

CONCERT 13TH OCT 2020

I would like to centre this week's correspondence around that most belittled of instruments, the humble recorder. We have a consort of recorders belonging to Tess's Great Aunt and to take them out and play a few notes is to travel back three or four hundred years. As I may have mentioned some letters ago, I flirted with the early-music scene in the early seventies as a side interest to orchestral playing. This was when interest in 'authentic' performance on original instruments was just starting to gather momentum in Melbourne. It all began because I owned an English cello made in the early 18th century, which I subsequently sold to finance further study overseas. I performed in a trio and taught classes on the gamba at the Conservatorium. The trio performed at different occasions, including festivals in Melbourne, Castlemaine, Bendigo etc. and met and dined with Spike Milligan, but perhaps that is a story for next week.

During this period I met a recorder player and maker called Fred Morgan and his harpsichordist wife Ann Murphy. Little did I realise at the time what a world-class maker Fred was to become, and that the local players of note were ordering instruments to be made by him, realising that here, living in Daylesford, was a man with exceptional talent as an instrument maker. Fred's reputation was secured and duly recognised when Franz Brüggem, the world famous Dutch recorder player bought his first Morgan recorder in 1973, championing Fred as one of the best makers in the world. I recall hearing not long afterwards that the waiting period for a Morgan recorder was around 14 years. Fred first started making recorders at the Pan recorder factory in Hawthorne, sharing the work with another musician of note, the Jazz Great, Ade Monsborough. Both men spent their day producing school recorders, a universe away from the craftsmanship that was to make Morgan recorders so highly sort after in years to come.

The recorder, contrary to what most people think, is a very complicated musical vehicle. The fallacy is aided by the simple shape and decoration. This wooden tube produces, with eight finger holes only, from 23 to 32 beautiful tones well in tune, (in a proper instrument) with the possibility of adding 20 tones or so of different timbre and pitch through alternative fingering. With the inner construction of the tube and wind-way, hundredths of a millimetre in shaping count. The famous recorder maker Hans Coolsma has written: "The body shape is alternately cylindrical-conical. The outer orifice of the finger holes is smaller than the inner one, conical therefore. This allows for a stronger attack without immediately affecting the pitch. Just as important is the shaping of the air-column. A laterally curved, conical column produces a richer more concentrated tone than a straight parallel column." These complicated air columns are carved out by the use of special tools, which certainly demand a high degree in skill and technique by the maker. The old recorders, those still remaining in museums, were made out of a soft European Boxwood. However, contemporary recorders, by means of greatly refined technique, can be made from harder woods (Brazilian pernambuco being one), which allow for less chance of warping due to the increase in dampness from playing. This was one of the reasons why so few recorders remain from the baroque period, that and the discarding and destruction of the old when modern instruments came on the scene. That said, the fact still remains that more solo repertoire was written for recorder than any other wind instrument.

Following on from my talk on Vivaldi and the development of the concerto I urge you to watch and listen to a performance on YouTube of the Vivaldi Concerto in C Major performed by Maurice Steger and the Cappella Gabetta. A truly brilliant performance. Tragically, Fred Morgan was killed in a car accident near Daylesford in 1999. A similar fate was to end the life of a one time student and fellow maker of his, Michael Grinter, two years ago. Michael, who lived in Fryerstown just outside Castlemaine, had also achieved an international reputation for his flutes and specialised Irish whistles. He was a long standing friend, performing at our wedding reception when Tess and I were married. Both makers

found inspiration in their bucolic setting, the majority of their orders coming from the other side of the world. In fact Fred relocated to Amsterdam in 1981, but with constant interruption to his work and missing the Australian bush, he returned home. I can attest to the extraordinary sound of Morgan recorders as the German recorder player in my ensemble performed only on his instruments.

We now jump back 300 years to 1717 – 1723, to the German city of Cöthen, now Köthen. Bach was living and working there as Kapellmeister for Prince Leopold von Anhalt. Incidentally, Köthen was also the birthplace of composer Carl Friedrich Abel who, together with Johann Christian Bach, founded the popular Bach-Abel concerts in London some years later, these being the first subscription concerts in England.

But I digress. We are of course visiting the great Brandenburg concertos. This title was first used by the Bach biographer of the 19th century, Philipp Spitta. Bach himself simply called the works “concerts avec plusieurs instruments” and all six were composed in his time in Cöthen. Bach, always the politician, prepared a carefully written copy of the six concertos, which was dedicated to Cristian Ludwig Margrave of Brandenburg, the youngest son of the Great Elector. The date of the dedication was March 24, 1721 and hence the now used title. We are not sure of the size of the orchestra at Cöthen where the works were originally performed but Bach was not writing for future performances. He always used the resources he had on hand, so over the time the instrumentation changed depending on the players available. It is the colourfulness and variety of instrumentation that makes them so special. Bach was actually not writing the works as a cycle, but wished to explore and, by so doing, define the range of possibilities of the concerto grossi form. The copy to the Margrave is the only manuscript that presents the six concertos as a collection; elsewhere they have appeared singly. They were composed over a period of years and their chronological order is in doubt. 3, 6 and 1 show the earliest baroque concerto style. Number 2 brings four soloists to the fore, number 4 gives the solo violinist virtuoso precedence as does the end of number 6, with its harpsichord cadenza.

Today, let us take number 4 in G Major BWV 1049, as we are concentrating on the recorder. The concertino group in this concerto consists of one violin and two recorders set against the main strings. The second movement possesses Corelli like violin-concerto features. I love the balance in the writing as Bach manages to assimilate the old and the new, giving each work an individual character by devising new combinations and variations on the traditional form. His brand of solo/group concerto is his own very special contribution to the development of the form. All six are as exciting and uplifting to listen to today, as they were when they were written.

YouTube Brandenburg concerto number 4. There are a couple of good recordings on Euroarts channel of this work. If time permits enjoy the other five as well, perhaps in that probable chronological order: Nos. 3,6,1,2,4,5.