

B

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
(1685–1750)

Concerto in D minor for Two Violins Double Concerto

Today, around half a million people live in Leipzig, a city that boasts one of the oldest and most respected orchestras in the world, the Gewandhaus, as well as two opera houses, a couple of music festivals and much more besides. However, when Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723, he inherited a professional music staff of four town pipers, three violinists and one apprentice. At the age of forty-eight, he had taken what seemed to him to be a backward move in his career, becoming Kantor of St Thomas's. He built up his force of musicians by recruiting from his school and the nearby university. Composed in 1717, the 'Bach Double', as it is often called, came with him from his previous job in Cöthen, but seven years after he had arrived in Leipzig, he made a transcription for two harpsichords. Many of Bach's orchestrations were for purely pragmatic reasons,

so we might presume that none of the three fiddlers were up to playing it in its original form. However, when the Cöthen version of the work was lost, Bach specialists were able to reconstruct it from the harpsichord version. The slow movement is surely one of Bach's most sublime creations.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Daniel Hope (violin); Marieke Blankestijn (violin); Chamber Orchestra of Europe.
Warner Classics: 2564625452.

CHART POSITION 32

Tocatta and Fugue in D minor

This work might as well be called 'The Organ'. For many, the instrument Stravinsky called 'the monster that never breathes' seems to come alive in this piece, which might have been written to make the listener believe that the organ talks, proving Stravinsky wrong. This is perhaps all the more striking when one realises that, since

right Johann Sebastian Bach: *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*



Johann Sebastian Bach

1685-1750

'Johann Sebastian Bach has done everything completely, he was a man through and through.'

FRANZ SCHUBERT



This German composer was the most famous of a large musical family. Alongside Handel, he was one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period. He was also an organist and director of church music, which is why lots of his works are religious.

Orphaned as a child, he became a chorister when he was fifteen. Four years later, he walked from his home in Arnstadt to Lübeck to hear a performance by his favourite composer, Buxtehude. The teenager then walked all the way back to Arnstadt, a total journey of some 420 miles.

Bach's career began in Weimar as an organist and court musician. Then he took a job in Cöthen, before eventually going to live and work in Leipzig for almost three decades.

He was without doubt a diligent composer, but that very much went with the territory of writing for church choirs. There was an expectation that a steady stream of new choral works would be

DID YOU KNOW?
Alongside composing, Bach also found time to teach music to many of his children. He had twenty in total - so, an entire class of young musicians!

composed for his choirs to perform. Although a hard worker, Bach was not the quiet bookish don that one might imagine. Instead, he often had blazing rows with his

employers and was even locked up for disloyalty on one notable occasion. As well as his choral works, Bach wrote some of the finest examples of secular Baroque keyboard and orchestral music.

It was not until after his death that Bach's true greatness was recognised. Towards the end of his life, rather than his huge output being hailed as that of a master composer, he began to be overshadowed by his sons Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christian, Johann Christoph Friedrich and Wilhelm Friedemann, all of whom were successful composers of the day.

Bach was a fan of two things: coffee and numbers. Lots of his pieces play games with numbers, inaudibly. And he wrote a whole cantata about coffee.

the 1980s at least, there has been a growing body of opinion that the work is not even by J. S. Bach. As with a lot of Bach's music, there is no surviving manuscript by the man himself - something that is not enough in itself to cast a stain on the work's credentials. It is more the complete originality, the one-off nature and the very un-Bach-like characteristics that lead some musicologists to doubt its provenance. If Bach did write it, say the believers, it was probably when he was very young - possibly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. The finest performances, such as the one recommended below, prove that, no matter who actually wrote it, it's a masterpiece of epic proportions.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING
Daniel Chorzempa (organ).
Pentatone: PTC5186127.
CHART POSITION 50

The Brandenburg Concertos (BWV 1046-51)



There is no doubt that J. S. Bach did write the *Brandenburg Concertos*. However, he would not have recognised them by that name. When he penned the six concertos, almost certainly during his time at Cöthen (presumably for various members of the Cöthen Court Orchestra) the composer gave them the title 'Concertos for Several Instruments'. It was only his decision to package them up as a present for Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg (a margrave is roughly on a par with a marquis) that gave them their title.

Sadly for Bach, there appears to be no record of him ever having received a reply from the

Margrave - and certainly not the one he desired: 'Thank you, Herr Bach, here's a large bundle of money and a job.' Indeed, there is no evidence the Margrave himself even heard them played.

Each of the six concertos appeals most to different listeners, from the galumphing First, the more 'stately-home' styling of the Second, the homely Third, the lofty Fourth and the galloping Fifth right through to the joyous Sixth.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING
English Baroque Soloists; John Eliot Gardiner (conductor). SDG: SDG707.
CHART POSITION 56



St Matthew Passion

Good Friday 1727 in Leipzig was a particularly good Friday. When Bach had first arrived, four years earlier, he had no doubt wowed his employers - not to mention the congregation - with that year's Easter offering, the *St John Passion*. Bach was ushered to Leipzig on the promise of a very large salary indeed, so the splendour of the work was probably timely. Given that he was responsible for providing weekly music at not one, but two, churches, for teaching singing to the school-children, for training the choir, for teaching Latin (although, in the end, he farmed this part out to a deputy), he could surely be forgiven for thinking he was doing enough. Indeed, one of the reasons for Bach's constant use of existing chorale tunes as the basis for his extended cantatas was not just

familiarity to his audience, but also sheer necessity. Four years into the job, though, he decided to compose another major choral piece. The *St Matthew Passion* is a monster of a work for two orchestras with extra words by Bach's favourite poet, Picander.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Anthony Rolfe Johnson (tenor, Evangelist); Barbara Bonney (soprano); Ann Monoylos (soprano); Anne Sofie von Otter (alto); Michael Chance (alto); Howard Crook (tenor); Olaf Bär (baritone); Cornelius Hauptmann (bass); English Baroque Soloists; Monteverdi Choir; John Eliot Gardiner (conductor). Deutsche Grammophon Archiv: 4297732.

CHART POSITION 78

Mass in B minor



There are several reasons why many Bach-lovers regard the B minor Mass as the pinnacle of his work. Size, for one, singles it out, even when compared to his previous titans, the *St John Passion* and the *St Matthew Passion*. It also contains some of the most engaging passages of music that he ever wrote, such as the opening five-part *Kyrie eleison*. Composed around 1748–49, it came at the end of Bach's life, when he had only one year left to live.

When the work is heard in its entirety, the listener comes away with the impression that this is a piece of music the composer had been building up to writing for the whole of his life. It therefore seems ironic that much of this best-loved work was 'bottom-drawer' music – music that Bach had either put by earlier or recycled. Indeed, he didn't even give the work a name. So this bundled collection of itinerant manuscripts simply bears the names of its

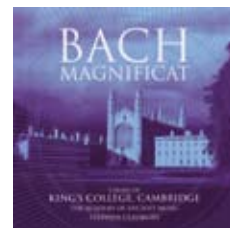
individual sections, save for the *Missa*, which he transplanted wholesale from some fifteen years earlier. Despite being a motley disarray of homeless Mass sections on paper, it sounds completely wonderful.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Barbara Schlick (soprano); Catherine Patriasz (soprano); Charles Brett (alto); Howard Crook (tenor); Peter Kooy (bass); Chorus and Orchestra of Collegium Vocale, Ghent; Philippe Herreweghe (conductor). Virgin Veritas: 6931972.

CHART POSITION 88

Cantata No. 147



If we translate the title of the most popular section of Bach's cantata a little more accurately than the now ubiquitous English version we know, it comes out something like 'Jesus remains my joy, my heart's comfort and essence', rather than 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring'. Indeed, the rest of the translation bears precious little relation to the actual German text, written by the lawyer and poet Salomo Franck. Accuracy of words aside, this exquisite movement – choral interludes between that divine, undulating melody – might be best seen as a mere key to unlocking the rest of the cantata, entitled *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* (which translates as 'Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life'). Bach, in his quest to supply music for umpteen venues throughout his life, recycled the cantata – adding the now favourite section only the second time around. Originally destined for the last Sunday of Advent, the reworked version became a setting for May's Feast of the Visitation. Thank goodness, in some respects, for the composer's pretty oppres-

sive work schedule. And a great example of recycling making sense.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Susan Gritton (soprano); Lisa Milne (soprano); Michael Chance (counter-tenor); Ian Bostridge (tenor); Michael George (bass); Choir of King's College, Cambridge; Academy of Ancient Music; Stephen Cleobury (conductor). EMI Classics: 5569942.

CHART POSITION 110



Cello Suites

Rarely has a composer managed to pare his music down to its absolute essence as Bach did in his *Cello Suites*. Perhaps there are three reasons for this: one, we're dealing with a genius composer; two, their solo nature – forcing Bach to astound his listener with clever and sometimes fiendishly difficult ways of maximising the instrument; and three, the fact that the cello is often considered the nearest instrument to the human voice. It somehow captures the feeling of exposed honesty, of complete naturalness, as the greatest voices do.

There are six suites in all, each with six movements. There are no surviving manuscripts in Bach's own hand, so musicians have relied on a copy written out by his second wife, Anna Magdalena. Her role as a scribe has even led some musical historians to paint her as a sort of Bacon to Bach's Shakespeare, with the suggestion that she actually wrote many of the cello suites herself.

The eminent cellist Pablo Casals kicked off the craze for recording all six in the 1920s – he'd found a second-hand copy of the music in a charity shop when he was just thirteen years old. Today, stunning complete versions abound.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Yo-Yo Ma (cello). Sony: SM2K89754.

CHART POSITION 134

Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D

Bach wrote a total of four orchestral suites, although his definition of an orchestra is pretty loose, as the group of musicians performing the work might be as small as a string quartet, a handful of woodwind players, some trumpets and a percussionist. The most popular of the suites is the Third, which was written, along with the others, during the last period of his life in Leipzig. It comes in five movements and, from the outset, it feels like 'civic' music, perhaps reflecting the fact that Bach was a public servant, rather than an aristocrat's in-house musician. In Germany and France, these works tend to be known as *ouvertures*, which is also the designation of the first movement in each case. The *Air* (the second movement) has now been reclaimed in its original form after a period being primarily known as a transcription by August Wilhelmj, which made it a party piece playable on only one string of a violin – hence its nickname *Air on the G string*. For an entire generation, this piece will forever be linked to Hamlet cigars, after being used in a long-running and highly popular television advertising campaign.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Regis: RRC1160.

CHART POSITION 141