

## PARTITA NO. 4 IN D: SARABANDE AND GIGUE J.S.BACH

### Background Information and Performance Circumstances

Johann Sebastian Bach, known today as perhaps the greatest of the Baroque composers, was perhaps even better known during his lifetime as a virtuoso keyboard player, particularly on the organ. He was also a brilliant performer on the harpsichord. There is a story that in 1717 in Dresden a competition was organised between Bach and a famous French harpsichordist, Louis Marchand. The Frenchman heard Bach practise and promptly left the city.

Bach's 4<sup>th</sup> Partita for harpsichord was published in 1728 and the complete set of six appeared three years later. They were among only a small number of Bach's pieces to have been published during his lifetime. The word *partita* had a number of meanings, but here it means a *Suite*, i.e. a set of stylised dance movements in *binary* or *rounded binary* form, preceded by some kind of *prelude*, in this case, a *French Overture*. The *sarabande* is the 5<sup>th</sup> movement and the *gigue* is the 7<sup>th</sup> and, as was usual in a suite, the last.

Bach wrote a number of suites, mainly in sets of six. Other compositions include the 6 *French Suites* and 6 *English Suites*. He also wrote a set of four for orchestra, as well as the famous set of six for unaccompanied 'cello. The harpsichord suites were aimed partly at good amateur performers, who might be persuaded to buy the printed copies. They would also have been used by professional players to entertain aristocratic listeners at court. A number of movements, including the *gigue* from *Partita no. 4* had real virtuosic demands, so would have been tough going for many amateur players.

The essential characteristics of these movements, which characterise them as being typically *Baroque* are:

- Use of harpsichord
- Contrapuntal (polyphonic) in texture, i.e. written in clearly defined separate, independent 'voice' parts
  - The Sarabande is mainly written in two part texture, whereas the fugal style gigue has an essentially three part texture, though with considerable variety.
- Melodically the music is ornamental in style, especially in the *Sarabande*.
- The structures are different types of binary form. The Sarabande has rounded binary form, whereas the Gigue has binary form with fugal elements.
- The sarabande is improvisatory in style.
- The music modulates to closely related keys. Both movements start in D major. The first half ends in the dominant key (A major). The second half in

each case modulates back from the dominant to the tonic. A number of other related keys are used.

- The *Sarabande* is in simple triple time; the *Gigue* is in compound triple time. Both movements have passages of continuous semiquavers. The *Sarabande* has almost constant quaver movement in the bass, and long passages of continuous demisemiquavers. There is some use of syncopation.

### Instrumentation

- No precise instrument was specified for the Partitas.
- They could have been played on a clavichord, a small, very quiet instrument with a type of metal hammer hitting the strings, though the *Sarabande* does require a bottom A in the second last bar.
- This would really require the range of a harpsichord. Either a two manual or a single manual harpsichord could be used.
- There are no dynamic markings at all, so the piece didn't require the dynamic contrast available on a two manual instrument.
- The movements both contain the almost constant rapid decorative notes, common in Baroque harpsichord music.

### Texture

- The texture in the *Sarabande* is mainly two part, with rapid, decorative notes in the top part and mainly continuous quavers in the lower part.
- The first bar has a brief moment of three part texture.
- The second bar is monophonic.
- The *Gigue* begins monophonically with the fugal subject, as was standard in a fugal movement.
- In bar 7, when the answer enters, the music changes to the expected two part texture.
- In bar 16, when the final entry of the subject begins, there is three part texture, with the addition of occasional chords, which change the texture briefly to four parts.
- There is then a long passage of varied texture, including free counterpoint.

## Structure

- The *Sarabande*
  - is in rounded binary form. An A section begins in the tonic, and modulates to the dominant, in which key the first half finishes.
  - The B section begins after the double bar with a version of the opening music in the dominant.
  - The A section then returns in the tonic key (this is what makes the form rounded) in bar 29.
- The *Gigue*
  - is in binary form with fugal elements
  - see notes on texture for the list of fugal entries at the start.
  - This movement too modulates to the dominant and is in that key at the end of the first half.
  - The second half begins with a new tune, loosely based on material from the first theme.
  - This is then ingeniously combined with the first theme at bar 55 to make two part counterpoint.

## Tonality

- The music is completely tonal, using functional tonality with modulations to closely related keys.
- Each movement begins in the tonic D major and modulates to the dominant by the end of the first half. The music then modulates back to the tonic for the end.
- Other related keys include B minor (the relative minor), e.g. *Sarabande* bar 20, E minor (relative of subdominant), e.g. *Sarabande* bar 24. There is a brief suggestion of the flattened 2<sup>nd</sup> (Neapolitan) key in bar 23.

## Harmony

- Bach uses functional harmony, i.e. harmony which relies on chord progressions, particularly perfect cadences. Both halves of the *Gigue* end with perfect cadences.
- The harmony is largely diatonic, though often quite complex.
- Frequently whole bars outline a single chord, e.g. first bar of *Gigue*.

- There tends to be faster harmonic rhythm near a main cadence, e.g. second last bar of first section of the *Sarabande*.
- Notice the diminished 7th over a tonic pedal in A just before the final chord of the first half of the *Sarabande*.
- There is a suspension there, as well.
- 7th chords are quite common. Bar 8 of the *Sarabande* outlines a dominant 7th of A major.
- There is Neapolitan 6th harmony in bar 23 of the *Sarabande*

### Melody

- Much of the melody of the *Sarabande* is conjunct, e.g. bar 1, whereas the first bar of the *Gigue* is *disjunct, using broken chord texture*.
- Leaps tend to outline chords, e.g. bar 1 of the *Gigue*, which outlines the tonic chord.
- There are a number of scalic runs, e.g. from the high A in bar 11 of the *Sarabande*.
- The style of the *Sarabande* is almost improvisatory. The term that has been used to describe this style is *Fortspinnung*, i.e. the constant spinning out of a melody with small improvisatory changes.
- The opening 3 note motif of the *Sarabande* is an ornament called a slide with rapid notes filling in a 3rd interval. There is a mordent in the same bar.
- Much of the music sounds like written out ornamentation, e.g. bar 28 which is like a complex written out trill.
- There is frequent use of sequence, e.g. bars 3-4 of the *Gigue*.

### Rhythm and Metre

- Both movements are in triple time. The *Sarabande* is in simple triple time, whereas the *Gigue* is in compound triple time (three sets of three semiquavers).
- In *sarabandes* there is often emphasis on the second beat, e.g. bar 1. The music is slow and stately, allowing the ornamental right hand phrases plenty of time. There are frequent passages of steady, continuous quavers in the left hand, e.g. bar 2-3. The right hand has some passages of continuous semiquavers and some of continuous demisemiquavers. e.g. bars 18-20.
- The *Gigue* has almost continuous semiquavers, e.g. bars 5-6.
- There is frequent use of delicate syncopation, e.g. in the rising sequence passage of the *Sarabande*, second beats, bars 5-6.