



Pearson

J S Bach: 3rd Movement from Brandenburg Concerto no. 5 in D major (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is regarded as one of the greatest composers of the **Baroque** era. He worked mainly as a church organist, music director and composer in a number of cities in central Germany. At the time of the Brandenburg Concertos, however, he was employed as ‘Kapellmeister’ (court music director), at the town of Köthen from 1717 to 1723.

There was a chapel in the castle grounds, but Prince Leopold, Bach’s employer, preferred not to have elaborate church music, so Bach’s duties were mainly confined to **secular** (non-religious) music. The prince was an enthusiastic amateur musician and encouraged Bach to write instrumental music. During this short period of six years, Bach composed most of his best-known chamber and solo instrumental pieces. His compositions at this time included the six Brandenburg Concertos, the six suites for solo cello, the six partitas and sonatas for solo violin, as well as the famous set of 48, preludes and fugues entitled the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Performances were held in rooms in the castle and would have been attended by a small number of dignitaries. There was a core of eight or nine professional musicians who were supplemented on occasion by musicians from the town and elsewhere. The music was clearly **chamber music**, rather than orchestral music in the modern sense.

The six Brandenburg Concertos were written between 1711 and 1720, and in 1721 were dedicated to Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg. They were not given this title until after their rediscovery in the 19th century. It is not known whether this presentation was intended as part of a job application or for any other reason. It is known that the Margrave had shown interest in Bach’s music and almost certainly the music was never played by the Brandenburg musicians.

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Performing forces and their handling

Each of the six Brandenburg Concertos has different instrumentation, including wind instruments and unusual combinations. In contrast, most Baroque concertos featured either one or two solo violins, a string orchestra and **continuo**. Examples of concertos with conventional, string-only instrumentation with continuo can be found in the Edexcel suggested wider listening list – Handel: Concerto Grosso op. 6 no. 5, 2nd movement and Vivaldi: 'Winter' from the *Four Seasons*.

The continuo consisted of one or more bass instruments, such as the cello and double bass, together with at least one chordal instrument such as a **harpsichord or Cembalo**. The keyboard player would **realise** the harmony in the right hand. A **figured bass** (a shorthand system of numbers under the bass notes) guided the player as to what type of chord to play.

In the Brandenburg Concertos, Bach broke with tradition in a number of ways. In the fifth concerto, for instance:

- There is an extended **virtuoso** (difficult display) solo part for harpsichord. This is regarded as the first concerto for keyboard solo in musical history. Much of the most difficult solo music is found in the rapid **scalic runs** in both right and left hands. There are also passages where both hands play **trills** at the same time. The first movement even has an extended cadenza (unaccompanied solo section). Bach probably played the harpsichord part himself.
- Only occasionally does the harpsichord play continuo chords (e.g. bars 29–37). In these passages there is figured bass.
- The **ripieno** (string orchestra) only has one violin part (normally there would be two).
- The **concertino** (solo group) consists of the combination of flute, violin and harpsichord.

The **Baroque flute** was very different from today's instrument. It was made of wood, had finger holes and just one metal key.

Technically the piece is a **concerto grosso** (a concerto for a large number of instrumental parts). Even so, it is likely that at the original performances there would only have been one player to a part.

It is important to note that the mechanical action of the harpsichord prevented variations in **dynamics**, unless a double manual harpsichord happened to be available. The evidence suggests that a single manual harpsichord would have been used for this piece. Accordingly, there are no dynamic markings for the harpsichord in the original score.

On the few occasions where there are dynamic markings for any instrument, they are there largely for balance reasons (to ensure a particular musical line can be heard). So the solo violin part is marked *piano* at the beginning of the middle section, so that it does not drown the sound of the tune on the quieter solo flute.

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Structure

The structure of this movement is very different from the standard ritornello form found in the concertos of composers such as Vivaldi.

The movement is a large **ternary** structure (ABA). Very like the first movement, this third movement could be thought of as Ritornello form, although the return to original A section material is never entirely conclusive, within the middle section. This introduction of motifs from other sections was a common and clever technique often used by J S Bach.

A (bars 1–78)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The A section in D major begins in fugal style (see notes on texture)• There are brief sections in the dominant key (A major)
B (bars 79–232)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The middle section begins at bar 79 in the relative minor key (B minor), with a new theme (in the flute), which has many similarities to the main one• The second theme returns in bar 148, this time in the dominant (A major) in the ripieno• Fragments of the theme from the A section make frequent appearances• The section ends with a perfect cadence in B minor
A (bars 233–end)	A repeat of the opening A section, beginning with an extra D major chord in the continuo to establish the return to the tonic key.

Texture

- The texture is **polyphonic/contrapuntal** (i.e. contains several independent melodic strands sounding together).
- The movement begins in **fugal** style. A fugue is a complicated piece which uses **imitation** almost throughout. This piece is not an actual fugue, but uses fugal characteristics (the opening four bars are a good example).
- The subject (main theme first statement) in the solo violin is followed by an answer in the flute at a distance of two bars. We now have **two-part imitation**.
- There are then four additional bars before the harpsichord left hand enters with the subject, which is then answered two bars later by the right hand.
- The harpsichord plays in **two-part counterpoint**.
- Once both hands are playing, the music is in **four-part counterpoint**.
- Occasionally the flute and violin play in thirds. The harpsichord also does this.
- When the ripieno is playing, the flute and violin sometimes double each other in unison (e.g. bar 33).
- The bass line for the new middle section theme has a **tonic pedal** on B.

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Melody

- Much of the music is in **conjunct** (stepwise) style (e.g. bar 2), though there are leaps (e.g. fourths in bar 1).
- Often the conjunct music is extended to **scalic** runs, especially in the harpsichord part.
- There is a rising **sequence** at bar 137 (same short phrase repeated several times, going up one note each time).
- There are occasional **ornaments**, with **trills** (e.g. bar 19) in the harpsichord part.
- There are **appoggiaturas** in the main middle section theme when it returns in A major (e.g. bar 148).

Tonality

- The music is in **D major**.
- This key is used for most of the two A sections.
- The B section modulates to the **dominant** (A major) and **relative minor** (B minor).
- The music is **diatonic**.

Harmony

- The harmony uses the standard chords of the time (i.e. predominantly chords I, IV and V, with occasional use of II and VI), including **dominant sevenths** in various inversions.
- The harmony is **functional**.
- The harmony uses mainly root position and first inversion chords.
- **Perfect cadences** announce the ends of sections.
- **Suspensions** are used occasionally (i.e. 9–8 suspension at bar 130).

Tempo, metre and rhythm

- The metre is 2/4, **duple time** – two beats to the bar – but the music could also be notated in 6/8 compound time. It is essentially a Baroque gigue (a dance in compound duple time).
- It uses **triplets** and **dotted rhythm** throughout.
- The dotted quaver-semiquaver grouping (as in the first bar) would have been performed in triplet rhythm – so the dotted quaver would be two-thirds of a beat, and the semiquaver would be one-third of a beat.
- The harpsichord part in particular has many semiquaver runs.

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