

## **Edexcel A Level Syllabus – Analysis**

J.S.Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No.4,  
first movement

Jack Day

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Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto appears in an autograph manuscript, dedicated to Christian Ludwig, the Margrave (i.e. hereditary ruler) of Brandenburg, an employer and friend of Bach. The manuscript contains five other works in the same form; together these are known as the 'Brandenburg Concertos'. The manuscript is dated 24 March 1721, although some of the concertos were clearly written well before then. The Fourth Brandenburg Concerto was probably written during the early years of Bach's tenure at Cöthen, where he served from 1717-1723.

Looking at the first page of the score, you can see that the system is divided by two brackets, one covering the bottom six staves (including the *ripieno*, the rank-and-file section of the ensemble, and the *continuo*, the bass line with harmonies added by a keyboard) and another at the top for the three solo instruments, who collectively form the *concertino*. Although Edexcel have placed this piece in the category 'Music for Large Ensemble', a performance is possible with no more than nine players; the 'continuo' line seems to be just for the harpsichordist. Werner Breig (in John Butt's Cambridge Companion to Bach, p.123) notes that there no distinction between chamber music and orchestral music is expressed in Bach's contractual arrangements at Cöthen – it was all just 'music for a group of musicians'.

Christoph Wolff (in *New Grove II, s.v. Bach, Orchestral Music*) indicates that the special significance of the Brandenburg Concertos lies in their abandoning the standard type of *concerto grosso* and using a variety of solo combinations: a more diverse *concertino* section. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *concerto grosso* as 'A Baroque Concerto characterised by the use of a small group of solo instruments against the full orchestra'. Michael Talbot (also writing in *New Grove II, s.v. 'Concerto', II*) wrote that 'the style and form of the concerto accommodated differences of status (between salaried and hired players) and ability (between advanced players and the rank and file) among the members of the orchestra, breaking with the more egalitarian tradition of the sonata.' The solo instruments (the *concertino*) were generally two violins and a cello, in the case of Corelli (1653-1719), one of Bach's Italian antecedents. The use of two flutes and a violin as the *concertino* is unprecedented in the concerto repertoire.

The movement we are considering is a fast movement; that which follows it is slow, but the third is also fast. This 'fast-slow-fast' configuration is something Bach adopted from Vivaldi (1678-1741). Indeed, this style of concerted instrumental music originated in Italy. Another feature Bach adopted from Vivaldi is the *ritornello* form: a *ritornello* is a passage for the whole ensemble, generally remaining in the same key. They function like solid pillars of tonality and are reached by modulations, which take place in the 'episodic' passages, between the *ritornellos*.

The five ritornellos in this work are as follows:

No.	1	2	3	4	5
Bars	1-83	137-57	185-235	323-43	345-427
Keys	G-D-G	G	a-C	b	G-D-G

The first ritornello presents the same music (with subtle changes such as inversion of thirds to form sixths) in the tonic (G), the dominant (D) and once again in the tonic. The movement begins with two bars of arpeggios, followed by 'three blind mice'; at bar 13 the instruments run off in an energetic *moto perpetuo* section. The same happens at bars 7-8 of Bach's Trio Sonata no.5, BWV 525i. At the end of the first (tripartite) ritornello there is what Gerald Hendrie calls a 'flagged cadence' (bar 79-83), leaning heavily on the subdominant.

The first episode (83-136) mirrors the motivic structure of the ritornello, beginning with arpeggios and switching decisively to the figuration first heard at bar 13 in bar 125. As an episode it has to modulate to prepare the way for the next ritornello, which begins and ends in E minor. By 103 the key has moved to D; the G sharp in 124 is pivotal for the move to A, from where the bass moves up by step to a perfect cadence in E minor (B-E, bars 134-137).

By 185, the start of the third ritornello, we have reached A minor. There is a particularly virtuosic violin solo at this point – remember Michael Talbot's point about difference of ability! This is a bi-partite ritornello, with statements in both A minor and C major; it concludes with another 'flagged' syncopated cadence. The syncopation at these flagged cadences makes them one of the highlights of the work.

What follows has such 'drive' and vitality that it doesn't feel like an episode. However, it leads us to B minor for the next ritornello (323-43). Gerald Hendrie describes bar 344 as a 'no-man's land'; bars 345-427 are a repeat of the first 83 bars.

This structural approach allows Bach to build a long movement out of concise musical material: the movement is in ABA form because of the return of the first ritornello at the end, and moves to the sharp side of the for part two of the first ritornello, to the flat side for the third ritornello, back to the sharp side for the fourth, and of course back to the tonic to conclude.