

1. J.S. Bach

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G: movement I

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G is an example of a **concerto grosso**, a genre developed during the Baroque period by composers such as Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Mostly these are works for a small group of soloists (the **concertino**, initially two violins and a cello) accompanied by a string orchestra and *continuo* (the **ripieno**). Bach's six Brandenburg Concerti are notable, however, for the variety of soloists employed (such as the two horns di caccia, three oboes, bassoon and violin in No. 1, and the high piccolo trumpet, oboe, recorder and violin in No. 2), the remarkable virtuosity required by some of the solo parts (notably the violin in No. 4 and harpsichord in No. 5), and the level of craftsmanship evident in all Bach's mature works.

The six Brandenburg Concerti were composed some time between 1717 and 1721 while 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 5th Brandenburg Concerto was written to display this new instrument.

Bach later redrafted the six concertos in an attempt to impress and persuade the Margrave of Brandenburg to offer him a more prestigious post than the one he had in Cöthen, but there is no evidence that the orchestra there 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, Bach redrafted the works, the 4th Concerto becoming a harpsichord concerto in F. They were subsequently lost and only rediscovered in the nineteenth-century.

Performing forces and their handling

Bach's original score asked for **solo violin**, **two fiauti d'echo** in the concertino and **first and second violins**, **viola**, **cello**, **violine** and **cembalo** in the ripieno.

It might be worth considering the difference between a 'period instrument' recording (such as that by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields under Sir Neville Marriner) and a 'modern' one as heard on the NAM CD by the Northern Sinfonia. 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 viols) in place of double basses
- performance directed from the harpsichord rather than by a conductor
- use of authentic instruments
- pitch of concert A may be set at c.415 as opposed to the modern 440 (approximately a semitone lower).

The table below shows the significant differences between authentic and modern instruments and the performance techniques associated with them.

Authentic	Modern
Violins	Violins
Shorter neck and fingerboard, with a smaller range up to sixth position	Longer neck and fingerboard, bigger pitch range
Strings made of cat gut, with a less brilliant sound	Metal strings, stronger tone
Shorter, curved bows, less tension in the hair	Longer, straight bows, more robust sound
Little vibrato, lighter phrasing	Some vibrato, leading to a more colourful and varied sound More sustaining power for longer notes
Recorders	Flutes
Wood with limited projection	Metallic (nickel or silver) with stronger sound
Violone	Double bass
6 stringed member of the viol family, with a less vibrant sound, but possessing a larger range (Bach requires a low D, e.g. bar 23)	4 strings, fuller sound, but requires extension for notes below E

The concerto was the most popular instrumental form of the period, giving the opportunity for soloists to display their virtuosity in the context of an ensemble work.

Note that there are no dynamic markings (apart from the *pp* in the ripieno violin parts in bars 235 and 251). Bach achieves contrast and balance through judicious writing for the various instruments.

The two flute parts almost always play as a pair together (the only exceptions being the short section of interplay in bars 257-263 and imitation in bars 285-289) and invariably are placed at the very top of the texture so that 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 (notice that on the Baroque violin it was possible to play all three notes of a triple-stopped chord simultaneously).

The ripieno players are utilised for various purposes:

- to provide dynamic contrast when reinforcing the soloists
- to provide harmonic support
- to add textural contrast.

The violoncello and 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.

Texture

Note that the bottom three staves are closely linked (violoncello, double bass and continuo). This is the bass line which underpins the texture throughout. Mostly all three play the same line together, although bear in mind that the double bass sounds an octave lower than and normally only supports the texture when the ripieno is playing. There are passages where the double bass plays in **unison** with the violoncello (bars 244-250) and even places where it plays an octave above (bar 243). Sometimes the double bass plays a simplified version of the bass line (**heterophonic** texture bars 364-366) and passages where the continuo plays a more florid bass line than the violoncello (bars 304-309). The bass line is occasionally taken by the viola and continuo, thereby lightening the texture (bars 32-34).

Texture is at its most reduced in the violin solo episode (bars 83-124) where the single line melody is supported by intermittent bass notes to outline the harmonic shape. This contrasts with the intricate and dense eight-part counterpoint of bars 225-226.

Homophonic texture

Bars 1-3: Recorder melody, supported by 4 note chords, under an **inverted dominant pedal**

Bars 4- 6: **Polarised** texture – high melody in 3rds supported by continuo

Bars 7- 9: As in bars 1-3 but the sustained note now an **inner pedal**

Bars 10 --12: As in bars 4-6 but melodic voices now in **parallel 6ths**

Monophonic texture

Bars 84, 86, 88 etc.

Contrapuntal texture

- Bars 13-22: 4-part counterpoint, consisting of 3 melodic voices over a supporting bass line
- Bars 35-56: Recorders high in 3rds and 6ths (later in imitation) over an independent violin melody (supported by the ripieno and doubled by the bass in 10ths at the end)
- Bars 165-184: Typical Baroque trio sonata texture of two loosely imitative melodic lines high above a walking bass, which is decorated simultaneously in the continuo (heterophonic texture)
- Bars 197-208: Phrases passing in close imitation between the two flutes in 3rds and 6ths with the ripieno strings, all supporting the bravura violin solo which weaves above and below the other parts of the texture.
- Bars 235-240: 3 violin parts in stretto imitation at the same pitch
- Bars 251-256: 3 violin parts in stretto imitation at the same pitch

Antiphonal texture

- Bars 257-262: Recorder I and viola in 6ths in antiphonal exchanges with Recorder II and cello in 10ths in support of the principal violin solo.

Structure

The movement is in ritornello form, but one of the most significant features of Bach's mature writing is the way in which he integrates the solo and tutti sections; there is much important solo work in the tutti sections, and frequently the ripieno reiterates the main 'motto' idea in the solo episodes, most notably at bar 185 where, for a moment, one imagines this to be the start of the third ritornello.

Ritornello form (literally 'Little return' form)

Bars 1-83	Opening ritornello	G major
Bars 84-136	Episode 1 (violin solo)	
Bars 137-157	Second ritornello	E minor
Bars 157-208	Episode 2 (flute duet followed by violin bravura passage)	
Bars 209-234	Third ritornello	C major
Bars 235-322	Episode 3 (3 part stretto imitation)	
Bars 323-344	Fourth ritornello	B minor
Bars 345-427	Fifth ritornello	G major

Opening ritornello (bars 1-83)

Each of its three main sections begins with a return of the main idea – the 'motto' theme (bars 1-3). See under the 'Melody' section for further information about motifs.

Bars 1-22 G major (tonic) to D major (dominant).

Bars 22-56 D major to C major (subdominant), then to G major.

Note the material in bar 35 which later becomes an important idea in the first and third episodes.

Bars 57 – 83 G major.

Note the distinctive closing bars with cross-rhythms, circle of fifths progression and hemiola.

First episode (bars 83-136)

Bars 83-88 Violin solo attempts a move to subdominant (C major), but...

Bars 89-102 Tutti reinforces the tonic with 'motto' theme; violin tries subdominant again before moving towards dominant (D major).

Bars 103-113 Tutti reinforces the dominant with two playings of the 'motto'.

Bars 113-124 Violin solo continues to dwell on the dominant.

Bars 125-136 Flutes repeat motif from bar 35 over an A7 chord, rising through F#7 to B7 which becomes dominant preparation for...

Second ritornello (bars 137-157)

Bars 137-157 E minor.

Note that this is a shortened ritornello, consisting of just the opening and closing motifs.

Second episode (bars 157-208)

Bars 157-165 Flute duet with tutti accompaniment; E minor to G major.

Bars 165-184 Flute duet with continuo accompaniment; touching fleetingly on a number of keys, but chiefly B minor and A minor.

Bars 185-208 Starts as if a tutti ritornello in A minor, but quickly becomes a virtuoso violin solo heard over the ritornello material. The music moves from A minor to C major.

Third ritornello (bars 209-235)

Bars 209-235 C major characterised by violinist's double stopping in parallel 6ths. Like the second ritornello, this is 'abbreviated' to just the opening and closing motifs.

Third episode (bars 235-322)

Bars 235-240 3 part stretto canon at the unison over a tonic (C) pedal.

Bars 241-243 'Motto' theme in C (tutti).

Bars 243-248 Violin solo (material similar to Episode 1).

Bars 249-251 'Motto' theme in G (tutti).

Bars 251-257 3 part stretto canon at the unison over a tonic (G) pedal.

Bars 257-263 Violin solo (material similar to Episode 1).

Bars 263-287 A reworking of bars 35-56 from the opening ritornello, here moving from D to C, then G.

Bars 288-310 A reworking of bars 157-184 from the second episode, touching on E minor, A minor and B minor.

Bars 311-322 A reworking of bars 125-136 over E7, C#7 and F#7.

Fourth ritornello (bars 323-344)

Bars 323-344 B minor (almost identical to 2nd ritornello but with instrumentation switched – ripieno violins now taking some of the melodic material).

Fifth ritornello (bars 345-427)

An exact repeat of the opening ritornello in G.

Tonality

Refer to the section on 'structure'. As can be seen there, the music modulates frequently to related keys: i.e. D (dominant), and C (subdominant), and relative minors of tonic, dominant and subdominant: E minor, B minor and A minor. Tonality is reinforced by use of cadences and pedal points.

Harmony

Bach's harmony is **functional**, with frequent perfect cadences: note the opening 'motto' theme based on the perfect cadence structure of I – V – I.

Harmonic sequences are used, e.g. bars 13-18

Circles of 5ths occur, e.g. bars 175-178

Dissonances include

- 7th chords (e.g. bar 35)
- suspensions (e.g. 4-3 suspension at bars 69-70 and 7-6 suspension at bars 44-47)

Harmony is diatonic, except for

- Neapolitan chord which appears twice only at bar 155 (beat 1) and 337 (beat 1)
- Diminished 7th, e.g. bar 195

Harmonic rhythm is often one chord per bar (e.g. at the opening) but speeds up towards cadences at end of sections, e.g. bars 79-83, where there is a chord every quaver

Other features include

- Lengthy dominant pedal points, e.g. bars 211-222
- Avoidance of cadence points to keep the music moving forward restlessly, e.g. bars 302-322

Melody

This work is based mainly on four motifs, or groups of motifs, subjected to constant elaboration through **Fortspinnung**: chiefly repetition, sequence and inversion:

- Bars 1-6, with **arpeggios** (bars 1-2), and rising and falling **3 note scalic figures** (bars 4-6)
- Semiquaver rising scalic figure followed by falling thirds (bars 13-14)
- Conjunct figure (bars 35-36)
- 'Closing figure' with jagged rising fourths (bars 79-83).

These motifs are extended through:

- **sequence** (solo violin bars 13-18, based on a two-bar sequence, and bars 18-22, a one-bar sequence)
- **inversion** (Recorder I, bar 21)
- **repetition** (bars 7-12 are a repetition of bars 1-6).

Even the apparently complex virtuoso violin solos are based entirely on arpeggios and scales and are diatonic throughout (but note the use of the melodic minor scale patterns in bars 188 and 193-194).

Rhythm

- The time signature of 3/8 suggests three quavers in a bar, but effectively the music feels like **one dotted crotchet beat** per bar, giving a joyous buoyancy to the rhythmic flow.
- As with many Baroque pieces, once the rhythmic patterns have been established at the start, there are **continuous semiquavers** in the melody parts almost throughout the movement, usually over a more slowly moving bass in rhythmic counterpoint.
- Vitality is increased further when semiquavers occur in all parts, e.g. bars 38.
- Ties across the bar line, producing **syncopation** (bars 43-46) help to add energy and direction to the melodic shapes.
- Note especially the **hemiola** effect as the sense of metre changes from triple to duple time in the final bars of each ritornello section (e.g. bars 79-80).
- Further subtle changes of stress occur in bars 162 and 164 where the combination of harmonic and textural change with melodic decoration (trills) throws the accent on to the second beat of the bar.

Further reading

Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001), Vol. 2 pp. 309-382.

M. Boyd, *Bach* (London, 1983)

M. Boyd, *Bach: The Brandenburg Concertos* (Cambridge, 1993)