Johann Sebastian Bach  
*Keyboard Concerto in F minor, BWV 1056*

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH was born in Eisenach, Thuringia, in central Germany, on March 21, 1685, and died in Leipzig on July 28, 1750. His F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056, dating from the mid-1730s, is evidently a transcription of an earlier concerto, now lost, for either oboe or violin, probably in G minor. The first performance of this concerto likely took place soon after its completion as part of the concerts of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum, of which Bach was director.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO KEYBOARD PART (here played on piano), the score of the F minor concerto, BWV 1056, calls for a string orchestra—first and second violins and violas—plus continuo, played here by cellos and basses.

The genre of the concerto as we know it—a work combining a single or multiple solo instruments with a larger ensemble—only began to solidify in the late 1600s, although the term, the origin of which isn’t quite clear, had been in use for some time. The genre initially developed in Italy; the first important concertos for solo instrument and ensemble—as well as the first to appear in print, in the 1690s—were those by Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709). A generation later, Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), one of the great violinists of his age, published his solo concerto collection *L’estro armónico*. These works established the concerto as a medium in which the soloist or soloists were clearly the center of attention, their parts demanding virtuosity and independence radically distinct from the humbler music of the ensemble. Vivaldi’s works are the model for the concerto tradition passed down to us today, through Mozart and Brahms to Stravinsky to Dieter Ammann. Even if that model is explicitly rejected, it’s still the precedent composers must reckon with.

Upon its publication in Amsterdam in 1711, *L’estro armónico* quickly made its way throughout Europe, becoming enormously influential in the process. Johann Sebastian Bach transcribed for solo harpsichord or organ many of Vivaldi’s concertos (as well as those of other composers) as a way of assimilating the best models of the age. Much of this self-education took place in Weimar, where Bach was employed from 1708 to 1717. The six Brandenburg Concertos, completed by 1721, were a culmination of these efforts, in which Bach synthesized and invented a variety of approaches to the combination of single or multiple soloists with ensembles of various sizes. With the *Brandenburg* Concerto No. 5, Bach is said to have written the first concerto for keyboard and ensemble, in which the harpsichord, instead of its usual role as a member of the continuo accompaniment, is given a virtuosic obbligato part throughout, as well as an extended cadenza.

When Bach took up the post of Kantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig in 1723, he could devote less time to “pure” instrumental music. His Leipzig duties included writing music for Sunday services, church feast days and special services, and other special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. In his first two years he composed two complete church-year cycles of cantatas, each cycle comprising more than sixty works. He completed two more cycles by 1729, and a fifth by the 1740s. In addition, he had overall responsibility for the music programs of Leipzig’s four principal churches, involving four choruses of boys drawn from the boarding
students of the Thomasschule. He was ultimately responsible for the boys’ education as well as their musical training.

Although by their very nature the cantatas are primarily vocal works, for the sake of musical and dramatic variety Bach employed a variety of approaches to style and genre within these multi-movement pieces: chorales and other settings for full chorus, arias and recitatives for one or more solo voices sometimes paired with an obbligato solo instrument, purely orchestral movements, and even concerto movements for an instrumental soloist with ensemble. Among the latter type can be found several that are transcriptions of earlier Bach works—for example, the organ concerto that appears in the cantatas nos. 29, Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir, and 120a, Herr Gott, Beherrscher aller Dinge, originated as the Preludio of the composer’s Partita in E for solo violin. Another such movement is the opening Sinfonia for oboe solo, strings, and continuo from the 1729 cantata Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe. The source of that movement is also the basis for the Adagio of the F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056, one of a group of concertos for one or more keyboards with orchestra that Bach completed in the mid-1730s.

After half a decade of near-total immersion in cantatas and Passions, in 1729 Bach became director of Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum, a society of professional and amateur musicians founded by Georg Philipp Telemann in 1704. The society gave weekly concerts—Wednesdays outdoors during the summer, Fridays at Gottfried Zimmermann’s coffee house during the winter months—that were serious, and entertaining, events open to the public. In addition to music by other contemporary composers, these concerts of course included works by Bach himself, among them the Coffee and Peasant cantatas, chamber music, and concertos. Many, even most, of these pieces were written expressly for performance by the Collegium. Much of this music, too, served pedagogic ends: Bach used them as training tools for his students, among them his own sons. Most of the group of harpsichord concertos for solo or multiple harpsichords with orchestral accompaniment that Bach produced at this time are presumed to have been first performed by Bach and his sons in Collegium concerts.

Strange though it is to realize, the accompanied keyboard concerto as developed by Bach in the 1730s was virtually a new compositional genre. Vivaldi’s famous concertos were typically for solo or multiple “melody” instruments—violin, cello, mandolino, oboe, bassoon. As suggested above, the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto is considered the prototype of the concerto for keyboard and ensemble, but Bach didn’t explore its possibilities during his first years in Leipzig except in a few cantata movements. After becoming director of the collegium, he returned to the idea, but most of these “new” concertos were in fact reworkings of earlier concertos—Vivaldi’s and his own—for melody instruments. The concerto for four harpsichords, BWV 1065, is a reworking of a piece by Vivaldi for four violins and orchestra, for example. The concertos for solo keyboard and accompaniment, BWV 1052–59, and those for multiple keyboards and accompaniment, BWV 1060–64, are evidently based on earlier solo concertos by Bach himself (excepting BWV 1061 for two keyboards and accompaniment, derived from a piece for two unaccompanied keyboards).

Most of those earlier works, probably dating from Bach’s years in Weimar and Cöthen (1708–1721), are now lost; for some, their origin as works by Bach is still in question. (Also, Bach scholar Christian Wolff has suggested that in dating the concertos on limited evidence, scholars have been “rather generous” to this early period.) Bach’s process for transcribing the works to their new settings is fairly clear from comparisons between the handful of extant earlier concertos
and manuscript copies of the Leipzig-era keyboard concertos. He first wrote out the original solo part verbatim, then made changes, some of them extensive, to make it work for the harpsichord, including filling in the left-hand parts. Sometimes transposition—raising or lowering the key—was necessary to accommodate the harpsichord’s range. In cases where no original version has been found, scholars use details of pitch range and melodic figuration to try to determine the original instrument. A very wide melodic range would suggest violin or cello, a narrower compass recorder or oboe. Modern musicologists have reverse-engineered convincing, performable versions of presumed source works; Wilfried Fischer’s reconstructions (with an “R” appending the BWV number, e.g., BWV 1052R) were included as part of the New Bach Edition, the most complete representation of the composer’s catalog.

Opinion is divided about the origin of the F minor keyboard concerto, BWV 1056. The accompanied oboe solo movement from Cantata 156 mentioned above has led to the supposition that the entire concerto was for oboe solo, while some scholars have suggested that the first and third movements came from different concertos altogether; a further possibility is that the original was a violin concerto. A further interesting detail is that the first two measures of a c.1716 G major flute/oboe concerto (TWV 51:G2) by Bach’s friend Telemann, the leading German composer of the day, are identical (except for key) to the first two bars of the Largo middle movement of the F minor concerto. Did Bach write a movement of the now-lost original concerto around the same time that Telemann wrote his? We don’t know; we do know this is just one of many instances of musical sharing between the two composers.

The F minor concerto is in three short movements: fast (no tempo marking), slow (marked Largo in one version, Adagio in another), fast (Presto). The opening movement features a thematic idea shared by the piano and orchestra; by itself, the piano “echoes” the end of each phrase. To the relatively square, two-beat theme are contrasted the expansive, triplet-based solo excursions. The slow middle movement in A-flat major is justly famous for its singing, ornamented melody and its expressive excursions into minor keys. Ensemble accompaniment is sparse. The Presto finale, in 3/8 meter, features a rising theme with a syncopated detail throwing the meter off balance. The second half of the theme, predominantly falling, inverts and balances the first half, and the violins’ phrase-ending echoes complement the soloist’s in the first movement.

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THE FIRST BSO PERFORMANCE OF BACH’S F MINOR KEYBOARD CONCERTO took place on January 2, 1918; Ruth Deyo was solo pianist, and Karl Muck conducted. Since then, the only other complete BSO performances were at Tanglewood: Alexander Borovsky under Serge Koussevitzky for a 1945 “Bach/Mozart” Festival; Lukas Foss under Charles Munch in 1959; Seymour Lipkin with Munch in 1960; and Foss again as both soloist and conductor in July 1990. The most recent Tanglewood performance was given by Angela Hewitt with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Richard Tognetti in August 2005 in Ozawa Hall.