

## Masterworks Concert #4

### **Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major, BWV 1050** Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

The six Brandenburg Concertos stand at the crossroads in musical history where chamber music and orchestral music went their separate ways. These *Concerts à plusieurs instruments* (Concertos for various instruments), as Bach named them, were dedicated to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, who employed a modest orchestra that was probably too small and inexpert to play all the Concertos. The Dedication Score, including an obsequious cover letter by Bach, has been preserved and is now in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. The mint condition of the manuscript indicates that the Margrave's orchestra seldom if ever performed them.

These same Concertos, however, were common fare at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, Bach's employer. Three of them, Nos. 2, 4 and 5, are true concerti grossi, specifying a solo instrument or group of instruments, requirements that correspond closely to the better players found in the prince's orchestra.

Bach composed the Concertos between 1718 and 1721, although parts may have been written as early as 1708. They were not composed as an independent group, but rather assembled from various orchestral works Bach had already written over the years as courtly entertainment music on the highest level.

Concerto No. 5 exists in two versions that are earlier than the one in the score dedicated to the Margrave. The final version, in particular, broke new ground in music history. For the first time, the harpsichord becomes a member of the ensemble of soloists, instead of functioning only as a basso continuo instrument. Its new role came in the form of an extended bravura solo in the first movement, appearing in full only in the Dedication Score.

The work must have made a great impression on Bach's contemporaries, to judge from the number of references to its performance and number of copies that have survived. Bach himself played the solo harpsichord in performances in Cöthen. The harpsichord subsequently occupied a crucial place in his creative output. During his final position as Kantor of the St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig, he transcribed for the harpsichord sixteen earlier concertos for other instruments.

All of Bach's concertos adhere to the Italian style championed by Antonio Vivaldi. Each movement consisted of a single theme, or ritornello, introduced by the full ensemble; the solo part often picked up individual motives from the ritornello or played new episodes, for which the ritornello served as a refrain.

The opening ritornello of this Concerto, with the harpsichord in its role as member of the continuo, gives little clue of what is to come. Unlike the other concertos, where certain episodes were dominated by a single solo instrument, here all three soloists contribute to every episode, except for the harpsichord cadenza. The slow movement bears the marking *Affettuoso* instead of a true tempo marking and belongs exclusively to the three soloists without accompaniment.

The final movement is a treasure often overlooked because of the flashy first movement. It is a gigue, traditionally the final movement of a dance suite, and begins as a canon at the

interval of a fourth. As the three soloists begin, Bach sets up a series of expected cadences and then systematically avoids them by changing key, or dovetailing phrases, so that there is virtually no rest until over a minute into the movement when the soloists begin the first episode.

***Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10***

Benjamin Britten  
(1913-1976)

Benjamin Britten was one of the musical giants of the last century. Born into a middleclass family in Lowestoft, the easternmost town in England, Britten showed exceptional musical promise while still a toddler. By age twelve he had already composed six string quartets, ten piano sonatas, numerous suites of piano pieces and many songs. Although his dentist father was not enthusiastic about his son's passion for a field that might not yield a decent living, his mother was Benjamin's emotional lodestar. So supportive was she of her son's talents that she openly expected his name to join the musical trinity, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, as the fourth B. A fifth B, Frank Bridge (1879-1941)—although not one of such stellar quality—became Britten's first composition teacher.

A difficult, curmudgeonly person and middling composer with no regard or patience for children, Bridge reluctantly allowed himself to be introduced to the boy wonder after a performance of his works at the Norwich Triennial Festival in 1927. To his own surprise, he was soon impressed enough to accept the thirteen-year-old Benjamin as his only student. Britten spent his summer vacations and school holidays traveling to London to study composition with Bridge and piano with Harold Samuel. Bridge not only evaluated and corrected his pupil's enormous array of scores, but also widened Britten's musical horizon by introducing him to the music and harmonic language of his own century. Britten called Bridge his "musical father." In tribute to his teacher he composed in 1937 the Variations, using as a theme the second of Bridge's Three Idylls for String Quartet, Op. 6.

Surgeon and professional musician Boyd Neel commissioned the Variations for his orchestra's performance at the 1937 Salzburg Festival. Neel had established his orchestra in 1932 and was instrumental in reviving and rejuvenating the chamber orchestra repertoire. It took Britten just four weeks to finish the work, and the premiere brought him badly needed international recognition.

While working on the Variations, Britten, now in his mid-twenties, was coming to grips with two of the most momentous issues in his life: the death of his mother, to whom he had been passionately attached since childhood, and his homosexuality. Earlier that year he had first met Peter Pears, who became his lifelong partner.

The Variations seesaw between somber melancholy and exuberant humor. Scholars have attempted to assign an autobiographical program to the work, largely because of Britten's evocative titles for the movements and the position of the work in his personal life. Britten, however, stated: "I ... cannot make out why they have to hunt for programs & 'meanings' and all that rot!" Nevertheless, Britten's own extra-musical concept of the work can be seen on the sketch of the composition and on his own copy of the published score, where he indicated that each movement represented one of Bridge's personal characteristics. In that regard, they are much like Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, although with a markedly different

kind of theme and more modern handling of it. Bridge, perhaps reflecting on his career and personal shortcomings, wrote: "I don't know how to express my appreciation in adequate terms. It is one of the few lovely things that has ever happened to me."

The theme and its variations do not proceed according to the traditional sequence of repeated phrases, and the variations disguise and transform the theme in both melodic shape and mood.

1. *Introduction and Theme*: A somber, dramatic opening precedes the theme.
2. *Adagio*: The harmonies of this variation are a dark foretaste of the music for the opera *Peter Grimes* composed eight years later
3. *March*: This is a whimsical dialogue between lower and upper strings, and bowed and pizzicato articulation.
4. *Romance*: This is a delicate waltz for the upper strings.
5. *Aria Italiana*: Britten parodies the Italian flamboyant *aria di bravura* of Rossini.
6. *Bourrée Classique*: This is perhaps a take-off on Stravinsky's angular, syncopated neoclassical style.
7. *Wiener Walzer*: Britten includes every cliché of the Viennese waltz in a bi-tonal parody.
8. *Moto Perpetuo* (Perpetual motion): The strings scurry about in perhaps a tip of the hat to Brahms and Elgar, each of whom has a similar movement in his variations.
9. *Funeral March*: It is difficult not to read Britten's sense of personal loss into this achingly passionate variation.
10. *Chant*: Fragments of the theme are assigned to the upper and lower strings, which play brief antiphonal phrases.
11. *Fugue and Finale*: No composition student can escape fugue writing. Britten takes Bridge's theme on a contrapuntal romp before the final encomium to his master. Quotes from five other works by Bridge make cameo appearances in this movement.

### *Carmen Suite, Op. 37*

Rodion Shchedrin  
(b. 1932)

One of the most prolific of Russian composers of the second half of the twentieth century, Rodion Shchedrin was born in Moscow, the son of a composer and professional violinist who taught at the Moscow Conservatory. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory where he subsequently taught composition. Since 1969 Shchedrin has worked as a freelance composer. From 1973 to 1990 he succeeded Dmitry Shostakovich as chairman of the Composers' Union of the Russian Federation and in 1990 was made honorary chairman of the organization. Since 1992 he has divided his time between Moscow and Munich, composing and teaching.

Shchedrin's style is eclectic; he has a knack for combining the most avant-garde styles and methods with traditional folk and Russian church music. He has composed in all musical

genres, including three operas and five ballets, twelve concertos, two symphonies and many other orchestral, chamber and vocal works. His larger compositions are marked by non-traditional structures; the Third Piano Concerto is a set of variations on a theme that is heard only at the end. Much of his music, especially since the mid-1980s, is neo-Romantic and always laced with musical irony and humor.

In addition to his many original works, Shchedrin has enjoyed “recomposing” other composers’ works. In fact, the ballet *Carmen Suite*, a recomposing of George Bizet’s opera, first brought him to the attention of the West. Shchedrin composed the ballet in 1967 for his wife Mayya Plisetskaya, then prima ballerina of the Bolshoi. He extracted from the ballet a suite of thirteen movements, scored for a large body of strings and an army of percussion instruments, requiring five percussionists. With sly humor Shchedrin took Bizet’s familiar melodies and served them up in ways Bizet would never have conceived. In love with Bizet’s music, Shchedrin could not resist adding to the stew the *farandole* from the incidental music to the play *L’Arlésienne* and the *Danse bohémienne* from the opera *La Jolie Fille de Perth*. The Suite nearly foundered on the shoals of Soviet bureaucracy, which considered it “insulting to Bizet’s masterpiece.” Only intervention by Shostakovich rescued it and got it reinstated on the officially approved list.