

C.P.E. Bach's "Show Horse"

C.P.E. Bach's Keyboard Concerto in C Minor, Wq 31 (published in CPEB:CW, III/9.10), belongs to a group of six works (Wq 29–34), all dating from between 1753 and 1755, that represents the conclusion of a particularly creative phase in the composer's output. At the beginning of his time in Berlin Bach wrote at least one concerto for solo keyboard and string accompaniment each year, and in this manner began to explore the fairly novel genre and further develop its artistic possibilities. As Bach became more experienced with composing concertos, the number of them he wrote increased around the mid-1740s.

In the years after 1755, however, Bach composed only a few other concertos; it seems as if his artistic interest shifted from the concerto to the symphony for a while, and afterwards, in the early 1760s, he turned his attention to the sonatina for obbligato cembalo and orchestra (a genre developed by him). Only in the very late Berlin and early Hamburg years did he return to writing concertos. Whether there were biographical reasons for this shift in emphasis is unknown. But for the years from 1753 to 1755 applications to city representatives in Zittau (1753) and Leipzig (1755) are documented, as well as a trip undertaken in 1754, which apparently involved the exploration of employment possibilities at the courts in Rudolstadt, Eisenach, Gotha, and Kassel.

Hardly anything is known about the impetus for the creation or the circumstances of performance of the keyboard concertos. Apparently Bach most often played his concertos in the context of private soirées in the circle of his musician colleagues and friends. In his autobiography, Johann Wilhelm Hertel reports on Bach's performance of the Concerto in D Major, Wq 11 at Franz Benda's house in October 1745. Whether the oft-cited note of Frederick II regarding Bach's request for a pay raise in 1755 refers to a solo appearance involving a concerto for keyboard and orchestra at the court, cannot be resolved beyond a doubt. Possibly it has some connection with an appearance at the Berlin palace on 28 October 1753, which is alluded to in contemporary daily newspapers. Perhaps the fact that three of the five original dates in Bach's concerto autograph manuscripts mention the months of April and May suggests a yearly recurring event for which Bach furnished a new concerto.¹ The birthday of Bach's close friend, the Berlin doctor and music lover Georg Ernst Stahl (1713–72), on 6 May could be a conceivable occasion.

Bach described the Concerto in C Minor in a letter of 28 April 1784 to the Greifswald lawyer Johann Heinrich Grave with the following words: "The Concerto in C Minor was formerly one of my show horses. The recitative is written out as I played it without a doubt."² The humorously reinterpreted term "Paradör" is, as is often the case with Bach, borrowed from military parlance, and refers to a show horse in a military parade. He uses the term also in his letter to Johann Jakob Heinrich Westphal of 25

1. Wq 17: "d. 5 Apr. 1745"; Wq 23: "Potsd. Mens. Majo [1748]"; Wq 33: "Pots. [17]55 Mens. Majo." The other two only have years (Wq 46: "1740" and Wq 8: "1741").

2. CPEB-Briefe, 2:1009: "Das Concert C mol war vor diesem eines meiner Paradörs. Das Rezit. ist so ausgesetzt, wie ich es ohngefähr gespielt habe."

September 1787 to describe the demanding and striking keyboard sonatas Wq 65/16, 65/17, and 65/20, and apparently describes with it works that he composed principally for his own use and made available to his friends only at a late point in time.

Wq 31 was written in the same year as the Concerto in A Major, Wq 29 and the Concerto in B Minor, Wq 30 (both published in CPEB:CW, III/9.9). Wq 30 can be considered a sister work to Wq 31, for it displays similar eccentric hallmarks of style. The two works mark extreme positions of Bach's Berlin concerto style. Their extended ritornellos signify a valorization of the orchestral part, which strives for originality and unusual effects. In Wq 31 Bach differentiates the color palette of the strings through distinctive playing techniques (*pizzicato*, double stops, *con sordino*) and dynamic effects. In addition Wq 31 features unison playing and repeated 16th notes, which lend the work almost symphonic traits. The crossing of genre boundaries in the slow middle movement, which is organized like a large recitative tableau, is also exceptional. In this fashion the solo instrument becomes somewhat akin to a protagonist in a dramatic action.

The use of instrumental recitatives in the 1740s and 1750s in the Berlin School appears to have catered to a certain popular taste. The similarity to the "Freie Fantasie," which Bach developed in the 1740s, is striking. We first encounter recitative-like middle movements in cyclical works in Bach's first "Prussian" Sonata (Wq 48/1). Further examples can be found in concertos by Christoph Schaffrath (Concerto in A Major; D-B, Mus. ms. 19750/2) and Christian Friedrich Schale (Concerto in D Minor; D-B, Mus. ms. 19758/2); Johann Gottlieb Janitsch employs a recitative in his Trio in G Major (in D-B, SA 3462). As the works by Schaffrath, Schale, and Janitsch cannot be definitively dated, it remains unclear whether Bach adopted a principle developed by other composers or whether the inauguration of this compositional form can be ascribed to him.

In contrast to many of his other concertos of the 1750s, Bach changed the musical text of the outer movements of Wq 31 only slightly in later years. The shortening of the first ritornello in movement i by one measure, which strikingly dramatizes the entrance of the soloist, is noteworthy. The middle movement, however, also survives in a different version from the early Hamburg years, a version that documents Bach's own playing style. The existence of these two versions—the "plain" notation of the autograph score and the earlier set of parts, and the "realized" notation found in a *particella* and in the later set of parts—presents a highly interesting and instructive case that gives welcome insights into the performance practice of Bach's instrumental recitatives and free fantasias. This movement has to be seen in the context of Bach's writings on the free fantasia (in the second part of his *Versuch*), his didactic sets of embellishments, and his collection of cadenzas (see also CPEB:CW, VIII/1).

The ranking of Wq 31 as a "show horse" was cause for Bach's holding back the work and generally avoiding its distribution until the late years of his life. For this reason, apart from the autograph score, an autograph short score of the revised middle movement, and original parts, the only extant copies were prepared for J.J.H. Westphal and Grave, as well as two—possibly interdependent—copies that contain

the unrevised musical text. An allusion to the scant distribution of the work is also found on the title wrapper of the original parts: “Ist nicht sehr bekannt.” (Is not very well known.) Similar comments are found on the wrappers for Wq 30 (D-B, Mus. ms. Bach St 510: “ist wenig bekannt”), Wq 36 (D-B, Mus. ms. Bach St 530: “ist wenig bekannt”), Wq 38 (D-B, Mus. ms. Bach St 540: “ist nicht sonderlich bekannt”), Wq 39 (D-B, Mus. ms. Bach St 529: “ist nicht sonderlich bekannt”), as well as Wq 164 and 165 (both D-B, Mus. ms. Bach P 356: “ist wenig bekannt”).

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