

## Keyboard Concerto No. 4 in A major, BWV 1055

### JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

B. March 21, 1685 in Eisenach, Thuringia

D. July 28, 1750 in Leipzig, Germany

*The concerto was most likely premiered in 1739 at Zimmerman's coffee-house in Leipzig during Bach's tenure as director of the Collegium musicum.*

*Scored for solo piano and strings (approx. 14 minutes).*

Bach is perhaps the most important composer to come from the seven generations of professional musicians. Though he never worked nor traveled far from his birthplace, his music is beloved around the world. He was well known in his lifetime as a keyboard virtuoso, but today his compositions form the foundation of current music theory. Bach took his knowledge of counterpoint and carried it beyond any other composer of his time, embedding himself so firmly as the genius of the Baroque period that the date for its ending is commonly defined as 1750, the year of Bach's death.

Bach was a prolific composer in numerous genres. Though he is highly revered today, his music during his lifetime was considered stodgy and old-fashioned, was largely ignored and later forgotten. No more than 10 of his works were published during his lifetime, and nothing more was revealed for half a century. Many of his manuscripts were sold for pennies; for instance, the engraving plates to *The Art of Fugue* were sold as scrap metal, and manuscripts were used as wrapping paper for merchants and butchers of Leipzig.

The rediscovery of Bach began with the performance of *The St Matthew Passion* under the direction of Felix Mendelssohn. The power of this work prompted a later performance of the *St. John Passion*. In 1850, a century after his death, the Bach Gesellschaft was formed, a society created for the purpose of publishing the complete works of the composer without editorial additions. The society spent 46 years collecting what music they could find, which when published, filled 60 massive volumes.

Bach, a modest, hard-working man, never considered himself a genius. He was a craftsman working to support his large family. He held several positions as church organist and as a chamber music director. In 1722, he accepted the post of cantor in Leipzig where he remained until his death.

Bach had numerous responsibilities in Leipzig, teaching voice lessons and giving instruction on various instruments and also taught a class in Latin. He organized the musical activities for the two leading churches in Leipzig, including composing and directing for them. In addition, he was expected to attend funerals, weddings and other functions.

He also served as director of the *Collegium musicum*, a student musical society in Leipzig from 1729-41. The Collegium performed frequent concerts at Zimmerman's coffee house. On June 17, 1733, Bach introduced a new harpsichord that the Collegium declared to be "the likes of which no one here has ever heard." It was this new

instrument that was the likely motivation for Bach's 14 harpsichord concertos composed in the late 1730s.

The Concerto No. 4 is part of a set of six concertos (BWV 1052-1057) dated 1738. These works illustrate the development of harpsichord technique. Bach developed left-hand parts and made extensive use of idiomatic figurations. The sparse orchestral scoring reflects the few musicians available to perform his works. Bach inscribed these manuscripts as he usually did, beginning with "J.J", *Jesu Juva* or Jesus, help, and ending with "Finis. S. D. Gl.", *Soli Deo Gloria* or for the glory of God alone.

Because pieces written in Bach's time were usually composed for single events without much thought given to repeat performances, portions of previously composed music were commonly "borrowed" or transcribed for subsequent works. These concertos were mostly keyboard transcriptions of earlier violin or oboe concertos. This one was likely based on the lost concerto for *oboe d'amore*.

Keyboard Concerto No. 4 in A major is written in three movements. The *Allegro*, a light and lively movement characteristic of Bach, begins with a theme which he later alters and recreates in a number of ways throughout the movement. Written for harpsichord, which has no sustaining power, the movement is constant throughout with consistent ornamentation, idiomatic to the instrument. In the *Larghetto*, the opening pathos of the slow descending sequences makes way for the melody. This moving melody appears and reappears over the effect of uneven sighs from the bass. The *Allegro ma non tanto* opens in a sprightly manner, maintaining a rhythmic dance-like bass figuration through the end.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Bach' Keyboard Concerto No. 4.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Bach, Keyboard Concerto No. 4, BWV 1055, Andrei Gavrilov, piano, Sir Neville Marriner conducting the Academy of St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, EMI 81482.

*Program note by harpist Kelly Yoakam, master's candidate in musicology at Michigan State University.*