Transplanting the Harpsichord: The Keyboard’s Rise to Prominence in Bach’s Concerto, BWV 1061

Johann Sebastian Bach was the first prominent composer to write and arrange concertos for multiple solo harpsichords. Many of his harpsichord concertos were transcribed from concertos originally composed for other solo instruments. His *Concerto for Two Keyboards in C Major, BWV 1061*, is the only concerto believed to be specifically written for two harpsichords. This shows the higher level of prominence given to harpsichords toward the end of the Baroque era as they were transplanted from the supporting basso continuo and into the foreground.

J. S. Bach, a notable composer from the Baroque era living from 1685-1750, composed this concerto during his service as director at the *Collegium Musicum* in Leipzig. It is understood that this piece was not only composed for double harpsichord with orchestral accompaniment, a unique solo instrument combination for the Baroque era, but it may have been originally written for unaccompanied harpsichord. Only the two harpsichord parts survive in Bach’s handwriting. The orchestral parts were pieced together from other copies by his family members. They do not present new material and simply provide emphasis on cadences through doubling the keyboard parts. Also, the second movement is unusually scored for only two harpsichords. While this piece may have been originally composed for solo harpsichords, since Bach was at the *Collegium Musicum* at the time, he had the orchestral performing forces at his disposal to include as accompaniment. The piece debuted with chamber orchestra at the *Collegium Musicum* in Leipzig in 1735. The absence of a significant orchestral accompaniment leads to the understanding that this piece was originally scored for two harpsichords, demonstrating the rising importance of the harpsichord.

The harpsichord was originally intended for private practice, and as an accompaniment to orchestra, opera, and other solo instruments on the basso continuo. As composers began writing more literature for the harpsichord in the late Baroque era, it slowly came to be celebrated as a solo instrument. This eminence may be observed through the Baroque compositional techniques used in the concerto. The concerto uses imitation between the voices in an antiphonal manner, a style and idiom primarily reserved for instrumental soloists. Long melodies driven by energized
rhythms which push the music forward is a Baroque style portrayed in the first and last movement. In the second movement, a Baroque element of composition may be noted in the harmonic direction found in the bass movement. Although this movement is written in vocal style with a clearly defined melody, the prominent bass gives this movement clear direction. The third movement is written in the style of a contrapuntal fugue due to the reemergence of polyphonic texture in the late Baroque era. Listen for the many entrances of the fugue subject being driven forward rhythmically by the sixteenth-note counter-subject. These are a few examples of the Baroque elements of composition used in this concerto which further illustrate the significance of the harpsichord as a solo instrument.

Through the absence of an original orchestral score and through the distinct use of solo Baroque compositional elements, this piece demonstrates the prominence given to an instrument that, in the Baroque era, was previously used for only the supporting basso continuo.

Please enjoy as we perform the second and third movement of this concerto.