

# 1. J S Bach

## Brandenburg Concerto No.4 in G

### First Movement (Allegro)

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Before turning to the academic study of this movement, let us forget for a moment that it is the first work in an Anthology for examination students. Instead, listen to it for its sheer, unmistakable *joie de vivre*. We cannot know just how Bach happened to feel as he wrote it for his rich, cultivated employer and his orchestra of first-rate fellow musicians, but this joyous music speaks of energy and confidence, delight in both life and music-making.

#### The concerto

The concerto was to the earlier eighteenth century what the symphony was to the classical period – the most serious medium of concerted instrumental music. Although the word had been used throughout the seventeenth century to describe various forms of composition, the concerto as we understand it emerged in Italy in the last quarter of that century. Corelli developed the definitive form of the concerto grosso, which sets off a trio of soloists (the concertino – two violins and cello) against a string orchestra known as the ripieno ('the rest'). At the same time, Torelli, Albinoni and other Italians were developing the solo concerto, which laid much greater emphasis on instrumental virtuosity. The most productive Italian writer of concertos was the Venetian Vivaldi. Vivaldi developed the ritornello form with its emphasis on sharply delineated, memorable themes and rondo-like structure. Bach arranged several of Vivaldi's concertos for organ, and in his own concertos blended Vivaldi's muscular directness with his own typically north-European skill in harmony and counterpoint.

The six Brandenburg Concertos show features that belong both to the concerto grosso and to the solo concerto, though none uses Corelli's trio of string soloists. Nos. 3 and 6 are for string ensembles, in which most of the individual players have both a solo and a ripieno role. The others call for unique combinations of concertino instruments, including representatives of all the instrumental families:

- No. 1: two horns, three oboes, bassoon and piccolo violin.
- No. 2: piccolo trumpet, oboe, flute and violin.
- No. 5: violin, flute and harpsichord.

Some of the solo parts, notably the violin in No 4 and harpsichord in No.5, call for all the virtuosity of a solo concerto. As with all Bach's mature works, they show a level of craftsmanship that puts them in a class of their own.

#### Circumstances of the first performance

The Brandenburg Concertos were composed between 1717 and 1721 whilst Bach was Kapellmeister (Director of Music) for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen in Germany. The Prince was a lover of music and a good violinist himself, often playing in the orchestra of around eighteen players, employed to entertain and impress visitors to the Court. Bach was required to write and perform music for a regular series of Sunday evening concerts, and clearly he attracted some talented instrumentalists to his orchestra, either as permanent members or as guests. It is known that Prince Leopold bought a new two-manual harpsichord in 1718 and it is probable that the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto was written to display this new instrument.

Bach later revised the concertos and sent them, with a flowery dedication, to the Margrave of Brandenburg, in the hope of being offered a more prestigious post than the one he had in Cöthen. There is no evidence that the Brandenburg orchestra ever performed the works; certainly, Bach did not get the job, nor, as far as can be ascertained, did he receive any financial reward for the compositions. Later, he rearranged the works for the Collegium Musicum that he directed in Leipzig, the Fourth Concerto becoming a harpsichord concerto in F. They were subsequently lost until their rediscovery in the nineteenth century.

## Performing forces

Bach's original score for the Fourth Concerto calls for solo violin and two 'fiauti d'echo' in the concertino, with first and second violins, viola, cello, violone and cembalo as the ripieno. The word fiauto ('flute') was used at the time both for recorders and side-held flutes, but Bach specified 'traverso' whenever he wanted the latter. It is not clear what he meant by 'fiauti d'echo'; suggestions have ranged from treble recorder to a little flageolet playing an octave higher than written.

Students are strongly recommended to listen to a 'period instrument' recording (such as that by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields under Sir Neville Marriner, or John Eliot Gardiner's 2009 recording with the English Baroque Soloists) alongside the 'modern' one by the Northern Sinfonia heard on the NAM CD. The typical 'period' performance may differ from a 'modern' one in:

- Use of recorders as opposed to transverse flutes.
- The presence of relatively few players, so producing a chamber music sound.
- Use of violone (six-stringed double bass viol) in place of double basses.
- Performance directed from the harpsichord or violin rather than by a conductor.
- Pitch of concert A may be set at c. 415 as opposed to the modern 440 (approximately a semitone lower).
- Use of instruments in their eighteenth-century rather than their modern forms.

There are significant differences between eighteenth-century and modern instruments:

<b>Eighteenth-century</b>	<b>Modern</b>
<p><b>Violins</b> Shorter neck and fingerboard. Smaller range up to sixth position. Strings of cat gut; less brilliant sound. Shorter, concave bows. Less tension in the hair. Three-note chords possible. Little vibrato. Lighter phrasing was therefore the norm.</p>	<p><b>Violins</b> Longer neck and fingerboard. Wider pitch range. Metal strings, stronger tone. Longer, convex bows also contribute to more robust sound. More sustaining power for longer notes. Some vibrato, leading to a more colourful and varied tone colour.</p>
<p><b>Recorders</b> Made of wood. Smaller projection.</p>	<p><b>Flutes</b> Made of metal (nickel or silver). Stronger sound.</p>
<p><b>Violone</b></p>	<p><b>Double Bass</b></p>

6-stringed member of the viol family. Less vibrant sound. Range includes low C required by Bach.	4 strings. Fuller sound. Requires extension for lowest notes.
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### Use of Resources

As in most scores of the period, there are very few dynamic markings. This was not because composers did not care about expression; contemporary writings on music are full of references to its importance. Contrasts of light and shade were achieved by changing the density of the texture, and conventional features of performance (such as a strong tutti sound and a quieter accompaniment during solo passages) did not need to be constantly reinforced on the page. We should also bear in mind that most performances took place in smaller spaces than modern concert halls, instruments had a smaller dynamic range, little music was widely distributed, and most performances were directed by the composers themselves.

In the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto, the one dynamic instruction – *pp* for the ripieno violin imitations in bars 235 and 251, with an intervening return to *forte* – suggests that Bach was particularly conscious here of the striking effect of the textural contrast.

The two flutes always play together as a pair, often in thirds, sometimes in imitation (e.g. bars 285–289) and occasionally antiphonally bars (257–263). They are invariably at the very top of the texture, where they can be easily heard above the strings. Their range is from F above middle C to top G (two octaves higher) with the first part almost always higher than the second.

The principal violin, on the other hand, often has solo work in addition to playing in trio with the flutes, and it is the only one of the soloists to engage in virtuosic activity, most notably in the elaborate string-crossing of bars 83–124, the dazzling non-stop demisemiquavers of bars 187–208 and the double- and triple-stopping of bars 215–228.

The ripieno violins and violas are utilised very flexibly, providing harmonic and rhythmic support, creating dynamic and textural contrasts, reinforcing parts of the solo violin line and sometimes taking over thematic material (e.g. bars 129–132).

The violoncello and violone/double bass provide the bass line throughout and the harpsichord fills in the harmonies. It is likely that Bach himself would have directed the performance from the harpsichord, and this perhaps accounts for the absence of figured bass indications in the score.

### General characteristics and the ritornello (bars 1–83)

We should always bear in mind that the analytical terminology we use to study music was not necessarily that of the composer. 'Ritornello form', of which this movement is a magnificent example, has only been the standard name for this type of structure since the mid-twentieth century. What Bach took from Vivaldi and other Italian contemporaries was not a defined set of textbook rules but a flexible principle of composition – a recurrent theme, appearing at intervals in various keys during the movement, interspersed with contrasting episodes and concluding with a statement in the tonic key. This principle made possible the composition of movements that combined coherence with variety on a much larger scale than previously. The fast movements of Corelli's concerti grossi, which do not use this form, typically last 2 minutes or less. The ritornello movements of Vivaldi's solo

concertos are often twice this length, whilst even the most fleet-footed performance of our Brandenburg movement takes about 6 ½ minutes.

Many features of this movement can be illustrated from its opening section, so after outlining some general points we shall look in detail at bars 1-83, and then consider new features as they arise in subsequent sections of the movement. Some of the key technical terms that students should be able to illustrate with specific reference to the music are identified in bold type.

## Structure and tonality

Structure and tonality are inseparably linked in eighteenth century style, so we will start by considering them together.

Wilhelm Fischer coined a set of terms that apply to the structure of many ritornello themes of the period and are clearly illustrated in this movement. The Vordersatz (**head motif**) is a memorable musical gesture that defines the key and sets the style for the movement. The useful term **Fortspinnung** ('spinning out') refers to the continuation from the head motif, spun out of the repetition and development of short phrases. The Epilog is a **closing theme** that breaks the momentum of the Fortspinnung and leads to a structural cadence.

The tonality of the movement is limited to the home key of **G major** and modulations to **related keys** (keys of the tonic, dominant and subdominant, with their relative minors – or, in a minor key, with their relative majors). Within these limits Bach is comprehensive: the ritornello appears systematically in all six keys: G, D and C majors, e, b and a minors).

The opening **ritornello** is a huge paragraph of 83 bars that includes three statements of the head motif and three passages of *Fortspinnung*, before arriving at the closing theme.

Bars 1–13	Head motif (concluding on the first beat of bar 13).
13–22	Fortspinnung I. G major, modulating to D major. The move to D major is initiated by its dominant, heard at bar 15; the tonic is avoided until bar 23.
23–35	Head motif in D major.
35–56	<i>Fortspinnung</i> II in G major, passing through C major in bars 40-43.
57–69	Head motif in G major.
69–78	<i>Fortspinnung</i> III in G major with passing modulation via <b>secondary dominants</b> to D major (bar 70–71), E minor (bar 71–2) and C major (bar 74–5).
79–83	Closing theme signalled by <b>antiphonal</b> texture, <b>hemiola</b> rhythm, <b>staccato marks</b> , and <b>faster harmonic rhythm</b> carrying the harmony through a <b>circle of fifths</b> .

## Rhythm

Rhythm is the distribution of musical events over time. We naturally look first at the duration of individual notes and the metre indicated by the time signature and bar lines. The **triple time** signature of 3/8 suggests three quaver beats per bar, but at this tempo

we are more likely to feel the **dotted crotchet as the basic pulse**, giving a joyous buoyancy to the rhythmic flow. The first 12 bars of the concerto introduce three rhythms that subdivide the dotted crotchet: six semiquavers, three quavers and a bar composed of quaver rest, two semiquavers and a quaver.

- From bar 13, we embark on a typical baroque rhythmic procedure, with a **walking bass line in even notes below continuous semiquavers** for the soloist. Note that the violin **phrases start on the second semiquaver** of the bar, giving the effect of a **5-note anacrusis** that leads energetically to the first beat.
- Bars 35–56 include greater variety of rhythm: all parts share in the semiquavers and the bass goes on to a new **articulated accompanying rhythm** (bars 47–52); the flute melody is **syncopated** in bars 43–6.
- Bars 69–78 combine the syncopation of bars 43–6 with a faster harmonic rhythm in the accompaniment.
- The closing theme (bars 79–83) introduces **hemiola** in bars 79–82. A hemiola is normally two bars of triple time, with the beats accented in pairs – **1 2 3 1 2 3**. Notice that in this case four bars of 3/8 are recast as six pairs of quaver beats.

## Melody

The melodies of the movement are all simple shapes based on **scales and broken chords**. They are so distinctively characterised and consistently used that we recognise them immediately on each appearance. The **recurrent interval of a third** gives many of the melodies in the ritornello a family likeness. This interval appears in the first three notes of the violin, and it colours all the additional material in the ritornello except the closing theme. There are five principal motifs:

Opening phrase  
(Motifs A and B)

Motif A

Motif B Phrases enclose a third

(Motif C)

13 Theme moves by thirds

(Motif D)

35 Theme encloses a third

Inverted from bar 13

(Motif E)

69 Each phrase outlines a third



- In bars 20–22 the parts aim at the same goal via different routes. Almost every note in these bars belongs to the chord of A7, the dominant of D, but the solo violin and bass line are progressing down in a sequence that passes by leaps through F# and D, contrary to the prevailing chord.
- Bach's typical walking bass in bars 14-19 articulates a single chord per bar, leaping on and off the third to lighten the effect, or stepping down through a passing note in alternate bars.
- The **harmonic rhythm varies** from very slow – e.g. 35–42 (4 bars of D major followed by 4 bars of G major) – to 3 chords per bar in the closing theme. Here the rapid chord changes around a **circle of fifths** help to drive the music conclusively towards the cadence.
- **Dominant 7<sup>th</sup>s** are frequent. The closing theme is introduced by **chord V7d** (bar 78). The fact that the bass is the dissonance in this chord gives it a particularly strong functional sense of direction.
- Flutes I and II have 4–3 and 9-8 **suspensions** in bars 70–74. Bars 75–76 show a **decorative resolution** in which Flute I delays the expected C until bar 76.

## Textures

### Homophony v. counterpoint

Once again, we have to apply terms cautiously. In *Music in the Baroque Era*, Manfred Bukofzer writes of the 'complete interpenetration of continuo-homophony and contrapuntal texture' in the Brandenburg Concertos. There is no dislocation between the homophony of the first few bars of this movement and the free counterpoint we shall meet later. Bach's homophony is formed from coherent instrumental lines, and his counterpoint decorates a progression of chords. It is not a matter of 'either-or' but of the proportions of each in the mix.

Consider the behaviour of the bass line in bars 1-83:

- Bars 1–12. **Melody dominated homophony**. The bass has single notes underpinning a chord, with melodies riding above.
- Bars 13–19. **Typical continuo-homophony**. The bass line is continuous and active and lays down a harmonic path for the upper parts to follow; however, it does not share in their thematic motives.
- Bars 35–42. The bass line becomes involved in the **counterpoint**.
- In later sections we shall find greater use of counterpoint. The last movement of the concerto opens fugally.

### Concertino and ripieno

The **textural contrast** between the soloist or solo group and the *ripieno* orchestra is a fundamental feature of Baroque concerto style. Five of the Brandenburg Concertos open with a *ritornello tutti*, in which the soloists join forces with the *ripieno* before setting off on independent material. Our concerto is the exception, in giving the soloists independent lines from the outset, and building in stages towards the continuous involvement of the whole ensemble. The central section of the movement will feature more distinct solo/tutti contrasts.

**Other textural features:**

- The presence of the continuo adds density in performance even when the printed music appears to be thinly textured.
- Bach has carefully orchestrated his bass line, which underpins the texture throughout, between the cello, double bass and keyboard continuo. In broad terms, the cello is the bass instrument for the solo group, and the double bass supports the *ripieno*, whilst the continuo plays throughout. The double bass sounds an octave lower than written and is usually below the cello. (See bars 235–256 for exceptions to this.) The **viola** (followed by the continuo) **takes the bass line** lightening the texture e.g. in bars 10–12 and similar places.
- **Parallel thirds and sixths.** The prevalence of parallel writing emphasises the light-hearted, pastoral nature of the music. The flutes are often paired in parallel thirds and sixths, in particular in the second phrase of the head motif and bars 35–42. The ‘broken thirds’ phrase from motif C also often appears in compound thirds between Violin 1 and the bass line, (e.g. bars 20–22).
- Notice that the soloists constantly vary their roles in the returns of the head-motif, and sometimes even hand it to the ripieno (e.g. bars 31–35).
- **Pedal notes** frequently appear, sometimes inverted, e.g. bars 25–28 and 31–35.
- **Antiphony** between violins and flutes in the closing theme.

**Episode 1 – bars 83–137**

The solo violin has **continuous semiquavers** throughout this episode, based initially on sweeping arpeggios that flow seamlessly into the references to the head-motif in bars 89-90. The harmonic move in bar 129 is a dramatic feature after the tonal stability of the previous sections. **F#7 is approached unexpectedly from A7 via a semitone step in the bass** (one of only two such moves in the whole work). Coupled with the slow harmonic rhythm, this creates a contrasting and memorable feature at a point where a strong harmonic gesture is needed to announce the structural modulation to the E minor ritornello.

Bars	Structure	Tonality	Harmony
83-96	6-bar solo 2-bar head-motif 6-bar solo	G major	I, I7, IV, V over <b>articulated tonic pedal.</b>
97-102	6-bar harmonic and melodic sequence.	G major modulating to D major.	Violin includes 7 <sup>ths</sup> in bars 98, 100 and 102.
103-118	2-bar head-motif followed by varied repeat of bars 83-96.	D major	I–V in bars 103-4, then as 83-96
119-124	Varied repeat of bars 97-102	D major modulating to A major	As 97-102
125-136	3-fold repetition (4+4+4 bars) of Motif D with Motif C counterpoint.	<b>Chain of dominants.</b>	A7 – F#7 – B7.

**Melody**

**Free inversion** is used (compare bars 83–88 with bars 91–96.)



**Texture**

Solo line over **articulated tonic pedal** (bars 83–88 etc.). Head motif accompanied as usual by homophonic chords. Bars 97–102 and 119–124 are **2-part** (plus continuo thickening). Bars 125–136 show **3-part counterpoint over a sustained note or chord** (two of the upper parts being in thirds). This gives solidity to the successive dominant harmonies. Chord changes in bars 129 and 133 are emphasised by single notes on bass and continuo.

**Second ritornello – bars 137–157**

The ritornello appears in an abbreviated form. One statement of the head-motif is followed by the final portion of the full ritornello, transposed with slight adjustments from bars 69–83. Changes to note are

- **Tonality is E minor.**
- **Neapolitan chord** in bars 151 and 155. By avoiding F#, the leading note of G major, and its diminished triad (chord vii in G as well as chord ii in e minor), Bach emphasises the fact that we are away from the home key.
- The instruments reverse their roles in the closing theme, with the flutes taking the lead in the antiphonal texture of the hemiola.
- **Cadential trill** in bar 156.

**Second episode – bars 157–209**

This section features imitation between the two flutes, extended into free counterpoint in the **manner of a trio sonata**. There is then a spectacular **virtuoso display from the violin**, over an **A minor** version of the head-motif.

**Structure**

*Bars 157–184:* Two 4-bar phrases (each internally 2+2) then a freely evolving passage, strongly contoured but avoiding cadences. *Bars 185–208:* 12 bars of ritornello plus a further 12 bars (four 2-bar phrases and 4 single bars)

**Melody**

The theme of the flutes' imitation (bar 157) features four falling conjunct notes leading to a leap in the opposite direction. It is **inverted** e.g. in flute I, bar 161. There are short **trills** at bars 160, 162, 164 (and later at 291–2). The rhythm from Motif E appears from bar 166 (Flute II). In bar 187 the solo violin sets off on a spectacular adventure in whirling **demisemiquaver scales**.

**Texture**

Initially **two-part imitation over quaver walking bass and homophonic chords**. From bar 165, **3-part free counterpoint** with active bass line. **Heterophony** between cello and continuo e.g. bars 165–171. From 193 onwards flutes share the homophonic accompanying chords. From bar 197, flutes in close imitation with ripieno violins.

**Tonality**

E minor at first. Then, moving restlessly by **avoiding settled cadences**, through B minor (bars 166–170) and D major (bars 171–4) to A minor (bar 175 onwards). From bar 185: A minor to bar 197 then modulating to C major.

**Harmony**

Suspensions e.g. 9–8 in 166; suspended 7<sup>th</sup> resolving into change of harmony (bar 178). Circle of fifths bars 197–205 provides an interesting route for modulation from A minor to C major. Bars 185–209 entirely in root position except bar 195 (**diminished 7<sup>th</sup>**) and bar 208 (Vb). At bar 200, there are adjacent D minor and major chords.

**Third ritornello – bars 209–235**

- **Tonality is C major.**
- The material is essentially the same as the second ritornello, but melodies are redistributed to give a very different *textural* effect. Changed features include:
  - Solo violin has **3-note chords** then takes over what were previously two flute parts in a long passage of **double-stopping**.
  - Head motif is accompanied by an emphatic G **dominant pedal**.
  - Violin passage from ritornello 2 is now replaced with two contrasting flute melodies in **contrary motion**, one **conjunct** and the other **disjunct**.
  - During bars 221–227 the texture includes **eight independent parts**.
  - Notice that this time there are two statements of the head-motif in bars 209–221 – perhaps to give the violinist a moment to recover after the demisemiquavers and to increase the impact of the multiple stopping.

**Third episode – bars 235–322**

Elaboration in the latter stages of a movement is typical of Bach's style. This long episode draws together features from different parts of the movement (see next page), playing on our expectations about how the various themes relate to each other and what part the different solo and *ripieno* instruments play in them.

Bars	Source	Tonality	Comments
235–242	83–90	C	Based on the solo violin figure in Episode 1 with additional <b>stretto</b> (marked <i>pp</i> ) in <b>3 parts</b> at a <b>quaver's distance</b> (bars 235–6 etc.).
243–256	97–110	C to G	Having skipped 6 bars, continues the course of Episode 1. <i>Ripieno</i> instruments now in <b>antiphonal</b> phrases, e.g. bars 243–248. Stretto again in 251.
257–263	119–124	Moving to D	Having skipped another repeated passage, continues with the second sequential passage of leaping arpeggios implying 7 <sup>th</sup> chords.
263–285	35–56	G	The music draws on motif D and follows the course of the opening ritornello, but with changes to the instrumental distribution.
285–310	157–182	G at first then moving through various keys, avoiding cadences	Just when we expect the head motif to return, Bach cuts to the flute duet that opened Episode 2. Strings accompany with a <b>diminution</b> of the three notes of Motif B (bar 286 etc.). After bar 295, solo violin adds an <b>additional counterpoint</b> . The music is modified after bar 300, to reach a chord of E7 at 311.
311–322	125–136	E7, C#7, F#7	Development of Motif D resumed, keeping up the suspense with its succession of dominants.

**Fourth ritornello – Bars 324–344**

- The key is **B minor**.
- The same short version is used as in Ritornello 2.
- For the first time, the head motif is underpinned by a **tonic pedal** (bars 325-9).
- At the end of the ritornello (bar 344), the cadence is concluded without dovetailing into the next section. Instead, Bach uses his thematic figure in broken thirds to lead back to G major **without modulation**. This moment is comparable to the end of the 'B' section in a da capo aria, when a section in a contrasting key would be followed without transition by the resumption of the opening music.

**Final ritornello – Bars 344–end.**

This is identical with bars 1-83.