

Bach, Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in F Major

The Brandenburg concertos by Johann Sebastian Bach are a collection of six instrumental works presented by Bach to Christian Ludwig, margrave of Brandenburg-Schwedt, in 1721. They are widely regarded as among the finest musical compositions of the Baroque era.

The **Brandenburg Concerto No. 3** in F major (“for three violins, three violas, and three violoncelli, with bass for the harpsichord”), exemplifies the emerging sense of an orchestral style, stressing the textures of instrumental sections as they contrast and coalesce. These are concertos in the sense that the word was employed in the Baroque to mean a “coming together” of instruments. The violinists and violists serve as both as section players and as soloists; in *tutti* sections the three players of each instrument perform in unison, as a section, but in the contrasting episodes they go their separate ways as three soloists. In the opening Allegro the musical themes pass from violins to violas to cellos. The closing movement, also an Allegro, is a high-spirited fugue that seems to ask the players to push the tempo to the limit. The two Allegros are connected by a musical mystery: a sequence of merely two chords forming an imperfect (or “Phrygian”) cadence. There is little agreement among musicians and musicologists about whether the chords should be played verbatim or whether they should close a movement inserted at the player’s discretion. It is odd that Bach should have placed a fermata over the second of the chords rather than the first; one could imagine an improvisation taking place above the first chord—*i.e.*, prior to the harmonic resolution—but hardly after it. But the manuscript is clear in this regard and the whole question remains a puzzle without a certain solution.