

Keyboard Concerto in A major, BWV 1055

Johann Sebastian Bach

The principal source for Johann Sebastian Bach's seven concertos for solo keyboard instrument — plus a fragment of an eighth — is a manuscript collection he copied out as a self-standing album, seemingly in the period 1737–39. Bach did not waste paper; he began inscribing each movement immediately after the one that preceded it, even beginning a new concerto on the same page as the preceding one if space allowed.

In the late Baroque period, concerto collections usually comprised six pieces (or sometimes double that number). Bach's manuscript suggests that he did start out assembling six concertos for this collection, those known as BWV 1052–57; for whatever reason, he skipped to a fresh page to add the Keyboard Concerto in G minor (BWV 1058), and proceeded from there directly to a Concerto in D minor for Oboe and Keyboard (BWV 1059, which exists only as a fragment) as a sort of appendix following the main set of six.

The collection of Bach's keyboard concertos is somewhat analogous to the anthology of concerti grossi he assembled to support his application for a job with the Margrave of Brandenburg in 1721. As with the *Brandenburg* Concertos, there must have been a reason for Bach to go to such an effort.

A likely explanation is that he created these works to be played by the Collegium Musicum he directed in Leipzig from 1729 through 1741 (excepting a two-year absence in 1737–39). Since physical evidence suggests that the collection most likely dates from precisely the time when Bach was absent from the Collegium Musicum, he may have prepared it to use on his return.

Bach had moved to Leipzig in 1723 to oversee music at the city's principal churches and to teach at the St. Thomas School, but the Collegium Musicum presented a supplement-

tal freelance opportunity that would have been very appealing to a middle-aged musician with a large and ever-growing family. Seven of his children — aged one to 21 — were living in 1729, when he began his Collegium job; six had already died and seven were yet to be born.

During these years he produced concertos that spotlighted one, two, three, and as many as four harpsichords. Of the bunch, only one seems to have been originally conceived for the keyboard: his Concerto in C major for Two Harpsichords (BWV 1061). The rest are widely thought to be transposed arrangements of concertos he had written earlier for other instruments.

Musicological speculation initially promulgated by the music analyst Donald Francis Tovey, including considerations of instrumental range and balance, strongly suggests that the A-Major Keyboard Concerto (BWV 1055) started life as a concerto for oboe d'amore. Lower members of the oboe family were more centrally employed in Bach's day than they are today; beginning in 1723, his cantatas include high-profile movements spotlighting such mellow double-reed instruments as

IN SHORT

Born: March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Thuringia (in today's Germany)

Died: July 28, 1750, in Leipzig, Saxony

Work composed: copied out as early as 1730 or as late as 1737–39, arranged by Bach from a concerto for oboe d'amore that probably dated from around 1723

World premiere: unknown

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 16 minutes

oboe d'amore and the still deeper oboe da caccia. This concerto quite possibly dates from about that time, just as Bach was ending his six-year tenure at the Court of Anhalt-Cöthen (a period that also saw the production of the *Brandenburg* Concertos), or perhaps from the beginning of his days in Leipzig. Among Bach's keyboard concertos, this one is particularly sophisticated in its adaptation, which has led some musicologists to believe that it was one of the last of those Bach arranged, drawing on experience he had gained in recasting a number of concertos previously.

Bach's admiration for the newfangled Italian style of Vivaldi and his cohorts is evident

in this work. In the opening *Allegro*, the soloist's lines are frequently punctuated by a ritornello (a recurring section) in the accompanying strings, reflecting the Italianate style. The central *Larghetto* is highly expressive, its emotions intensified by the use of sustained chromatic bass lines; but the vigorously accented, dance-like rhythms of the final *Allegro ma non tanto* bring the concerto to a happy — and slightly self-satisfied — conclusion.

Instrumentation: solo keyboard (originally harpsichord, here performed on piano), strings (two parts for violins, one for viola), and basso continuo (comprising cello and double bass).

Bach's Repurposing

Bach's Keyboard Concerto, BWV 1055, is thought to have originated as a concerto for oboe d'amore. This lower-pitched member of the oboe family was created in the early 1700s and was utilized regularly by composers for the next 100 years before losing favor. The instrument falls between the oboe and the English horn in the woodwind family; it is slightly larger than the former and has a pear-shaped bell, like the latter, with a sound that is often described as tranquil, mellow, or serene.

In fact, the New York Philharmonic's only previous performances of the Bach work noted as BWV 1055 were in a version for oboe d'amore, performed in 1977 and again in 2000, with Thomas Stacy, the Orchestra's longtime English horn player, as soloist. In today's Orchestra, Associate

Principal Oboe Sherry Syllar serves as the oboe d'amore player, as she did in the Philharmonic's 2013 festival, *The Bach Variations*.

The work performed here is known as a Keyboard Concerto, as Bach would have transcribed it for harpsichord, since the piano did not come into popular use until the late 18th century.



— The Editors