

I have owned the only published Piano Duet arrangement of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos for decades. Even at first glance, the transcription by Max Reger revealed a serious shortcoming: the upper, Primo part is crammed with notes and the bottom, Secondo part is too sparse by comparison. Attempting to play it resulted in one pianist struggling to penetrate the tangled treble notes while the other plodded through the uneventful bass. I considered revising it someday and kept it on my music shelf. Then in 2014, Concerto #2 seemed perfect for a Piano Four Hands program in a Bach concert series I was preparing. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that even heavily editing Reger's score would not be enough for a viable performance: one had to start anew. The resulting arrangement was fun to play and loved by the audience. Naturally, there was no other choice but to re-arrange the other 5 Concertos. Thus the Brandenburg Duets were born out of necessity.

My main goal was to create a transcription which highlighted the polyphony, imagining how Bach might have distributed the score if he intended to create 4-part inventions for Piano Duet. Doubling the cello/bass part in octaves, as Reger did, made no sense because it kept both hands of Secondo occupied and resulted in excessively bottom-heavy sonorities. Likewise, throwing all of the treble parts together in the Primo – violins, violas, oboes, solo french horns, flutes or trumpet plus the harpsichord - rendered the part unplayable at any decent tempo and hid the counterpoint in clusters of chords. To return to Baroque sensibilities, the individual lines had to be clear to the eye of the performer in order to be clear to the ear of listener. Since the fast movements of the Concertos usually have at least 4 voices intertwining and because more than 3 voices in polyphony become harmony in effect, some incidental parts could be omitted without any harm done to the integrity of the music. Using the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra's "chamber" sound as a point of reference, I was able to restore the hierarchy and balance of the parts. At the same time, secondary string lines which may not be clearly audible in the orchestral version now sounded more distinctly on the keyboard. This approach helped give Bach's magnificent texture the desired clarity for an elegant new translation.

Equal partnership of the pianists was another vital need in conveying the nature of Bach's material and it resulted naturally from the polyphonic approach discussed above. In a Concerto Grosso, the sound should be fused in the Tutti sections and divided into threads for the solos. When different instruments, such as the flute and the violin, have simultaneous solos, we have no trouble hearing two voices. On the keyboard, however, the easiest way to give the lines different expression is to assign them to different people. The Piano Duet medium presents equally effective possibilities of either blending or differentiating the sound each performer produces. In the present arrangement, Secondo is always given an opportunity to fully indulge in beautiful melodic lines and the Duet partners execute frequent hand-crossings and other logistical adjustments which go with the piano-4-hands territory and make the collaborative experience even more enjoyable. These thematic exchanges enhance the momentum of the slower movements, as in the Andante of Brandenburg Duet #1 where Secondo takes the lead in the sublime oboe and violin duet.

Bach combined these 6 instrumental works into a set of Concertos for presentation to the Margrave of Brandenburg in 1721 but they were composed over several years for disparate solo

instrument groupings. To do these marvellous works justice, an arrangement had to use the modern piano's full potential to convey the unique scoring and character of each one. In the process of transforming the Brandenburg Concertos into the Brandenburg Duets, I found that their various instrumentation dictated particular adjustments:

Concerto #1 is scored for 12 parts, the largest group of all. The French horn solos were a major obstacle to conveying the rich texture since they play in the same register as the strings. Eliminating most nearby notes highlighted their parts and a special touch to imitate the "hunting horn" would help the interpretation.

The trumpet was fairly easy to isolate in Concerto #2 because of its high register and the relatively light texture.

Concerto #3, written just for strings and continuo, needed consistent register changes in the 2nd movement to point out the 4-part canon entrances.

The soaring virtuoso violin part set against 2 recorders influenced many decisions in Concerto #4, including slower tempos for proper execution of the 32nd notes in the 1st movement and of the dense and vigorous closing fugue.

Concerto #5 required the greatest skill in integrating the wide-ranging harpsichord solo part between two pianists while preserving the framework. The harpsichord had to be relegated down an octave for the Tutti sections of the 1st movement and great precision is required of the partners as they share the virtuosic cadenza. The piano's heavier action constrains the tempo, but not the spirit, of another brilliant closing fugue.

Perhaps the most radical, yet to me the most successful, change is the transformation of the first movement of Concerto #6 in B-flat major, scored for 2 solo violas and lower strings with harpsichord. This Concerto is the least popular because its overall low register lacks brightness and variety. The opening movement is usually played at a fast pace (even though Bach provided no tempo indication) and since the canon of violas is written in the same register as the accompaniment, the impression is unremarkable. This canon is impossible to realize in the same register on the piano. After the voices were separated by an octave, the lovely outline of the theme revealed itself and took on a gravity almost reminiscent of Brahms, dictating a slower tempo. The pedal, a device entirely avoidable when playing Bach, became indispensable here for creating the wonderful cushion of open chords. Finally, the key of B-flat major, not the best for strings, sounds divine on the piano, bringing forth this movement's truly majestic essence.

The order of the Concertos on this recording was influenced by a desire to create an engaging listening sequence for the Brandenburg Duets, paralleling a concert experience. #1 is a logical start but it is the longest and best separated from #2 since they are both in the key of F major. #5 is most exciting and complex and #2 is most popular and jubilant, so they are good endings for a double-CD set or for halves of a concert. #6 is a revelation and a good opener and #3 and #4 work well in the middle, resulting in a coherent numerical sequence 1, 3, 5 – 6, 4, 2 which also balances out for timings of the recording. For a concert audience, this order affords the best pace and variety and it has been previously employed by conductors such as Claudio Abbado.

As thrilled as I am with the release of this recording, it is only a step toward my ultimate wish: to publish the Brandenburg Duets in time for the 300th anniversary of the Concertos in

2021 so they will be available for other musicians and amateur pianists to perform. I simplified this new arrangement as much as possible and most movements are well within the reach of intermediate-advanced students. Playing Bach's music is deeply gratifying and twice as joyful when the experience can be shared with a partner. My hope is that this arrangement will finally establish the Brandenburg Concertos as a much-needed boost for the Piano Duet repertoire.