

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B Minor, BWV 1067

Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major, BWV 1068

While scholars differ on when and where J. S. Bach composed his four surviving orchestral suites, they do agree on at least one thing: the precise chronology of these works is impossible to determine. Extant source material suggests that Bach wrote them during his tenure in Leipzig, but it is equally plausible that he composed at least some while in Cöthen, a period during which he wrote much of his instrumental music. Regardless of when the suites were created, it seems likely that they were performed by the *Collegium musicum* in Leipzig, which Bach directed between 1729 and 1737, and again from 1739 until his death in 1750.

Founded by Telemann at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Collegium musicum was a musical society known for its casual concerts at Gottfried Zimmermann's coffee house on the main street of Leipzig on winter Friday evenings and in his garden on Wednesday afternoons in the summer. As one contemporary described, "the musicians who play for these concerts are, for the most part, students from the town and play very well, to such an extent that, as we know, some famous virtuosos emerged gradually from their ranks. Each musician was able to play in public during these concerts of music, and also found a good number of listeners who knew how to appreciate the value of a skilful musician." Demand for the events eventually exceeded the confines of the modest performance spaces, and the concerts were moved into a larger hall.

Like other examples of the genre, Bach's Orchestral Suites Nos. 2 and 3 are a series of dances (typically French dances) linked together to form a longer piece. Bach did not intend this music to be recreational, however; while the dances' standard conventions are audible, Bach transforms them through elaboration and ornamentation. The Orchestral Suite No. 2 offers a good example of this stylization. While it contains several French dances that are pushed past traditional formal bounds (sarabande, bourrée, minuet, and polonaise),

the suite ends with a badinerie, a relatively rare dance that Bach essentially makes over into a showpiece for the flute. In the Orchestral Suite No. 3—scored for two oboes, three trumpets, timpani, and strings—Bach arranges the various dance movements to maximize dramatic effect. The slightly melancholy Air, for strings alone, for example, contrasts strikingly with the grand Gavotte that follows.

Cantata No. 202, “Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten” (Wedding)

Bach composed his Cantata No. 202, “Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten,” to celebrate a marriage—and while we don’t know the identities of the bride and groom, the work has come to be known popularly as the “Wedding Cantata.” Not surprisingly, the subject of the text is love. Despite the sense of joy that pervades the poetry, the mood of the opening is mixed: discord between the voice and languid oboe melody evokes “Schatten, Frost und Winde” (shadows, frost, and wind), providing a sharp contrast to the “frohes Glück” (sheer delight) that the occasion inspires. Bach varies accompaniment for each aria to add additional musical texture to the work: the first is written for oboe, strings, and continuo; the second continuo alone; the third, solo violin and continuo; the fourth, solo oboe and continuo; and finally, Bach returns to the full ensemble. While variety and contrast evoke the text’s colorful imagery, Bach brings the cantata’s true subject to the foreground in the stately, almost rigid Gavotte with which the work ends, creating a sense of unity and togetherness.

Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor

As with the orchestral suites, we know little about the composition of the Concerto for Two Violins, or “the Bach double,” as it is often called. Leading Bach scholar Christoph Wolff has proposed that Bach wrote the work while in Leipzig, but most scholars agree that like most of Bach’s string music, the concerto probably dates from Bach’s tenure at Cöthen. Bach was offered the position of Kapellmeister at Cöthen in December 1717, when he was just 32. Although the Duke of Weimar was reluctant to lose the composer—in fact, when

Bach tried to resign, he held him under arrest for an entire month—the position at Cöthen was irresistible.

Bach would be the second highest-paid court employee, and his wife Maria Barbara would be a salaried singer as well. Tragedy struck about three years after the move; his wife died, leaving him a single father. (About a year later, Bach married Anna Magdalena, the daughter of the town trumpeter.)

Although we usually think of Bach as a keyboard player, his first paid music post was as a violinist, and by all reports, he was relatively accomplished. As his son Carl Philipp Emanuel wrote,

From his youth up to fairly old age he played the violin purely and with a penetrating tone and thus kept the orchestra in top form, much better than he could have from the harpsichord. He completely understood the possibilities of all stringed instruments.

The double concerto is an excellent example of Bach's facility with strings. . While the violins hold the stage in all three movements, the part writing strikes the perfect balance between extroverted showmanship and idiomatic ease. The two solo parts fit together effortlessly, and their musical dialogue becomes the focal point of the entire piece. While the orchestra emerges occasionally to challenge the soloists, it serves primarily as the accompaniment—and in the second movement, the ensemble essentially plays the continuo part, providing understated support for the plaintive, heart wrenching melodies of the solo violins. The concerto's pervasive imitation is particularly noteworthy. In the resolute first movement, the lyrical second, and the frantic third movement, the violinists incessantly trade phrases back and forth; indeed, the two parts only truly differ in terms of their range.