

Saturday, March 18, 2006, 8pm
First Congregational Church

Bach Collegium Japan

Masaaki Suzuki, *director and harpsichord*



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PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067
Overture — Rondeau — Sarabande — Bourrees 1 and 2 —
Polonaise et Double — Menuet — Badinerie

Harpsichord Concerto in D minor, BWV 1052
Allegro non troppo ed energico
Adagio
Allegro

INTERMISSION

Concerto in D minor for Two Violins, BWV 1043
Vivace
Largo, ma non tanto
Allegro

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major, BWV 1050
Allegro
Affettuoso
Allegro

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THE ORCHESTRAL WORKS OF J. S. BACH

To hear four of Bach's most famous and universally loved instrumental works together in one concert is an unusual event by today's standards, especially when audiences and performers are still acquainting themselves with Bach's often celebrated but under-appreciated cantatas. The vast number of cantatas Bach wrote, a number that far outstrips his works for instrumental ensembles alone, has long prevented even the best of them from gaining a secure foothold in the concert season of most orchestras (the Bach Collegium Japan excepted). It is important to keep in mind, however, that it took some time for these works to gain their status as staples of the concerto repertoire and, following their reintroduction to the public in the mid-19th century, audiences were not quick to appreciate them.

One of the main problems concerned Bach's orchestration, which 19th-century audiences found inadequate when performed alongside works by such composers as Berlioz and Wagner, who utilized a much larger and more colorful orchestral palette. Mendelssohn's famous performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 made changes of instrumentation and phrasing, excisions, and melodic and textual alterations that would be unthinkable today. Arrangements with enhanced orchestration were preferred at the time, for listeners expected the music to sound much like what they expected from a typical 19th-century orchestra: strong melodies, timbral effects, the expression of emotion and passion and the brilliance of virtuosic display.

It is clear from critical responses to these works that the style that defines Bach's concerto writing—a steadily moving, non-thematic bass, an energetic treble line with rapid movement, repetitions within the melody that serve to increase momentum, the aggressive and mechanical rhythms, and the breathless onrush to the cadences—limited their appeal. One critic writing for *The New York Times* in 1875 considered the first and third movements of the CONCERTO IN D MINOR FOR TWO VIOLINS to have “more affinity with elaborate bowing exercises for the violin than with anything intended to charm the ear.” And in 1881, another critic for the *Times* was also left absolutely cold: “The concerto possesses no interest to any one but the violinist and even for a musically disposed audience is not a felicitous selection.” In a review of the Symphony Society of

New York's 1878 performance of Bach's Concerto in D minor, another critic was equally disappointed: “The concerto...addresses itself to students of the piano rather than to the public. Its ideas are interesting chiefly through their development, and the listener who expects to find in them loftiness or sweetness, or, indeed, anything beyond fluency and a graceful ornateness, is doomed to disappointment.” Undoubtedly, these writers found Bach's frequent recourse to a common stock of patterns and phrases much too audible and repetitive. While Bach often transferred vocal, keyboard, and orchestral styles from one medium to another, this is not the case in the concerti. Allegro themes are written, for the most part, in an energetic concerto style rather than simple periodic melodies. Even the slow-movement themes are instrumental in style.

While some critics were quicker to praise the skilled counterpoint and motivic development in these works, the net result was a popular stereotype of Bach as an academic composer. Thus, the performance of such works as the ORCHESTRAL SUITE IN B MINOR, with its dance movements and frequent four-bar melodies, was refreshing. As one critic described an 1874 performance, “The Suite...is one of those fresh, charming, simple, melodious pieces in which this most fascinating of the grand old masters...stands far above rivalry or imitation. With just enough formalism to give it a quaint air of old-fashioned elegance, it is entirely free from the scholastic dryness which the popular mind ignorantly associates with the name of Bach.” Another described the music as “quaint and rather dignified, instrumented with matchless ingenuity and contrapuntal skill [that is] decidedly interesting from an historical standpoint.”

The instrumentation of the Orchestral Suite in B minor makes this work a close relative of the concerto, with its addition of a transverse flute to the usual complement of strings. The flute is deployed as a concertante instrument throughout the suite, with solo passages in the middle section of the Overture, the second couplet of the Rondeau, and the double of the Polonaise where it adds an elaborative upper voice to the polonaise melody in the bass. In the final Badinerie, easily the most famous movement in the group, the flute never relinquishes its hold on the melody. Badineries, few and far between in the concert repertoire, designate suite movements of a playful nature, and, while re-

lated to the gavotte in many ways, are much faster in tempo. Rhythmically, this movement has much in common with the gavotte: it begins with a half-bar, the first phrase is eight beats long, with a caesura after the fourth and a point of rest on the eighth, and the phrases are later extended. The Overture, on the other hand, has a highly unusual structure: the fugal middle section is followed not by the expected repeat of the introductory section but by a variation in a slower $\frac{3}{4}$ meter. Also unusual for the dance movements are the contrapuntal devices such as the canon at the lower fifth in the outer voices of the Sarabande and the migration of the melody of the Polonaise to the bass line.

Reception of Bach's concertos began to change after the turn of the century, when composers and writers discovered their virtues as what the English poet and philosopher T. E. Hulme, writing at the beginning of the 20th century, called "geometrical" art. This movement was part of the reaction against Romanticism, and Hulme defines the outlook of this new tendency in art as the creation of "a certain abstract geometrical shape, which, being durable and permanent, shall be a refuge from the flux and impermanence of outside nature.... The geometrical line is something absolutely distinct from the messiness, the confusion, and the accidental details of existing things." In addition to the many artists, writers, and composers that reflect the ideals of this new objectivism in their works, it also gave rise to re-evaluations of the ways that the musical canon should be interpreted in performance. Attempts to minimize the role of performers' interpretation of works made motor-drive rhythms of many Baroque compositions ideal models for composers.

As Richard Taruskin has pointed out, the first movement of the HARPSICHORD CONCERTO IN D MINOR provided Stravinsky inspiration in writing his Concerto for Piano and Winds. What Stravinsky valued in particular was Bach's "hierarchized metrical texture," with its "simultaneous patterning" of steady sixteenths in the harpsichord, eighths in the continuo, quarter-note attacks in the violins, and syncopated half-note attacks in the violas beginning in bar 28 of the first movement. This movement also provides numerous instances of the idea of *fortspinnung*, a term first used by Wilhelm Fischer in 1915 to describe modulatory passages in Baroque melodies, where a short idea or motif is "spun out" into an entire phrase or period by such techniques

as sequential treatment, intervallic transformation, and repetition.

By de-emphasizing melody in favor of a *fortspinnung* treatment, Bach draws attention to the fast-paced and dramatic harmonic rhythm of the piece. His extraordinary sense of drama is evident right from the start with both soloist and ripieno instruments all stating the opening theme in an assertive unison, planting it firmly in the listeners' minds before the fragmentary permutations begin. The elaboration that immediately follows sets the harpsichord apart as the soloist in a long arch toward the first head motive with violas and continuo following the violins and harpsichord in imitation. This theme is then parsed apart into constituent motives, beginning with the first and second violins exchanging it back and forth. Throughout the movement, the violins play a dominant thematic role over a strong, driving pulse of semiquavers from the harpsichord and a consistent use of pedal points. There is much more textural variety in this work than many of Bach's other concertos, and the very often monophonic harpsichord line betrays this work's possible origin as a violin concerto. Near the end, the opening theme returns in unison only to be cut short for one more interlude before all instruments state it again in full to bring the movement to a close.

Bach frames the second movement, now in the subdominant, much like the first, with a unison statement of a theme at the beginning and at the end. But the driving rhythms that characterize the outer movements are set aside here for the complicated, cantabile melody that the harpsichord plays over a more peaceful accompaniment in the strings. In the third movement, the opening theme again frames the movement, but is rendered polyphonically with a series of distinctive motives any part of which is audible throughout the movement. While the first movement concentrated on a rich, pulsing harmonic motion, the third movement brings motivic development to the foreground, often in isolated fragments delivered by the orchestra, with the harpsichord driving the motion continuously forward in long lines with little room for breath.

Throughout the 20th century, writers and performers frequently compared many of Bach's works to a skyscraper or sewing machine in order to justify interpretations of the works with ever increasing tempi and rhythmic inflexibility. The Concerto in D minor for Two Violins has often been the ideal

testing ground, for, even more so than the D minor Harpsichord Concerto, the outer movements take off running in semiquavers and never let up through to the end. In the first movement, the solo violins' very distinctive first motive mark a descending pattern of leaps of a tenth that will figure over the course of the movement. While the ripieno texture often lightens for the full statement of this theme, the dramatic size of the leap does not cause a lull in the dense activity of the piece. The very appealing two-bar cantabile melody of the second movement is supported in the accompanying semiquavers by a motive characterized by a graceful turn on the lower neighbor tone. While the violins exchange triplet semiquavers throughout, the orchestra provides a much more open supporting texture than in the first movement, where they participate much more fully in the motivic development. The third movement opens with a fugue at the unison. The head motive turning on the lower neighbor in movement two is now often reduced to a tighter half-step lower neighbor, which makes the motive seem all the more hurried. Once again, the orchestra participates in its elaboration, punctuating the solo violins with this three-note figure throughout. The syncopations in the first solo drive things forward along with the unusual jabbing double stops in the solo violins that occur twice during the tutti sections. Triplet semiquavers recall the lilting motion of the second movement while providing the moments of most rapid motion in a curtailed phrase that often seems to have trouble getting off the ground.

Bach's most important model in concerto writing was Antonio Vivaldi, whose concertos, according to one recent monograph, became "the very embodiment of the new Italianate concerto and of a new language of instrumental music for the whole of musical Europe in the years around 1710." From Vivaldi, Bach picked up not only the three-movement structure of the cyclical concerto but also the ritornello form, which was of central significance in fashioning the outer movements. But Bach modified the Vivaldian concerto with a more playful idea of the interchange between ripieno and solo, which is so often rendered in unexpected ways within the course of a movement. While there is usually no problem in identifying the first and last statements of the ritornello, the number and exact position of the middle statements is seldom sharply defined in a remarkable integration of solo and tutti. The scores

of both the Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor and the Double Concerto in D Minor offer in the dissimilarities of their first and last movements a striking reflection of Bach's more sophisticated orchestral language: after the middle movement, the texture of chamber music gives way to an interchange in which the solo instruments are doubled for moments and in which symphonic interjections combine some or all accompanying string parts.

Bach's use of the harpsichord as a primary instrument in chamber music and the concerto was one of the ways in which he pointed forward in concerto composition, but it is in the FIFTH BRANDENBURG CONCERTO that he most boldly elevates the harpsichord from continuo instrument to unapologetic soloist. And what is so interesting about this particular work is how Bach fundamentally altered the orchestral relationship to the soloist in a way that would come to define the concerto principle among Bach's followers. Since the harpsichord was not a melodic instrument drawn into the interplay of tutti and solo but an instrument that could vie with the contrapuntal complexity of its orchestral partner, it gained a measure of independence that in the end enhanced the independence of the orchestra as well. It meant a division of solo and orchestra that Bach had not been able to achieve before. In this work, there is an overt struggle from within the members of the concertino of flute, violin, and harpsichord for central position. During the course of this struggle in the first movement, the harpsichord ends up successfully overwhelming not only the concertino but the ripieno as well.

At the outset, it appears as though a contest may ensue between the flute and the *ripieno* group. Since the only instrument not playing during the opening ritornello is the flute, its late entrance initially suggests a flute concerto. The harpsichordist and the first violinist join in as soloists at the first episode, however, and it quickly becomes apparent that a rather different kind of struggle will take place during the movement. With various starts and stops in the opening movement of the Fifth *Brandenburg*, however, the harpsichord moves from its traditional role as continuo, to an obbligato role still somewhat overshadowed by the solo flute and violin. After it comes to overshadow the concertino, it completely overwhelms the full ensemble.

As listeners, we are aware that in the Fifth *Brandenburg* the role of the harpsichord is at the outset

that of one member in a concertino of three. And we witness its astounding emergence as an unqualified solo instrument in what became the first major written concerto cadenza. The 64 measures that Bach entered with the note “*solo senza stromenti*” constitute almost a movement within itself. The extraordinary length of the final episode or cadenza, scored for unaccompanied harpsichord, features some extreme departures from the rhythmic and harmonic conventions of concerto style. Although the larger group does have the last word, so to speak, Bach’s conventional closure by the ritornello lacks the power to succeed in containing the disruptiveness both musical and social of the solo harpsichord material. This remarkable, unprecedented work took concerto form to its very limits. The number of extant sources of the Fifth *Brandenburg* far exceeds that of any of the others in the set and bears witness to the impression that this work must have made on Bach’s contemporaries and immediate successors.

Taruskin has examined recordings of this work from Furtwängler to Hogwood and documented the ever increasing tempos of its performances, where “resilient rhythms, flying tempi, energy, activity, actuality, clarity, concision, the absence

of subjective reflection” becomes increasingly the norm. Harnoncourt provides a synopsis of attitudes toward Bach performance that had come to dominate in the second half of the 20th century in the notes for his first recording of the *Orchestral Suites* from 1967 (and rereleased in 1987): “For Bach differed in one important respect from all composers of his generation: he rejected the freedom of the performer, that essential feature of all baroque music, entirely. Perhaps it was just because he...knew the dangers that threatened the best compositions of his colleagues...that he left no place for this in his own works.... Just as he wrote out the execution of the ornaments in detail...he also laid down himself the final and unequivocal form.” Recent recordings of Bach’s concertos, however, suggest that this idea is now in a tailspin. Tonight’s concert provides a rare opportunity to hear the direction interpretive responses to Bach’s most beloved works may take in the 21st century.

Notes by Scott L. Edwards

Scott L. Edwards is a PhD candidate in the music department at UC Berkeley.

The **BACH COLLEGIUM JAPAN**, hailed by *BBC Music Magazine* as “Kings from the East,” is comprised of a baroque orchestra with period instruments and choir that has been widely recognized as among the world’s leading interpreters of J. S. Bach and his contemporaries. Founded in 1990 by its current Music Director, Masaaki Suzuki, the Bach Collegium Japan introduced the Japanese audience to period instrument performances. In addition to the orchestra’s numerous instrumental programs, the choir and orchestra together perform an annual concert series of Bach’s cantatas.

The Bach Collegium Japan made its North American debut in April 2003, performing Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion* in New York at Carnegie Hall, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids and Boston. The ensemble’s recent international tours include concerts throughout Italy and Spain during the 2001–2002 season and performances at major festivals in Santiago de Compostela, Tel Aviv, Leipzig and Melbourne in 2000, the 250th anniversary year of Bach’s death.

The Bach Collegium Japan records for the Swedish record label BIS and has released 30 CDs of Bach’s church cantatas, which have garnered awards from major European publications, such as *BBC Music Magazine* and *Le Monde de la Musique*. Their recording of the early *Leipzig* cantatas was named “CD of the Month” by *The Gramophone*.

In summer 2005, the Bach Collegium Japan appeared at the Bach Festival in Seoul, Korea, and at the Ansbach and Schleswig-Holstein festivals in Germany.

Born in 1954 in Kobe, Japan, **MASAAKI SUZUKI** began to play the organ at the age of 12 at church services every Sunday. After graduating from Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music with a degree in composition and organ performance, he went on to study harpsichord and organ at the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam under professors Ton Koopman and Piet Kee.

Having achieved Soloist Diplomas in both of his instruments in Amsterdam, Mr. Suzuki was awarded Second Prize in the Harpsichord Competition (*basso continuo*) in 1980 and Third

Prize in the Organ Competition in 1982 at the Vlaanderen Festival in Bruges, Belgium. During 1981–1983, he was a harpsichord instructor at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Duisburg, Germany.

Since his return to Japan, not only has he given many concerts as an organist and harpsichordist all over the country, but he has also organized a well-known concert series at the chapel of Shoin Women’s University in Kobe, which houses a French classical organ built by Marc Garnier.

Meanwhile, Mr. Suzuki has acquired an outstanding reputation not only as an organ and harpsichord soloist, but also as a conductor. Since 1990, Suzuki has been the music director of the Bach Collegium Japan, a baroque orchestra with period instruments and choir, which specializes in regular performances of Bach’s cantatas, as well as other sacred works. As the director of Bach Collegium Japan, Suzuki regularly works together with renowned European soloists and ensembles. Suzuki has earned a fine reputation through his interpretation of Bach’s Cantata series on BIS. In addition, he has recently begun to record Bach’s complete cembalo music for BIS.

Every summer since 1983, Mr. Suzuki has given organ concerts in countries such as France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Austria, to name but a few. In autumn 2004, he appeared at the Academy of Ancient Music, and in March 2005 performed at the Netherlands Bach Society.

As a professor of organ and harpsichord and director of a new early music division, Mr. Suzuki teaches at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

In April 2001, Mr. Suzuki was decorated with the German «Verdienstkreuz am Bande des Verdienstordens der Bundesrepublik». Among his other awards are the 29th Mobil Music Award (1999), the 24th Ongakuno-tomo Award (2000), the 42nd Mainichi Newspapers Prize and the Shoichi Tsuji and Anna Miura Memorial Academic Prize (2003).

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