

BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO.4 IN G

J S BACH

First Movement (Allegro)

At first listening, this set work appears to be the most daunting with its 427 bars of full orchestral score and often apparently complex textures. Certainly the total number of notes is considerably greater than in any of the other works set for 2010, but the music is wonderfully energetic and exhilarating and built from a relatively small number of musical ideas, each of which is easily identified and memorable.

The music is an example (arguably one of the finest) of a **concerto grosso**, a genre developed during the early baroque period by composers such as Arcangelo Corelli. Mostly these are works for a small group of soloists (the **concertino**) 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 high piccolo trumpet, oboe, flute 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.

Circumstances of the First Performance

The six Brandenburg Concerti were composed sometime 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 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 until rediscovered in the 19th century.

Performing forces

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** as the ripieno.

It might be worth considering the difference between a 'period instrument' recording (such as that by the Academy of Ancient Music under Richard Egarr) 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 viol) 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)

There are significant differences between authentic and modern instruments:

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,

Three-note chords possible

More sustaining power for longer notes

Little vibrato, lighter phrasing

Some vibrato, leading to a more
colourful and varied sound

Recorders

Flutes

Made of wood, smaller projection

Metallic (nickel or silver) and
stronger sound

Violone

Double Bass

6 stringed member of the viol family,
less vibrant sound,
but range includes low C required by Bach.

4 strings, fuller sound,
but requires extension for lowest notes

Use of Resources

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 of bars 235 and 251 to indicate balance with the solo violin). 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 at the very top of the texture in order 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.

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.

Textures

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 written (unlike the modern double bass, Bach writes down as far as bottom D) 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 'cello (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 textures

Bars 1 -3 flute 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 textures

Bars 13 – 22 4 – part counterpoint - 3 melodic voices over a supporting bass line

Bars 35 – 56 flutes 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 itself 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 and 251 - 256 3 violin parts in stretto imitation at the same pitch

Antiphonal textures

Bars 257 – 262 1st flute and viola in 6ths in antiphonal exchanges with 2nd flute and violoncello 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, 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 is 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 'Melody' for further information about motifs.

Bars 1 – 22	G major (tonic) to D major (dominant).
Bars 22 – 56	D major to C major (subdominant) 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 Notice 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 the dominant of....

Second Ritornello (bars 137 – 157)

Bars 137 – 157	E minor. Notice that this is a shortened ritornello, consisting of just the opening and closing motifs.
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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 over the ritornello material. Moves from A minor to C major.
Third Ritornello	(bars 209 – 234)
Bars 209 – 234	C major characterised by violinist's double stopping in parallel 6ths. Like Ritornello II, this is "abbreviated".
Third Episode	(bars 235 – 322)
Bars 235 – 240	3 part stretto canon at the unison over a tonic (C) pedal.
Bars 241 – 242	'motto' theme in C (Tutti).
Bars 243 – 248	violin solo (material similar to Episode 1).
Bars 249 – 250	'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 2 nd 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

As seen in structure above, the music modulates frequently to related keys: G (tonic), D (dominant), and C (subdominant) majors, and each of their relative minors E minor, B minor and A minor. Tonality is reinforced by use of cadences and pedal points.

Harmony

Functional harmony with the opening 'motto' theme based on the perfect cadence structure of I – V – I

Harmonic sequences such as bars 13 – 18

Cycle of 5ths eg bars 175 – 178

Dissonances include

- 7th chords
- suspensions eg 4-3, bars 69-70 and 7-6, bars 44 – 47

Diatonic, except for

- Neapolitan chord which appears twice only in bar 155 (beat 1) and 34 (beat 1)
- Diminished 7th eg bar 195

Harmonic rhythm is often one chord per bar (eg 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 eg 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:

- 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 4th (bars 79-83).

These motifs are extended through

- **sequence** (solo violin bars 13 -18 is based on a two-bar sequence, and bars 18 – 22 a one-bar sequence)
- **inversion** (1st flute 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 as **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 with semiquavers in all parts in bars such as 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 3 time to 2 time in the final bars of each ritornello section (eg bars 79 – 80).
- More subtle changes of stress occur in bars 162 and 164 where the combination of harmonic and textural change with melodic decoration (trills) throw the accent on to the second beat of the bar.