bach was exceedingly lucky in his placement, Prince Leopold was an eager patron of the arts and had allotted the funds for a diverse consortium of full-time instrumentalists, an expense other courts would only make for special occasions and one that most churches could not afford.¹ This gave Bach the creative freedom to compose virtually whatever music he wanted, as the players he needed would be readily available for rehearsals and performances. In the early spring of 1719 Bach was sent to Berlin to inspect and collect a new harpsichord ordered by Prince Leopold, a purchase that was no doubt a part of the effort to maintain his court's musical prestige.¹ Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg also happened to also be visiting the Berlin court and was present while Bach was entertaining guests on the harpsichord. Amazed by his playing and improvisation skills, the Margrave implored Bach to send some examples of his compositions. Bach obliged and sent him the Six Brandenburg Concertos in March 1721.¹ The delivery was seemingly ignored, and they concertos went undiscovered in the Margrave's library until 1849.¹

While the score dedicated to the Margrave is the only surviving copy, it is generally agreed that Bach did not compose the concertos strictly to gift to the Margrave, or even all at once. For example, the 1713 Hunt Cantata's (BWV 208) horn part is very similar to the first movement of the First Brandenburg Concerto, and the Second Brandenburg Concerto may have been inspired by the trumpet playing of Johann Casper when Bach visited the Saxe-Wissenfels court years prior to his appointment under Prince Leopold.^{1,4} The Brandenburg Concertos, along with the rest of Bach's catalogue of instrumental music, have traditionally been considered secular compositions. However, this long held belief has been challenged with the discovery of Bach's personal Bible that contained annotations emphasizing not only how important music is during a worship service but the divinity of music itself and how it is pleasing to God. Moreover, the personal notebook of Bach's wife, Anna Magdalena, had many compositions that

were used for home entertainment, and a significant portion of them were religious choral settings.⁵ The notion of Bach being a secular man who just happened to write religious music for monetary gain, or even simply personal pleasure, is unbelievable. And the idea of “art for art’s sake” would not be conceived until later in the next century, so Bach completely divorcing his Lutheran faith from his music is unlikely. Michael Marissen, a musicologist and Bach expert, is the author a groundbreaking analysis of the Brandenburg Concertos that asserts the compositions reflect Bach’s religious and social views. The pair of hunting horns in the First Brandenburg Concerto is an unusual choice, as the instruments were mostly used during fox hunts to communicate between different hunting groups and not typically found in chamber music. Marissen argues they are Bach’s representation of the aristocracy, as fox hunts were an upper-class past time, and their sound would immediately evoke such associations in listeners. This hypothesis is supported by Bach’s previous use of the hunting horns in the Hunt Cantata, which was written for the birthday celebration of Duke Christian, and proves Bach was aware of the instrument’s connection with social class and cultural practices. The horns initially play very disruptively, interjecting at inappropriate times and not contributing to the harmonic or melodic framework.⁴ This is a metaphor for how the opulence of the upper class is disruptive and even irritating to the common man who does not have the time to participate in hunting for amusement or lounge around entertaining guests.⁴ Eventually, the horns settle down and by the conclusion of the first movement they become an essential part of the music, much like the aristocracy provide protection to their subjects and help maintain peace.⁴ Portraying the ruling class as a necessary evil is a direct reflection of Bach’s Lutheran faith. While Lutherans do not believe earthly titles are important to God or necessary for salvation, they view them as an important tool in maintaining social order.⁴ Through the hunting horn Bach is not only affirming his Lutheran values, but also commenting on new Enlightenment ideas, which were challenging the authority of the aristocracy, all without writing a single lyric.

Marissen’s compelling analysis inspired an investigation into the trumpet part of the Second Brandenburg Concerto, the only other Brandenburg concerto to use a brass instrument. Much like the hunting horn, the trumpet was not commonly being used in concertos during this period, and in the same

way the horn was associated with fox hunts, the trumpet was strongly associated with its role in Biblical events. From bringing the walls down at the Battle of Jericho to sounding the rapture in the foretold Second Coming of Christ, the trumpet was directly associated with God's power. Musically, the trumpet was most frequently used in Christmas and Easter music, strengthening its association with Christ. Bach would have not only been aware of the Biblical history of the instrument but would have also been intimately acquainted with its use in religious music. Therefore, by following the same analytical principals as Michael Marissen, the Second Brandenburg Concerto is Bach's musical retelling of the Easter Story with the trumpet representing Christ.

Methodology

An analysis of the score for the Second Brandenburg Concerto was done applying Marissen's analytical techniques. As the trumpet part was of particular interest, research was done on the history of the trumpet and how it was utilized in music of Bach's time.

Findings

In the opening of the first movement of the Second Brandenburg Concerto, the trumpet and the other instruments enter together, much like Christ began his earthly life the same way as all of humanity. In Bach's era it was fashionable for the first movement of a concerto to follow ritornello form. This structure is characterized by an opening tutti section followed by a soloist episode and then a return to the tutti material. This pattern repeats, with the soloist varying the solo material to be as virtuosic as possible, but always returning to the tutti section when appropriate. However, in the Second Brandenburg's first movement the opening tutti motive, which includes the trumpet, frequently interrupts the soloists' episodes. The traditional structure of ritornello form is so disrupted some music theorists believe the first movement to not ritornello form at all.^{1,2} Bach challenging the customary composition style in this movement is symbolic of Christ not abiding by the laws of the Old Testament and creating a new covenant. This movement demands the trumpet to play impossibly high notes, nearly guaranteeing a less than perfect performance, regardless of the skill level of the player (Fig. 1). These expected mistakes are Bach symbolizing the burden of human sin Christ is forced to bear. Bach employed the same musical

device in Cantata BWV 77, giving the trumpet a very high musical line when the text is mentioning human “imperfection” or sin.

Figure 1: An example of the high notes the trumpet must play in the first movement (m. 15-24)

The image shows a page of a musical score for the first movement of Cantata BWV 77, measures 15-24. The score is written for a full orchestra and includes parts for Tromba, Flauto (Flute à bec), Oboe, Violino, Violino I di ripieno, Violino II di ripieno, Viola di ripieno, Violone di ripieno, and Violoncello e Cembalo all'unisono. The Tromba part is particularly prominent, featuring a high melodic line with many sixteenth-note passages. The other instruments provide a rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment.

The trumpet is absent from the second movement, symbolizing Christ’s death after crucifixion. The subdued mood is supported by a minor tonality and a slower tempo, marked *Andante*, unlike the first movement that does not have any tempo markings. The instruments pass around a sorrowful melody, beginning in the violin, that evokes images of mourners sharing sad news and lamenting together (Fig. 2). It is important to note how the melody is passed upwards in score order. The solo violin crying out first captures the wailing voices of the women present at the cross, including Christ’s mother, who would have been among the first to know he had passed. The oboe, an instrument that is associated with pastoral living and shepherds, echoing the violin are the people of the surrounding area hearing what has happened. And finally, the flute with its whimsical nature is representative of the news of Christ’s death traveling far across the kingdoms.

Figure 2: Opening melodic figure from the second movement bracketed in red (m. 1- 8).

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the second movement, marked *Andante*. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves: Flauto, Oboe, Violino, and Violoncello e Cembalo. Red brackets highlight the opening melodic figure in measures 1-8 across the Flauto, Oboe, and Violino parts. The Flauto part begins with a rest in the first measure, followed by a melodic line starting in measure 2. The Oboe and Violino parts also begin with rests in the first measure, with the Violino part starting its melodic line in measure 2. The Violoncello e Cembalo part provides a rhythmic accompaniment throughout the first eight measures.

Just as Christ was resurrected, the third movement opens with the trumpet returning and leading a victorious fugue (Fig. 3). The joyful nature of this movement is confirmed by the upbeat tempo marked *Allegro assai*. A fugue is a musical technique where one instrument or voice states a melody that is then repeated by the others in the group. The other instruments repeating the melody is symbolic of Christ's followers spreading his teachings and modeling their lives based on his actions, especially the original disciples who dedicated their lives to missionary work following Christ's resurrection. The precariously high notes continue to plague the trumpet part, which is the musical representation of the dangers of sin that persist in human nature. Christ's ultimate sacrifice ensured salvation to all who believe but did not abolish the temptation of sin his followers must learn to ignore during their Earthly lives. The material from the opening of the third movement returns in the trumpet line and is used to conclude the piece (Fig. 4). After resurrection, Christ ascended back to heaven to become part of the Holy Trinity and the restatement of the opening material can be thought of as Christ's promise to return to Earth to his faithful worshippers. Throughout the first and third movements, the trumpet is challenged with blending with the woodwind and string instruments that it could easily overpower in volume. This is again reminiscent of Christ because even in his human form, his words and actions made him stand out from humanity.

Figure 3: Opening statement of the fugue bracketed in red (m. 1-14)

Allegro assai.

Tromba.

Flauto.

Oboe.

Violino.

Violino I. di ripieno.

Violino II. di ripieno.

Viola di ripieno.

Violone di ripieno.

Violoncello e Cembalo.

Figure 4: Opening material of the third movement that reappears in the line trumpet at the end of the piece bracketed in red (m. 124 -end)

Tromba.

Flauto. (Flute à bec)

Oboe.

Violino.

Violino I. di ripieno.

Violino II. di ripieno.

Viola di ripieno.

Violone di ripieno.

Violoncello all'unisono.

Conclusion

Analyzing Bach's music through the lens of his religious beliefs and personal practices demonstrates unequivocal evidence that his instrumental music is more than just secular notes and rhythms. This especially the case in the Second Brandenburg Concerto, where the trumpet mirrors Christ's life, death, and resurrection, using the same musical storytelling Bach employed in his religious music and other prior compositions. Viewing the Second Brandenburg Concerto in this context not only enhances player and listener experience, but it changes the dynamic of how to engage with Bach and his music centuries after his life. There is a prolific catalogue of music left behind by Bach, but very few personal artifacts such as letters or journals, leading to even the most learned musicians only knowing Bach as a composer. Many see him as a musical deity whose music is unaffected by the human world

when in reality Bach was a human deeply dedicated to his religion and an active member of society and culture during his life.

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