

J.S. BACH
(1685 – 1750)

Concerto for Two Violins in d minor, BWV 1043

Vivace
Largo ma non tanto
Allegro

Johann Sebastian Bach composed the bulk of his instrumental secular music during his employment at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen from 1717 to 1723. Since the court was Calvinist, there was no call for Bach to compose sacred music. So, instead, secular works such as the “Brandenburg Concertos”, the first book of the “Well-tempered Clavier”, the “Orchestral Suites”, and many concertos for one, two, three, and four instruments. His primary venue for premiering these works was the Leipzig Collegium Musicum, an organization of dedicated amateurs devoted to the performance of serious, primarily secular, music, which performed every Friday evening in a local coffeehouse. Leipzig’s Collegium was comprised mostly of university students and had a long and proud history with Georg Philipp Telemann included in its list of previous directors. In 1729, despite his many other duties, Bach agreed to direct the Collegium. At the time of Bach’s hiring as Kapellmeister, Prince Leopold’s court boasted one of the largest and finest orchestras in Europe and Bach composed his various orchestral works for the Cöthen musicians, including most of his solo concertos.

Bach was an accomplished violinist and, during his late teens, earned badly needed money as “lackey and violinist” to Duke Johann Ernst. He was very interested in the Italian style of concerto writing, particularly the works of Antonio Vivaldi. He studied Vivaldi’s music avidly, sometimes copying the scores to develop greater familiarity with the style. It is no surprise, then, that the “Concerto for Two Violins in d minor” reflects certain Italian Baroque characteristics, such as its three-movement structure (fast – slow – fast). The outer movements are in the traditional ritornello form (alternating orchestral and solo episodes). As is typical with Bach, these movements feature subtle interplay between the soloists and the string orchestra. This interplay evolves to a degree unrivalled in any contemporary concerto. In both movements, the concertino (solo) and ripieno (orchestral) forces, in ever-changing combinations, work together in the perpetual development of motifs. In the second movement, the soloists leave the accompanying instruments behind and play a gentle, serpentine-like imitative counterpoint. Suspended harmonies enhance the expressivity of this Largo, serving as a perfect contrast to the two outer movements. The final movement crashes onto the scene with a stormy, aggressive opening motif as if to wake the listener from a daydream. The relationship between concertino and ripieno is practically reversed in this movement with the orchestra sharing in the densely overlapped principal statement.

OF NOTE:

After his death, half of Bach’s manuscripts went to his son Wilhelm Friedemann, who, perennially short of money, likely sold them for scrap paper – which was a valuable commodity at the time. The other half of the manuscripts, including those of the “a minor” and “E Major” violin concertos and the “d minor concerto for two violins”, ended up in the hands of his more fastidious son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, who took good care of them and, ultimately, insured their survival to today.