Bach Harpsichord Concertos II

Francesco Corti il pomo d'oro

BWV 1044, 1054, 1056 & 1057

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Harpsichord Concerto No. 3 in D Major, BWV 1054

1	I. Allegro	7.30
2	II. Larghetto	6.06
3	III. Allegro ma non troppo	2.37

Harpsichord Concerto No. 5 in F Minor, BWV 1056

4	I. Allegro moderato	3.25
5	II. Largo	2.50
6	III. Presto	3.42

Harpsichord Concerto No. 6 in F Major, BWV 1057

7	I. Allegro	3.24
8	II. Andante	4.50
9	III. Allegro assai	3. 48

Concerto for Harpsichord, Flute and Violin, BWV 1044

10	I. Allegro	8.11
11	II. Larghetto	6. 02
12	III. Allegro ma non tanto	6.38

Total playing time: 61. 36

Francesco Corti, harpsichord
il pomo d'oro

il pomo d'oro

Violin: Evgenii Sviridov **, Anna Dmitrieva, Rossella Croce

Viola: Stefano Rossi

Cello: Ludovico Minasi

Double Bass: Paolo Zuccheri

Bassoon: Alessandro Nasello

Recorder: Andrés Locatelli *, Alessandro Nasello *

Traverso: Marcello Gatti **

* soloist for Concerto BWV 1057
** soloist for Concerto BWV 1044

Cover image:
***View of Pirna from the Sonnenstein Castle* (ca. 1750)**
by Bernardo Bellotto (1721 - 1780)

Francesco Corti
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First of all, I wish to thank all people involved in this project. In the case of this recording, due the extraordinary conditions in which it took place I must go beyond the standard acknowledgement formulas one would expect in an album booklet.

We recorded on the very last days before Italy went into a lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These were extraordinarily tense and uncertain days, and we all were worried about our professional and personal future. Nevertheless, everyone involved in this project concentrated on Bach's beautiful scores and made music with care and love. To the musicians and administrators of il pomo d'oro, to Jean-Daniel, and especially to the staff of Villa San Fermo in Lonigo goes my sincerest gratitude. These were the last notes we were allowed to perform professionally for many months. They resonated in my heart and helped me through the difficult times that followed.

With this album, the recording of the 7 "official" harpsichord concertos by Johann Sebastian Bach is brought to completion. Bach's autograph of these concertos is an endless source of inspiration and a privileged glimpse into his working technique. This project has allowed me to mature my vision on this well-known corpus of pieces through their study as a whole.

I decided to perform the concertos in this volume with a very small string ensemble, basing my decision on certain aspects of Bach's writing. Compared to a fuller orchestral sound, solo strings allow for a freer approach to the performance of the accompanying parts. I find this particularly suitable to those moments in which Bach's polyphonic writing thickens, and each voice asks for a rhetorically expressive execution. The central part of the first movement of BWV 1054, as well as the last movement of BWV 1056 are two good examples: the writing resembles that of a keyboard quintet rather than that of a concerto. I find the stereophonic juxtaposition of two solo violins to the two recorders in BWV 1057 very functional to the piece's writing: often strings and winds answer each other, dialoguing above the harpsichord's solos. The complex writing of BWV 1044 is often covered when performed with a large ensemble, and Bach often seems to demand the same rhetorical value and the same degree of virtuosity from all voices. Moreover, Bach often pairs two parts into an unisono. This, among other things, prompted me to include this concerto in the present volume. Finally I decided to add a bassoon to the fast movements of BWV 1053. It seemed to me the most logical decision, Alessandro being an excellent bassoonist as well as a superb recorder player. I'm sure Bach would have come with a similar solution for a performance at the *Zimmermanisches Kaffeehaus*.

Francesco Corti

Masterful elaborations

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) loved to tinker, musically speaking. He combined an inventor's curiosity with a craftsman's delight in design and polish. Encountering a work that captivated his interest or promised to teach him something new, Bach got his hands on the music and started to take it apart. For instance, this process describes the period at Weimar (1708-1717) during which he made arrangements of numerous Italian violin concertos by Vivaldi and others. Arranging these concertos for solo harpsichord, Bach could reassign melodic material to different registers, creating the kind of counterpoint and full, resonant lower voices he favored.

In 1738, now well-established in his final post at Leipzig, Bach set out to produce a collection of six concertos for solo harpsichord with ripieno strings. These concertos (BWV 1052-1057) were not newly written in the 1730s. All derive from older sources, including Bach's own music. For some of the works (BWV 1052, 1053 and 1055), the original source is lost; scholars can only piece together fragments to identify or reconstruct something of the model. But for others, including BWV 1054 and 1057, the source concerto still exists and can be compared. This fact adds immeasurably to our appreciation of these works. For while they certainly succeed in their own right as keyboard concertos, they also reveal how Bach reworked material conceived for a melody instrument (be it violin, oboe, etc.) to suit the wider compass, textural richness, and contrapuntal possibilities available with the harpsichord.

In these borrowed themes, Bach saw what others did not or could not: possibilities for greater fullness and polyphonic elaboration. That vision, combined with a few particulars of history — his need for ensemble repertory to suit *Collegium Musicum* programmes, for instance, and the presence of four or five harpsichords in his personal collection as

well as gifted students to play them — gave rise to an outpouring of keyboard concertos in the later 1730s.

Such conditions directly explain the origin of the **Keyboard Concerto in D Major, BWV 1054** (1738). This is an arrangement of a brilliant violin concerto, BWV 1042, the date of which is uncertain but probably can be assigned to Bach's Weimar years. The opening Allegro unfolds with irresistible fluency. Bach integrates solo and ritornello forces more fully than his Italian model, and the "conversational" tone by which thematic heads and tails are handed off even looks forward to Mozart. As one would expect from its source, violinistic touches abound (quick turn figures, arpeggiated themes). Bach deftly inserts new material for the keyboard's left hand that adds heft to the glittering string-like treble passages.

The Adagio takes its material note-for-note from BWV 1042, yielding an accompanied solo for keyboard in B Minor. Sustained harmonies and plodding bass notes create a dolorous affect pierced only occasionally (as at the turn to D Major) by rays of light. By grounding the theme in the bass register, Bach liberates the treble part to become far more decorative. The Finale is a vibrant, triple-meter rondo. Each short section fosters a taut give-and-take between solo and ritornello textures, but the movement's overall brevity leaves a little bit to be desired. The lack of any thematic development suggests either that Bach felt he had exhausted this theme in its violin original (which seems unlikely) or that he was pressed for time in getting the keyboard arrangement ready for Collegium performance. To his credit, he did compose new material for the third solo episode that marks a worthy advance beyond the earlier version.

The **F-Minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056**, is almost certainly based on an earlier violin concerto. But apart from an exception noted below, scholars have not been able to identify and locate those possible sources. Bach focuses attention in the first movement on the head motive, which is built on a recurring neighbor-note figure. In addition, the choice of key contributes to the emotional mood, for F Minor is a rich, dark, at times imposing key. Form recedes in significance behind the more attractive aspects of motivic development and imitation. The ritornello/solo distinctions are as clear as anything penned by Vivaldi, and the later movements continue to strongly exhibit Italianate features.

The idyllic Largo soars on the keyboard's florid melodic line, given only token harmonic support by the strings. It may derive from a lost oboe concerto, but we can still hear its expressive potential utilized to good effect in the oboe solo at the start of Bach's Cantata 156, *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe*. The spirited Finale stays comfortably within the conventions of concerto form as defined by Bach's Italian predecessors. Instead, small details show the master's hand at work: a poignant suspension here, a striking key change there. Clearly this is not Bach's last or most profound word in the concerto genre. Still, its balance between tense outer movements in F Minor and a serene middle movement in A-flat Major is enough to recommend it to later generations.

Compared to other concertos in the set, the **Concerto in F Major, BWV 1057**, clearly trends toward the *concerto grosso* realm. Indeed, it is a close adaption of Brandenburg Concerto No. 4; here the keyboard takes over the solo violin material from Brandenburg No. 4 with added left hand bolstering. The keyboard gets occasional moments to shine and plenty of glittering passagework. But its true role is to support Bach's brilliant writing for the solo flutes. Their close counterpoint draws the ear, and the first movement's most appealing moments come when Bach pares the texture down to just flutes and keyboard.

The slow movement offers a study in chromatic writing and emotional gravitas. Bach maintains the full ensemble texture — which is fairly striking as this would provide a conventional time during which the flautists could catch their breath. Instead, all the instruments dwell on a theme built of two-note slurs, enveloping the movement in countless *Seufzer* (sigh gestures). A final flourish from the keyboard, a rising chromatic scale, and a "Phrygian" half cadence complete the impression of an antique-sounding Adagio. This mood is cast off by the lively, skipwise motion of the ensuing fugue. At first, the flutes remain silent until all four entrances have occurred; these proceed from viola to second violin, first violin, and finally cello/bass, all doubled in the keyboard. The flutes do eventually enter and create the Finale's finest moments in episodes with the keyboard based on canon and free counterpoint. Bach's ability to sustain harmonic tension through suspension chains ensures that the dynamism of the Finale continues up to its final cadence.

Finally, in the so-called **"Triple Concerto," BWV 1044**, we have a true ensemble concerto. Its scoring directly mimics the instrumentation for the famous Brandenburg Concerto No. 5: solo flute, violin, and harpsichord with strings. Apart from scoring, the first movement is also notable for the continuous triplet rhythms. Such details are adopted from Bach's source (his own keyboard Prelude and Fugue, BWV 894), but timbral contrasts make the effect even more appealing. Except for the lack of a massive keyboard cadenza, we are deeply immersed in the world of Brandenburg No. 5. Which is another way to say that, for those who find the latter's cadenza too ostentatious, BWV 1044 may offer an ideal balance between solo and ensemble writing.

A further development in BWV 1044 is Bach's use of pizzicato solo violin in the slow movement, scored for the three solo instruments. With the keyboard's treble and bass keeping their independence from each other, the result is a free-ranging four-part texture: two melody parts, and two accompanying parts. The success of this movement makes one wonder if Bach wrote other quartets that have been lost; and if he did not, why not? As this Adagio is based on a Trio Sonata for organ, BWV 527, Bach clearly had ample material on hand.

For the Finale Bach takes the fugue from BWV 894 notated in *alla breve* (2/2) time signature. This subject reprises the motivic triplets that marked the prelude material. Compared to the other movements, however, the Finale squarely places the greatest burden on the keyboard, both for leading the tonal argument and providing connections between ritornello and solo sections. And whereas we commented on the absence of a cadenza in the opening Allegro, Bach compensates with a modest cadenza at the end. Overall, it may not rise to the level of other finales Bach composed, and its main theme (taken from BWV 894) lacks a memorable profile. But the growing importance of the keyboard — as both soloist and anchor of the ensemble — shows how Bach's adaptations to older sources helped create works that transition from *concerto grosso* to the full-blown classical concertos to come.

Jason Stell


il pomo d'oro

Acknowledgments

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Francesco Corti plays an Andrea Restelli 1998 harpsichord, after Christian Vater 1738.

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