

Partita no. 4 in D: *Sarabande and Gigue* **J.S. Bach**

Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), one of the greatest of all composers, was most widely known in his own time as a performer – first and foremost as an organist, but also as a player of other keyboard instruments (harpsichord or clavichord, rather than piano – despite the Anthology recording's being for piano).

Partita No. 4 in D, first published in 1728, appeared as one of a set of six partitas in 1731 with a general title usually translated as 'Keyboard Practice' or 'Keyboard Exercises'. The title page seems to imply that they were composed for good amateur performers, but the technical difficulty of some movements (including the Gigue from Partita No. 4) would have made them suitable for professionals and the entertainment of their aristocratic patrons.

The word 'partita' here means 'suite' (i.e. a set of stylised dance movements in binary or rounded binary form, preceded by a prelude or some other type of non-dance piece).

The Sarabande of Partita No. 4 is the fifth of seven movements. The Gigue, as usual in a suite, was the last.

Aspects of these pieces that are characteristic of the Baroque period include:

- Use of Sarabande and Gigue – these two dances originated in the Baroque, and were not typical of the Classical period (and have only rarely been revived since then). Moreover Suites of several dance movements are also characteristic of the Baroque rather than of other periods
- Composition for harpsichord (or perhaps clavichord – see 'Instrumentation' below) rather than for piano – although music for harpsichord was still composed well into the Classical period
- Simple and rounded binary forms, which evolved during the Baroque, were much less commonly used later
- Continuous movement in short note values without 'periodic phrasing' (i.e. without clearly-articulated two- and four-bar phrases)
- Fugal writing in parts of the Gigue – although similar contrapuntal styles were used before the Baroque and were never completely abandoned afterwards

Instrumentation

- No instrument was specified. Undoubtedly, however, the Partitas were regularly played on the harpsichord (their style is not that of organ music)
- A single-manual harpsichord would have sufficed. There are no dynamic markings that would require the dynamic contrast available on a two-manual harpsichord. (Remember that no dynamic contrasts of the kind so easily available on the piano were possible on the harpsichord)
- The *Sarabande* requires a low A in the penultimate bar. Apart from this, it (and the Gigue) could have been played on a clavichord, a small, very quiet instrument ideal (only) for domestic music-making. The sound was produced by small metal hammers

(known as 'tangents') which hit the strings, and some limited dynamic contrast was available

Texture

Sarabande

- Almost entirely two-part writing
- The right hand has the melody, with semiquavers and demisemiquavers, while the left hand has a supporting part with mainly quavers – 'melody-dominated homophony'
- The beginning and end of each section is strengthened by the addition of (an)other part(s) – e.g. the texture at the start is three-part, and the end of the first section is four-part
- Bar 2 can be described as 'monophonic', as only one note at a time is sounding

Gigue

- Mainly three-part writing, with some fugal (contrapuntal) textures
- The opening (six) bars are monophonic, with just the fugue subject (as usually happens in fugal writing)
- The second fugal entry (the 'answer', beginning on the dominant) produces two-part texture
- The final entry (the subject again, starting on the tonic) completes build-up to three-part texture (bar 17)
- As the first section continues, there are reductions in the number of parts, occasional chords against one rapidly-moving part, and a moment or two of four-part writing (there is similar variety in the second section)
- The second section (bar 49) begins monophonically with a new fugue subject in the left hand
- The texture builds to three parts as in the first section
- The second entry of the new subject (which 'irregularly' is a 4th rather than a 5th above the first) is partnered by the fugue subject from the first section

Structure

Sarabande

- The Sarabande is in rounded binary form
- There are two main sections – conveniently called 'A' and 'B' and each marked to be repeated
- The A section ends in the dominant key (conventional for a major-key binary movement)
- The B section returns to the tonic, but with a reference to the A section (bar 29) – this is what makes the form 'rounded'
- Note also the 'rhyming' endings – the *ending* of A (in the dominant) is repeated as the ending of B (but in the tonic)

Gigue

- The Gigue is in 'ordinary' binary form (not rounded)
 - There are fugal elements, but the piece is not a regular fugue
 - As expected, the A section ends in the dominant key
 - The B section returns to the tonic
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- There are 'rhyming' endings – although the final bar of B is a descending broken chord (which makes for finality) not an ascending one as at the end of A (which leaves the music more open)

Tonality

- The music uses major-minor tonality, with modulations to closely-related keys.
- Each movement begins in the tonic D major and modulates to the dominant in the course of the A section
- There is a return to the tonic towards the end of the B section
- The return is via related keys. B minor (the relative minor) and E minor (the relative minor of the subdominant) are visited in both the Sarabande and the Gigue

Harmony

- Bach uses functional harmony, i.e. harmony which relies on perfect cadences and other 'standard' chord progressions to establish and maintain major-minor tonality
- Both sections of the Sarabande and both sections of the Gigue end with perfect cadences, and there are other examples (e.g. to confirm the modulations to B minor and E minor in the Sarabande)
- The harmony is largely diatonic, and based on triads in root position and first inversion
- Chords are frequently broken or arpeggiated, e.g. the D major chord I in the first bar of the Gigue
- There are plenty of dissonant moments, to create harmonic tension
- Seventh chords are quite common. A prominent example is the 'broken' dominant 7th in A major at bar 8 of the Sarabande (with a few intervals of a 3rd filled in with passing notes)
- Notice the diminished 7th (with suspension) over a tonic pedal in A immediately before the final chord of the first half of the Sarabande, and two examples near the end of the second section of the Gigue (both involving a G sharp and an F natural)
- Suspensions are used from time to time – e.g. in bars 75 and 77 of the Gigue
- Appoggiaturas (leading note to tonic) add tension in the closing bars of both sections of the Gigue (for the first time at bar 41)
- Some chromatic movement further reinforces these passages – notably with the C sharp to C natural in the top part (bars 41–43) and the E, D sharp, D natural in the bass
- As in many Baroque and other pieces, there tends to be faster harmonic rhythm (i.e. a more rapid rate of chord change) to lead up to an important cadence, e.g. the penultimate bar of the first section of the *Sarabande*

Melody

- There is much conjunct (stepwise) movement, including some scalar runs in faster-moving passages (as in the Sarabande (right hand) from top A to B near the end of the A section, a gesture that helps to clinch the modulation to A major)
- Disjunct movement (involving leaps) is common as well, and often involves use of broken chords (as at the beginning of the Gigue, where a broken chord of D is followed by a broken chord of D7. Elsewhere Bach has the interval of a minor 7th to highlight the most crucial notes of a seventh chord (e.g. in bars 22 and 23 of the Sarabande)

- There is frequent use of sequence, e.g. in the second phrase of the Gigue (bars 3–4) and bar 32 of the Sarabande.
- The systematic sequential use (and repetition) of short motifs (as in much of the Sarabande, RH) is often known as *Fortspinnung* (German: literally 'spinning out [of a melodic line]')

Rhythm and Metre

Sarabande

- The Sarabande (typically for this type of dance) is in simple triple time, with a slow beat
- The characteristic emphasis on the second beat of the bar in a Sarabande is clearly noticeable only in both bars of the opening phrase (and the transposition and repetition of this phrase in the B section)
- There are frequent passages of steady, continuous quavers in the left hand, e.g. bars 3–4. The right hand usually has shorter notes, with many semiquavers and demisemiquavers
- There is some use of syncopation, notably with quavers beginning off the beat (sometimes notated as two tied semiquavers, as in bar 5)

Gigue

- The Gigue is in compound triple time, with three sets of three semiquavers per bar. (Gigues are much more commonly in compound quadruple or compound duple metre rather than compound triple)
- There is almost continuous semiquaver movement in the Gigue. This is commonly in one part at a time, with longer note values elsewhere, but occasionally two parts have semiquavers simultaneously in the B section, notably near the end, where the increased rhythmic activity provides additional impetus as the piece approaches its conclusion.