

**Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra**  
**Program Notes for Concert October 10, 2015**

*by Geoffrey Decker*

**Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat major, BWV 1051**  
**by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

In his little more than 75 years, German composer Johann Sebastian Bach wrote 1128 cataloged works. There are more than that, though. In fact, musicologists over the years added another 190 plus, although some mistakenly. We also know that some of his music is lost; rumor has it that some of his cantata music was used to line bird cages in the late 18th and early 19th centuries! But, of all these more than 1300 works, the six Brandenburg Concertos are by far his most popular. So popular are they that there are hundreds of recordings of all six or of one or more listed for sale online as of today!

Although it is uncertain when Bach wrote his six Brandenburg Concertos, we can assume that, based on their instrumentation, he composed them for the small but excellent group of hand-picked musicians working at the court of Köthen in what is now Germany. As Kapellmeister there from August 1717 until he left for Leipzig in 1723 to take up his greatest career post, he wrote a lot of original music for the ensemble. There is strong evidence to suggest that, when Bach traveled to Berlin to purchase a new harpsichord in autumn of 1718, he performed in the palace of Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, the son of the then Great Elector. Being a great lover of music, the prince probably commissioned several concertos for his own musicians. Bach obliged by sending the six concertos dedicated to the prince and later designated by an early biographer as "The Six Brandenburg Concertos".

The *Brandenburg Concerto No. 6* in B flat major, BWV 1051 is in three movements, the first without tempo indication by Bach himself although often performed fast or moderately fast (*allegro* or *allegro moderato*); the second a slower, or *adagio*, movement; and the third, once again fast and dance-like, much like the final movement of the Concerto No. 5. Scored for

strings and harpsichord, it is especially unusual because of the absence of violins. The score specifies two different types of viola, the viola da gamba (viola of the knee), actually somewhat out of style by Bach's time, and the viola as we know it today, then known as viola da braccio (viola of the arm). It is two of the latter type that are the work's solo instruments. Tonight's performance will, of course, be performed on modern violas, two solo and two accompanying.

Ask someone who only dabbles in classical music what piece or pieces he or she knows and they will often mention the Brandenburg Concertos of Bach. What makes these works so popular? Well, they are the most played. Listen to any music by Bach and you might begin to realize why he and George Frideric Handel represent what many consider to be the two quintessential Baroque composers. Perhaps it is because Bach's music appeals almost equally to our analytical left brains and to our artistic right brains; in other words, it gets "equal billing" on both sides. For many, Bach's music satisfies both sides of our personalities. Bach even more so than Handel, though, because he was more mechanical and mathematical; i.e., the left-brain stuff. Handel, a composer of music primarily for public consumption like opera, was more tuneful, outgoing, and full of spectacle. Instead, Bach, who was writing for private performances, smaller venues, and the Lutheran Church, was more restricted in how he expressed himself. But, as we know very well, these restrictions did nothing to diminish the quality of his music and the satisfaction we derive from listening to it.

**Recommended Recordings:** As stated above, there are hundreds of performances available on CD or for download. As with any work written before 1900 (and some even since then), there are two types of recordings: those that are performed on period instruments and those that are on modern instruments. There are even subdivisions of these two categories. For example, modern instruments playing in strict period manner, what is called "big band" modern, versus chamber-style modern, etc., etc. The different ways of playing the six Brandenburg Concertos are myriad. To satisfy both camps of period performance versus modern performance, several example recordings of each are recommended here.

Of the period performances, the 2012 recording by the Dunedin Consort, a Scottish period-instrument group under the direction of harpsichordist John

Butt, on the British label Linn Records (CKD 430,) is an excellent example. It is available to order on Amazon as a Super Audio CD (SACD), but is also downloadable for a mere \$13 in CD quality format at [www.linnrecords.com](http://www.linnrecords.com). Other examples of period-instrument recordings are the excellent and affordable boxed set including not only the six Brandenburg Concertos, but also Bach's four orchestral overtures, offered on the Harmonia Mundi label with the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin (HMX 2908074.77). If you wish to watch the concertos played on period instruments, the EuroArts DVD with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra cannot be beat for skill on the sometimes treacherous instruments and for musicality. One small complaint about the DVD, though, is that the players don't look to be having enough fun (although you can't tell this in the wonderful music they make).

Among all of the modern instrument versions in the catalog, the two by the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and their famed violinist conductor, Sir Neville Marriner, are hard to beat. A personal favorite is the set on Deutsche Grammophon with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan and recorded in 1978-1979 (DG 415374-2). Although considered "out of style", "big band", and the antithesis of the period-instrument versions, the concertos are so well and musically played that one is tempted to believe that Bach would have preferred the recording himself. Karajan's 1964 recordings, made with members of the Berlin Philharmonic while vacationing in St. Moritz, Switzerland, show the conductor as even more sympathetic to the period style. Many people don't know that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Karajan astonished the musical world with his very period-informed performances at the Vienna Bach Festival. The former set mentioned above is newly remastered and available in the highly recommended 82-CD Deutsche Grammophon set titled "Karajan 1970s" and featuring all of the conductor's DG orchestral recordings made in the 1970s (DG 28947915775). And, by the way, the 1964 recordings are also available in another highly recommended set titled "Karajan 1960s".

## **Der Schwanendreher** **By Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)**

The job described by the German compound noun "Schwanendreher" may be one of the most specialized occupations in the world. This is the guy who

would stand – or sit if he was lucky – and turn a swan on a spit over a roasting fire. No, he's neither a chef nor even a sous chef. He's only the lowly spit turner, a person in the kitchen probably considered lower on the totem pole than even a dishwasher. German composer Paul Hindemith had a great sense of humor, and he put it to work in the wonderful concerto for viola and orchestra that he titled *Der Schwanendreher*, or "The Swan Spit-Turner."

One of the many reasons that musicians respect Hindemith – even if they don't care all that much for his music – is the fact that he played every instrument for which he wrote music and could play each quite well. In fact, we are told that he wouldn't write music that he couldn't play himself and, in 1935, he wrote *Der Schwanendreher*, for himself as soloist! After discovering some interesting music in an 1877 collection published as *Altdeutsches Liederbuch* (Old German Songbook) by Franz Magnus Böhme (1827-1898), a German composer, choral director, and noted ethnomusicologist, Hindemith took four of what he considered most interesting in the collection and put together the concerto, weaving the songs into the concerto's fabric.

In his own short description to the work, as printed on the score's title page, Hindemith says, "A traveling musician joins a happy gathering and shares what he has brought from afar: serious and light-hearted songs and, alas, a dance piece. After all is said and done, he is lauded as a true musician and beloved. This is the scene from the Middle Ages that inspired this composition." It is therefore more likely that the "swan spit-turner" is instead a reference to a traveling medieval hurdy-gurdy player, his instrument sounding by turning a crank shaped like a swan's neck.

The old German songs chosen by Hindemith for use as material for *Der Schwanendreher* are:

1. "Zwischen Berg und tiefem Tal" (Between Mountain and Deep Valley)
2. "Nun laube, Lindlein, laube" (Now Leaf, Little Linden, Leaf)
3. "Der Gutzgauch auf dem Zaune saß" (The Cuckoo Sat on the Fence)
4. "Seid Ihr nicht der Schwanendreher?" (Are You Not the Swan-Turner?)

From the outset, the concerto has a folksy quality as heard in the viola's opening fiddle-like flourishes. The first song, *Zwischen Berg und tiefem Tal*, is intoned by the three low-voiced horns almost immediately, and the first movement is off, filled with lively counterpoint and an exciting back and forth between the orchestra and the viola soloist. The listener is immediately struck not only by the sound of the odd orchestration but also visually when he or she realizes there are no violins on stage!

The quiet second movement begins with a beautiful duet for viola and harp which soon gives way to the second of the songs, *Nun laube, Lindlein, laube*, played as a chorale in the woodwinds. A bassoon solo soon breaks in, presenting the jaunty third song, *Der Gutzgach auf dem Zaune saß*, which is soon combined in a fugal style with the music that opened the movement. The movement ends quietly with a return to the harp and viola duet. The music is quite pastoral and one might even mistake it as a late chamber work by Debussy or perhaps even one of Copland's or Bernstein's quieter moments.

The third and final movement is a set of eleven very contrasting variations on the song *Seid Ihr nicht der Schwandendreher?*. The viola is driven to the edge in this movement with almost non-stop highly technical solo work. The soloist is asked to play cadenza-like solos in both the seventh and tenth variations. The 11th and final variation becomes the movement's – and the concerto's – exciting and very energetic finale.

*Der Schwandendreher* was first performed by the composer himself in Amsterdam on November 14, 1935. It is unusually scored: for two flutes, the second doubling on piccolo, one oboe, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, one trumpet, one trombone, tympani, harp, four celli and three basses. Note that there are no violins or violas included in the orchestration!

An interesting sidenote is that the British premiere of the work was scheduled for January 22, 1936. But, when King George V died on January 20, Hindemith composed his *Trauermusik* (Mourning Music) for viola and string orchestra to perform instead and in honor of the late king. He incorporated music from *Der Schwandendreher* and from his *Mathis der Maler* Symphony in *Trauermusik*.

**Recommended Recordings:** One, if not the finest, recording of Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher* is that with solo violist Geraldine Walther accompanied by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Herbert Blomstedt, included in a three-CD Decca "Trio" set currently available in the catalog. Walther, principal violist of the San Francisco Symphony and, since 2005, violist of the Takács String Quartet, plays beautifully and idiomatically. The recording, made in San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall in May 1991, is beyond reproach with soloist and orchestra well balanced, the soloist not sounding too far forward. An added bonus is that the set includes all of Blomstedt's highly regarded Hindemith recordings with the San Francisco Symphony and his recordings of the same composer's *Symphonia serena* and *Symphonie "Harmonie der Welt"* with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. You cannot go wrong with this set.

### **Variations on an Original Theme "Enigma", Op. 36 by Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934)**

Perhaps you have had the same thought, but what is it that makes the music of British composer Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934) sound so British? No one has come to a well-documented or accepted conclusion although there are musicologists, mostly British mind you, that have put forth the idea that his music is rhythmically close to British spoken English. More conjecture is that even the inflections of the music mimic the sounds of British English. Whatever it is, it's certainly British-sounding stuff. No work in the entire orchestral repertoire, save Elgar's own *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, sounds more authentically British than the so-called Enigma Variations, Op. 36. Just as the Bach Brandenburg Concertos are the quintessentially representative works of the German Baroque, so the Enigma Variations are what we think of when asked to name a truly British piece of music. This characteristic is only one of the reasons that the British cherish the work as much as they do and that each performance of it in the U.K. is an occasion, especially the frequent performances of the work at the annual London Proms concerts.

Written for full Romantic-era orchestra, the distinguished German conductor Hans Richter premiered the Enigma Variations at St. James's Hall in London

on June 19, 1899. According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, "The 'Enigma' is the theme itself, probably representing Elgar, but he said, 'through and over the whole set [of variations] another larger theme 'goes', but is not played'." No one has ever been able to identify this so-called second theme in spite of some hypotheses.

Elgar dedicated the work "to my friends pictured within". In fact, each of the variations is a musical representation of Elgar's wife or one of his friends, identified by their initials or a pseudonym. The work begins with a melancholy four-note theme heard at the outset and to which one can say, "Ed-ward El-gar." It is followed by fourteen variations titled as follows:

1. C.A.E. (Lady Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife);
2. H.D.S.-P. (Hew David Steuart-Powell);
3. R.B.T. (Richard Baxter Townshend);
4. W.M.B. (William Meath Baker);
5. R.P.A. (Richard Penrose Arnold);
6. Ysobel (Isabel Fitton);
7. Troyte (Arthur Troyte Griffith);
8. W.N. (Winifred Norbury);
9. Nimrod (Augustus J. Jaeger);
10. Dorabella (Dora Penny);
11. G.R.S. (George Robertson Sinclair, but more accurately his bulldog Dan);
12. B.G.N. (Basil G. Nevinson);
13. \*\*\* (Lady Mary Lygon);
14. E.D.U. (Elgar himself).

**Recommended Recordings:** Two very fine recordings stand heads above all others. Both recorded by EMI, they are the set recorded by Sir John Barbirolli and the Philharmonia Orchestra in London's Kingsway Hall in May 1962 and the set recorded by Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in Birmingham, England's Symphony Hall in August 1993. Of course, the latter of the two is in excellent digital sound, but there is something very special about the former. In fact, obtain both and you will have the two definitive recordings of the Enigma Variations!

Other excellent recordings are those by the musicologist and sometimes conductor Norman Del Mar and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra for

Deutsche Grammophon in Guildford Cathedral in 1975, and by eminent French conductor Pierre Monteux and the London Symphony Orchestra for Decca in Kingsway Hall, London, in June 1958. The former is coupled with excellent performances of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* and the latter is coupled with Karajan's famed and excellent first recording of Holst's *The Planets* with, believe it or not, the Vienna Philharmonic and recorded by Decca in Vienna's acoustically excellent Sofiensaal in September 1961.

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