**Bach ‘On the Move’: *The Six Brandenburg Concertos*.**

Moving one’s body to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is not a self-evident affair. Indeed, as a composer, Bach never took to composing straightforward ballet music – unlike, for instance, composers such as Telemann or Rameau. Even his instrumental dance forms, like the orchestra and harpsichord suites, were never explicitly meant for dancing.

Still, one can examine the question from a broader perspective. After all, Bach has been going places for such a long time now. From the moment Mendelssohn brought the St Matthew Passion back to life in 1829, more than one hundred years after its première, Bach’s music itself was given a tremendous boost, creating musical pulsations of such magnitude that they were bound to last through the coming centuries. After two hundred years, these pulsations have now travelled such a great distance that it is no exaggeration to say that not a single day, hour or minute passes by without works by Bach being played somewhere in the world.

Apparently, the music of the Thomas Cantor is of such compelling force that even three centuries after its creation it still manages to move people on a visceral level. The universal nature of Bach’s music turned out to be so substantial and groundbreaking that his work even survives a variety of non-authentic influences. No matter how one looks at Bach’s music – provided it is treated with due respect and insight – its stature remains beyond dispute.

In fact, the attempt to ‘move one’s body’ to Bach’s music, even though the composer never hinted at it, even appears logical, almost self-evident, when looked upon more closely. To understand this, one must look at Bach’s own place within the history of music. Bach lived at a remarkable moment in history, at the crossroads of two developments that took up a total of several centuries.

**Back to the past: the *stile antico***

Firstly, his music inevitably looked back to a distant past. This development (which will later, in the baroque era, be labelled ‘stile antico’) began in the thirteenth century when the first simple forms of polyphony were slowly taking shape; they gradually evolved from the simple canon to the famous Dutch School (Orlande de Lassus, Josquin des Prez) into the illustrious art of polyphony. In polyphony, all voices are considered of equal import. This art would continue to develop until it reached its peak with Bach. Bach’s work is the successful synthesis of everything that preceded him: the perfection of such a summary, to which nothing of consequence could really be added, meant the final point had been reached – all possibilities had been exhausted.

The music from Bach’s early period betrays a strong focus on the figure of the Creator, on God. Music, in this sense, was to serve one single purpose: to act as a reflection of the cosmic order and of the divine laws of creation, impersonal, objective and clearly proportioned. And this fitted perfectly with the worldview of the time, which was marked by a need to find correlations in all matter of things. This was still very solidly entrenched in the ideas of Pythagoras: musicology, arithmetic (study of numbers) and cosmology (study of astronomy and astrology) were considered the highest of sciences. The relationship music-numbers-cosmos continued into the Baroque period: Johann Sebastian Bach adhered to these old traditions.

**Looking into the future: the stile nuovo**

Secondly, Bach’s music points to a new future. In the early seventeenth-century, Italy had become known as the birthplace of an entirely new form of musical expression. One melody took the lead in this form, and was supported by the other voices in a consonant effort called harmony, which was vertical in nature. The melody could become extremely expressive, the accompanying voices simply continued to support (*basso continuo*). The operas of Claudio Monteverdi were a first expression of this ‘stile nuovo’.

Also during this period, music came to serve an entirely different societal function. In parallel to a changing world view, a new style of music-making shifted emphasis from God to humankind. Music no longer served to give expression to God’s perfect creation (the Music of the Spheres), but was given a purely mundane purpose, which was to please humankind, to excite the senses and evoke emotions… in short, to *move* people. Music increasingly became a language people could understand.

This new musical style was strongly influenced by the old Latin and Greek Ars Retorica. A composition was increasingly viewed as a discourse, a story, with a structural and emotional content which both the composer and the musicians were to use in order to convince the audience. In the end, this resulted in the formulation of a musical rhetoric that was entirely in keeping with the rules and regulations of the Ars Rhetorica itself – in terms of both the structural composition of a musical story, and the application of all manner of rhetorical figures – which was required to amplify the plastic effect on the audience. This process involved the various musical elements – including key, interval, rhythm, motif, harmony, tempo and so on – to be endowed with their very own emotional meaning. This would enable several entities; firstly, the composer and, secondly, the musician, who was to summon affects of the greatest possible variety, ranging from negative emotions like sadness, fear, aggression, despair and melancholy to positive ones like joy, ecstasy, assurance, peace, harmony, etc.

**At a crossroads of two traditions**

As mentioned previously, Bach lived in a time when both these two traditions were at a crossroads. He successfully bridged the two and arrived at an ingenious synthesis. Not only did he fully master all the elements of the old style, he was also a master in applying musical rhetoric and inventing (‘invenire’) the very special musical techniques required to express a delicate emotional value.

An essential part of the Latin Ars Rhetorica was the presentation of reason, the story of the rhetorician. The manner in which this story was told determined to a great extent the success of the suggestive nature of the discourse. First and foremost this concerned matters like the tempo of the discourse, the articulation, intonation, accentuation, the timing of pauses, and so on. Furthermore, it involved an intense experience of the story to the extent that all affects would reach the audience.

But no less important was the composure and the movement of the body, the mimicry and especially the gestures, the language of signs that accompanied it. The movement of the entire human body constituted, as it were, the final link to draw the attention and the imagination of the audience to the content of the discourse to the greatest possible effect.

It would seem, then, that with a musical discourse these elements play a subordinate role because the player is in need of all his bodily faculties (arms, fingers, feet, mouth) to provide a correct rendering of the score. Here dancers have free scope: the task of the musicians to award Bach’s penetrating rhetorical power with pure physical expression is compensated by the physical patterns of the dancers.

This makes it possible to experience the confluence of three closely related arts in the unique creation of Bach’s six Brandenburg Concerts: the spoken word, which fashions itself in accordance with music, and is completed in the art of movement. These are the immaterial arts, unfolding in time, contrary to the more material, concrete arts like painting or sculpting.

This extraordinary triumvirate allows for an unparalleled, in-depth exploration of Bach’s own musical narrative. The result is a harmonious dialogue that is logical, functional and, most importantly, emotional..

Kees van Houten

**The Brandenburg Concerts**

On 24 March 1721, Bach signed the preface of a leather-bound score called ‘*Six concerts avec plusieurs instruments dédiées à son Altesse Royalle Monseigneur Crétien Louis Marggraf de Brandenbourg*’. This magnificent manuscript in Bach’s own, meticulous handwriting contains the six works that became known in music history as the ‘Brandenburg Concertos’. They were sent by Bach as a gift to the Margrave of Brandenburg, but were almost certainly never performed at the same court.

Bach himself was active at the Court of Cöthen at the time (1717-1723), where the young prince Leopold von Anhalt-Cöthen ‘s excellent court orchestra was in employ, made up of musicians from all around Europe. No doubt, Bach used his own musicians on the various occasions he performed the six concerts for his sovereign Leopold so it would be more appropriate to speak of the ‘Cöthener Concertos’.

The most remarkable aspect of the six concertos is their enormous diversity –particularly with regards to musical structure and instrumentation. It seems as though Bach wanted to establish some kind of compendium of what could be done with the ‘concerto’ genre at that time. His piece was indeed the most brilliantly diverse instrumental collection ever to be conceived: no two concerts were written for the same combination of instruments and the alternation of solo instruments and tutti was different every time.

The following musical notes to and rhetorical interpretations of the Brandenburg Concertos stood at the base of the choreographic composition conceived by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.

**Concerto No. 1 in** [F](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/F_majeur) **major BWV 1046**

1.(without tempo indication) - 2. Adagio - 3. Allegro - 4. Menuetto – Trio – Menuetto – Polacca – Menuetto – Trio - Menuetto

concertino: 2 corni da caccia, 3 oboes, bassoon, violino piccolo

ripieno: 2 violins, viola, continuo

Parts 1, 2 and 4 of this concerto date back to 1713 and were originally the introductory Sinfonia to Cantate BWV 208 ‘Was mir behagt ist nur die muntre Jagd!’. Bach composed this cantata on the occasion of the 35th birthday of prince Christian von Sachsen-Weissenfels, a fervent hunter. The cantata was probably performed as a festive conclusion to a hunt. Hence the use of two hunting horns (corni da caccia).

The nobility is celebrating the favorable outcome of the hunt in predictably stately and courtly fashion. In the middle of these imposing sounds, the *violino piccolo* attempts to draw attention to itself in a dignified manner. While in the first part it still took on a modest part in conjunction with the other strings, during the inharmonious and dissonant sounding Adagio, it enters into an exciting dialogue with the oboe. It then continues its attempts to further breach the established order, in a vivid Allegro with provocative, virtuoso solos, but to no avail. In the fourth part, the aristocracy sets things straight with a number of ornate, distinguished court dances. In this final move, the aristocratic concert achieves its balanced conclusion.

**Concerto No. 2 in F major BWV 1047**

1.(without tempo indication) - 2. Andante - 3. Allegro assai

concertino: trumpet, recorder, oboe, violin

ripieno: 2 violins, viola, continuo

Repetitive, short, obstinate motifs in the high ranges lend this concerto the character of a continuously flaring pattern of flames. It largely owes its lively play to the four soloists: trumpet, recorder, oboe and violin. Above all, the uncommonly high trumpet commands our unfailing attention. The Andante has a more introvert character, in part because of the missing trumpet. The three other soloists offer poignant notes in an intense dialogue using a ‘traurig’ motif with many a ‘suspiratio’ (sigh) figure as a continuously repeating mantra, worked out in minute detail. In the third part, the trumpet takes the lead again. Using a flashing motif in the high ranges, it then enters into to a fiery fugue with a compelling, unstoppable cadence.

**Concerto No. 3 in** [G](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/G_majeur) **major BWV 1048**

1.(without tempo indication) - 2. Adagio – 3. Allegro

concertino: 3 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos

ripieno: continuo

The ultimate string concerto! In the first movement, all instruments present themselves in three groups of three (three violins, three violas, three cellos) with an air of self-confidence and positively steadfast tone, dominated by an obstinate ‘figura corta’ (or ‘anapest’: short – short - long). This cheerful, harmonious opening seems to continue until suddenly, in measure 47, a more erratic motif causes some insecurity. This motif continues to pop up as a sort of disruptive element, almost turning chaotic in the end. Ultimately, however, the main theme triumphs. What is noticeable in this movement, are the different powerful unison cadences, underlining the unity and the homogeneity of the strings.

No solos appear in the concerto itself. That is probably why Bach, exceptionally so, decided not to include a slow middle movement to this part. After a short transitional cadence (Adagio) the players in the third movement present themselves in quick succession, showcasing a whirling theme akin to a blustering wind, that picks up again and again and appears to go on without ending. This uninterrupted deluge of notes is of such a grandeur and force that as a listener you ultimately feel there is only one instrument playing in its full splendor – the strings.

**Concerto No. 4 in G major BWV 1049**

1. Allegro - 2. Andante - 3. Presto

concertino: violin, 2 ‘flauti d’echo’ (recorders)

ripieno: 2 violins, continuo

The graceful fourth concerto offers a remarkable leading role to the three soloists. Two playful recorders offer a charming, gracious theme with a light-footed dance-like character in 3/8 measure. All the time, a virtuoso violin solo boldly (sometimes even rampantly) tries to escape and break through the structure. However, the winds always respond with due attentiveness, and repeatedly step up as soloists. This results in an exciting, vivacious dialogue between the competing soloists, a dialogue which is nicely structured by the parts in *tutti*.

The middle movement (Andante) is an intense, nostalgic lament. The sad theme of the *tutti* is continuously repeated by the three soloists as if it were an echo – perhaps a sad memory of a love long lost? Suspiratio (sigh) figures underline the wistful character of the whole part.

During the subsequent Presto, the light-footed ambiance returns in the shape of a whirling fugue, running playfully through all the voices. After the exposition, the solo violin attempts to reclaim a leading role, but is continuously parried by the recorders playing a fugue theme. A second, more powerful attempt at an outbreak follows in which the violin tries to overturn the score’s structural features in a provocative, almost brutal fashion with virtuoso interludes. But yet again, the fugue valiantly reasserts itself, with the winds continuing in a leading role. At the end, the battle for dominion rears its head once more with snappy staccato chords, but the two recorders lead the fugue to a balanced, final cadence.

**Concerto No. 5 in D major BWV 1050**

1. Allegro - 2. Affettuoso - 3. Allegro

concertino: flute (traverso), solo violin, obligato harpsichord (cembalo concertato)

ripieno: violin, viola, continuo

This concerto is undoubtedly the most harmonious and ‘balanced’ of all six. The three solo parts, violin, traverso and harpsichord, are strongly connected on a harmonic basis, above all by means of a series of attractive dialogues, which showcase a great wealth of varied and well-ornamented motifs in one smooth, flowing motion. The main theme of the first movement shows an ecstatic, exuberant pleasure through open broken triads and a great ambitus (more than two octaves). Particularly exquisite is the way in which, time and again, the soloists make room for the return of the main theme with short, leisurely motifs. The harmonic unity between the three is so intense that near the end, with short, decelerating impulses, the flute and the violin clear the way for an elaborate solo of the harpsichord which launches into a virtuoso interlude with an unrelenting cadence, offering a unique moment in music history – the first great solo cadence.

The slow movement (Affettuoso) is a beautiful trio for soloists in which the harpsichord takes on the role of the soloist, as well as the continuo part. The three voices engage in an almost perfect dialogue with a short melancholic, loving motif developed down to the minutest of details. An example of perfect interpersonal communication. The third movement (Allegro) seems to draw directly from the Music of the Spheres and descend upon earth like a light-footed gigue. The violin and the flute launch into a light-flashing, butterfly-like fugue theme which minutes later is adopted by the harpsichord and reaches earth at the start of the shared tutti. Marvelous dance music wells up exhibiting a joy that is unburdened of any restriction and seems to go on forever in an unrelenting cadence. In the middle movement something akin to a dissonant counterforce develops (the Confutatio of Reason) with a new theme in minor. This theme engages in a thrilling battle with the fugue theme which now also appears in minor. Exciting modulations to exotic keys ensue until, after a cadence in B minor, the harpsichord takes swift action with a fierce D major chord after which the A part is repeated as a whole and this superb concerto reaches it conclusion.

**Concerto No. 6 in B-flat major BWV 1051**

1. (without tempo indication) - 2. Adagio ma non troppo - 3. Allegro

concertino: 2 violas, 2 viola di gambas, cello

ripieno: continuo

In terms of instrumentation, the sixth concerto is the most exceptional of all: two violas, two gambas, a cello and a continuo part. The high strings and the winds are missing and that results in a low, dark musical idiom. The two violas (normally intended to fill in the mid-range voices) take the lead and engage in a veritable duel with each other. In the first movement, they are fighting a fierce battle for the lead by means of a canon, with the two voices succeeding each other rapidly at the same level to a heavy and a light bar part. To keep everything in check, the other voices do not evolve beyond stiff, enduring repetitive eighths. In the second movement (Adagio ma non troppo), the two violas give each other much more space. Paying close attention to the other’s trajectory, they take it in turns to bring to bear an expressive cantabile melody that traverses all of the important keys. The result is an interesting dialogue between them. This harmonic rapprochement has its crowning moment in the final movement (Allegro) where the two violas embrace each other in a peaceful coexistence. For the first time in the six concerts, the soloists are unanimously playing the same theme. And a theme of surprising beauty and simplicity it is. This warm-blooded melody, like a kind of refrain, keeps returning in a variety of keys, offering a poignant conclusion to the entire cycle.

Kees van Houten

**Kees van Houten** was born in Helmond in 1940. After a grammar school education, he undertook training in piano- and organ-playing at the Brabant Conservatory in Tilburg. From 1957 to 2008, he was the organist of the St Lambert Church in Helmond where, for more than fifty years, he played the historical 1772 Robustelly organ. From 1971 to 1992, he was head teacher of organ at the Faculty of Music of the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Utrecht. He and Marinus Kasbergen co-authored the book ‘Bach en het getal’ (1985) and ‘Bach, die Kunst der Fuge en het getal’ (1989).  
In the series ‘Van Taal tot Klank’, he went on to publish 14 books on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, with topics including the cross shape in the St Matthew Passion, the Hohe Messe and the Weihnachts-Oratorium.  
As a concert organist, Kees van Houten has held numerous international performances. In addition, he gives lectures, workshops and interpretation training on Bach to professionals as well as to amateurs and laypeople in the Netherlands and beyond.

Kees van Houten was very closely involved in the preparation of the choreography of the Brandenburg Concertos.

[Short version for evening programmes:] Kees van Houten is a professional organist and musicologist specialized in the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, to whom he has devoted a large number of publications. Kees van Houten was very closely involved in the preparation of the choreography of the Brandenburg Concertos.