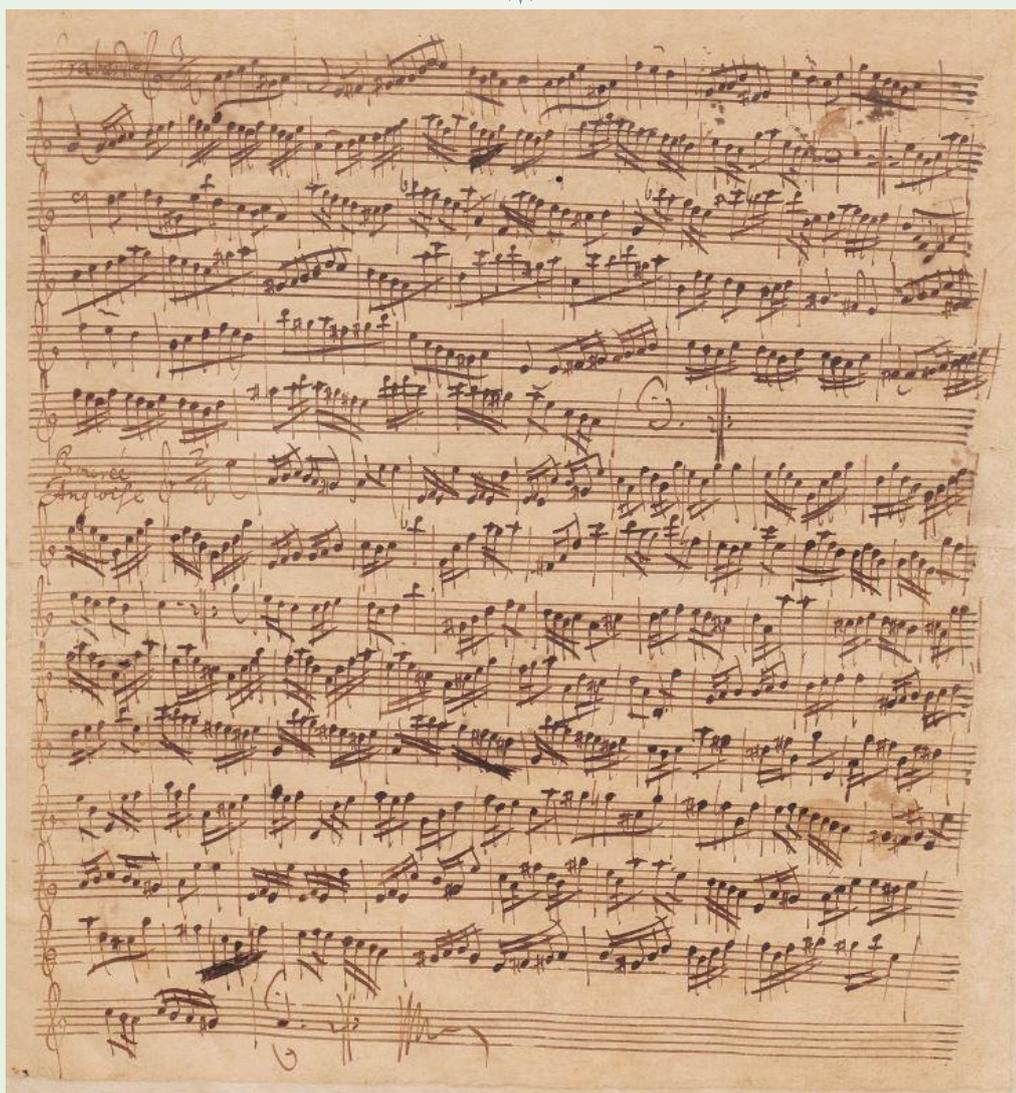


KEES BOEKE

ESSAYS BEFORE A PARTITA

« SOLO POUR LA FLUTE TRAVERSIÈRE » BWV 1013

de J.S. BACH



OLIVE MUSIC EDITIONS BACH 2



Essays before a Partita

“This investigative edition sheds new light on the perplexing features of Bach’s great work. For example, the continuous sixteenth notes in the Allemande - where to breathe? - embrace both the typical features of allemandes and some highly irregular ones. The authors propose *that the atypical, psalm-like structure, delivered with the speech-like enunciation used by Baroque flutists, allows the kind of breathing appropriate to a recitation. The unusually intense melody turns out to fit the structure and images of two particular psalms. The remaining movements - Corrente, Sarabande, and Bourrée Anglaise - likewise prove both typical and atypical of their dance types, and make a strong contrast with the Allemande while intimately identifying with it.*”¹ (my italics)

- Betty Bang Mather and Elizabeth A. Sadilek , *Historical Clues and New Discoveries for Performance*

“... I have often heard, preached to the point of exasperation, the myth of the homogeneity and equality of sound. If not perfectly understood, this concept leads to boring and mechanical performances, as in the case of the Allemande of the Bach Partita which very often seems more like a daily exercise by Moyses *than a musical work of the highest and most abstract metaphysical meditations. In its perfect architectural structure, the sublime contribution of human experience is declared by a circular sense of breath which both dictates and is dictated by phrasing and continuous changes of sound in the various registers and tonalities that underscore the “effects”. What emerges is the surprised and pudic resonance of a profound inner emotion. (...)*”² (my italics)

- Mario Ancillotti, *Il Suono*

“*[The Flagellation of Christ] has come to acquire the epithet “enigmatic”. That, however, is a mode extraneous to Piero’s lucid narration (...).*”³

- Machtelt Brüggén Israëls, *Piero della Francesca and the Invention of the Artist*

We could substitute Piero’s name with that of Bach, and the *Flagellation* with the *Solo pour la flute traversière*, BWV 1013, nowadays known under the name *Partita in A minor*. Analyzing a composition like Bach’s *Solo* means reconstructing the train of thought and planning underlying the (presumably) complete work. We must look at the general structure, starting with the external form and then moving inwards toward ever more detailed elements of composition.

The original title “*Solo*” does not give us any clue as to the nature of the piece other than that it is in fact written for a solo instrument, apparently the “flute traversière”. It is not one of the standard forms of Baroque composition, such as Sonata, Suite, Concerto, Fantasia or Cantata, and therefore we have to deduct its form from the four movements we have: Allemande - Corrente - Sarabande - Bourrée Anglaise. These are dance forms that typically constitute a suite, but a comparison with Bach’s cello and keyboard suites reveals a slight anomaly: a standard Bach suite is composed of six or seven, and not four movements.

¹ J.S. Bach Partita in A minor with Emphasis on the Allemande - Historical Clues and New Discoveries for Performance, by Betty Bang Mather and Elizabeth A. Sadilek - Falls House Press, 2004

² Il Suono, by Mario Ancillotti - Rivista FaLaUt, 1999

³ Piero della Francesca and the Invention of the Artist, by Machtelt Brüggén Israëls - Reaktion Books, London, 2020

All the *French Suites* (composed between 1722 and 1725) commence with the trio of Allemande - Courante - Sarabande, followed by two or three of the minor dance forms such as Menuet, Gavotte, Passepied, Bourrée, Anglaise (sic) or Loure, to be inevitably concluded with a Gigue. The *English Suites* (1713/4) and the *Cello Suites* (between 1717 and 1723) follow the same pattern but with the addition of an opening Prelude. The *Six Partitas* (1726-1731) all start with a type of Prelude, entitled Preludio, Sinfonia, Fantasia, Ouverture, Praeambulum and Toccata respectively, by which Bach uses almost every extant name of this compositional form. With the exception of the second (which concludes with a Capriccio), each Partita ends with a Gigue, just like the *French* and *English Suites*.

In short, it seems that our “Solo” might be an incomplete Suite, either English or French. However, since the Allemande, with its continuous and rather atypical sixteenth-note movement, has strong Prelude overtones (cf. the Preludes to the *Cello Suites* 1 and 3), a ‘truncated French Suite’ seems to be the most likely candidate, with the Gigue conspicuously missing.

It might be coincidence, but Bach’s four movements of choice typify four musical nations of Europe, with the Allemande representing Germany and the Corrente Italy (although we will see that this Corrente has more characteristics of its French counterpart than of the Italian Corrente proper). The Sarabande represents France and the Bourrée Anglaise obviously England, the latter a unicum in the entire repertoire of the Baroque. Could it be that Bach simply invented this dance form with the sole purpose of having an “English” specimen in his Partita?

Allemande

As shown by the two epigraphs at the beginning of this article, the Allemande is the movement that has most intrigued and baffled players and scholars alike. Since this can hardly have been the purpose of Johann Sebastian, we must find the right “key” to unlock this composition and discover the plan that underlies its genesis. Before jumping to metaphysical conclusions we should look carefully at what is there.

Tonal music, including that of the Baroque, is essentially comprised of three elements - melody, harmony and rhythm - each of which are present in varying degrees in any piece of music. For example, in Gregorian chant the melodic component overrules harmony, which is absent, and rhythm, which is free and therefore undetermined. In dance music, however, the rhythmic component usually precedes our perception of the melodic or harmonic structure. An analysis of these three elements tells us where to focus our attention when we read a piece of music.

As observed by many, the first thing that strikes the eye in Bach’s Allemande is its chain of continuous sixteenth-notes. This is a compositional choice, but what does it mean in the terms outlined above? There is only one logical conclusion: this Allemande does not have rhythm in its DNA. A succession of 764 equal note values (sixteenth-notes in this case) does not establish a scenario where rhythm plays a foreground role. As a consequence, the roles of melody and harmony become more important; or in other words, we should focus particularly on the interplay between these two other musical components.

What we perceive as “harmony” is usually not just one, but a succession of chords, a harmonic progression. This will be important in determining whether the Allemande is music that is preponderantly harmonic or melodic in nature. In other words, if for the duration of a whole measure (*m.*) of sixteen sixteenth-notes ($16/16^{\text{ths}}$) the chord never changes, it is likely that we are dealing with material which should be interpreted as melodic.

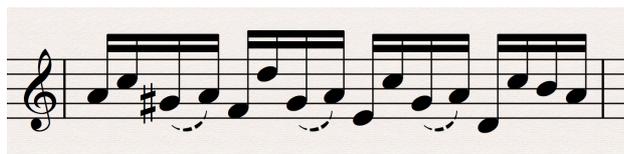
A French Allemande typically starts with an upbeat. But in the repertoire we can observe that there are in fact several varieties: upbeats of $1/8^{\text{th}}$ or $1/16^{\text{th}}$ are common, and there are plenty of examples of Allemandes beginning with a $3/16^{\text{ths}}$ upbeat. But in the Partita in question we are confronted with an anomalous situation: Bach seems to write a $7/16^{\text{ths}}$ upbeat (preceded by a rest), something that shouldn’t

really exist, is illegal or a mistake. We can assume that Bach didn't make mistakes, and so we must accept that what is written there in fact exists, that Bach therefore had no hesitation in doing something "illegal", and that he seemed to greatly enjoy the possibilities and ambiguities this offered. Given that we are listening to a solo instrument without basso continuo or any other help in determining where the "beat" falls, what do we really hear?

This:



In *m. 4*, the dissonant appoggiatura is confirmed as follows:



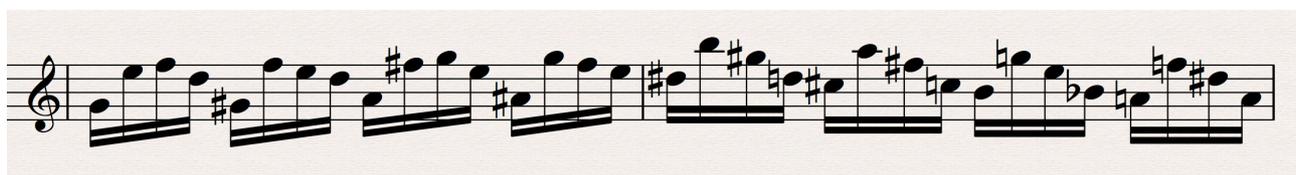
I IV⁶ I^{6/4} IV⁷

From the previous examples we can draw this essential conclusion: melodically, the material identifies with the characteristic upbeat(s) of an Allemande, whereas harmonically it depends on a fundamental or “bass” note that stands at the beginning of a chord and from which arpeggios or broken chords emerge. Put differently, harmonic material falls on the “beat”, while melodic material is “offbeat” or upbeat oriented, and we must never separate the fundamental of a chord from the notes that constitute it. In flautist’s terms, as long as we find ourselves in a harmonic rather than a melodic context, we should never take a breath (or start a phrase) after the first sixteenth-note of any group of 2, 4, or 8/16^{ths}, because we will inevitably interpret the notes after the breath as upbeats and thus transform them into melodic material.

It is only in *m. 9* that Bach restates the opening “melody”, which is then elaborated for five whole measures until *m. 14* when chord progressions again take the lead:



V I⁷ IV[#] VII^{7#} III #VI⁷ II[#] #IV⁷ II $\frac{6}{5}$ #



VII⁷ #VII⁷ I $\frac{7}{(3\#)}$ #I⁷ II $\frac{6}{\#}$ V $\frac{7}{3\#}$ I $\frac{6}{\#}$ IV $\frac{7}{3\#}$ VII⁶ III⁷ VI $\frac{4\#}{3}$ / 6

As can be seen in this diagram, the density of the implicit harmonic progressions (the harmonic rhythm) gradually augments from slow changes every half-note, to every quarter-note, and eventually every eighth-note before reaching the cadence of the first half of the piece.

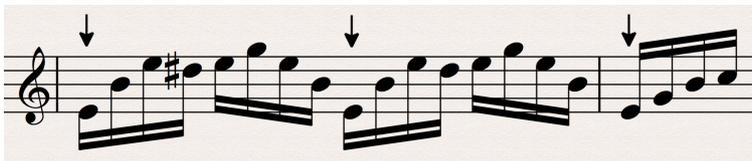
In principle, the ingredients so far described also determine the second part of the Allemande and can be used as tools for subsequent analysis. But there are a number of puzzling anomalies that require further scrutiny in order to understand Bach’s intentions.



The fragment above is the beginning of the second part, just after the double bar, where we find the restatement of the opening measure a fourth lower (or a fifth higher), as is usual. The third group of 4/16^{ths} should have been E'-B-E''-D#'', but a correction has been very visibly made so that the first note reads F#. ⁴ The reason "why" is not difficult to understand, but Bach's (?) solution is remarkably inelegant. The problem lies in the typical technique, common in the "lutenist" or "virginalist" style, of filling out the final note of the first half (i.e. the final two beats of the second time bar, *m.* 19) in order to land on E' rather than E'':



Whereas at the beginning of the Allemande the first note is missing, here a potential situation is created where there would exist three consecutive E's in a row on the strong beats (shown below by the arrows on beats 1, 3 and 1), which is musically unacceptable. The upbeat nature of the opening motive is suddenly replaced by a repeated, "on the beat", *arpeggiando* motive, similar to the prelude of the first cello suite, for example. But that is precisely what this motive is not, or should not, be (i.e. an on the beat arpeggio).



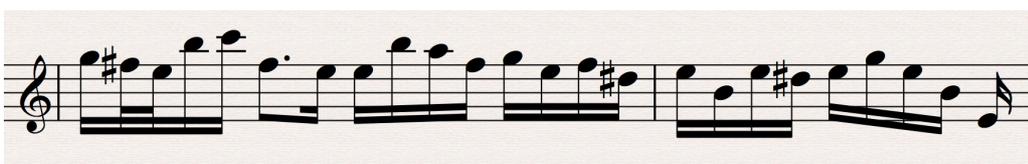
It seems that Bach realized this. Unfortunately, exactly at this point there is a change of scribe in the manuscript and it looks like the second scribe corrected it with an F# as can be seen in the facsimile above (none of the manuscript is in Bach's hand). However, this is what was written originally, and is one way of avoiding the problem:



The F# "correction" is the version that has been generally accepted, but ultimately is a bit of an emergency solution. The scribe could have filled out the final notes of the first half differently, in order to end on E' instead of E'', for example like this:



Or like this:

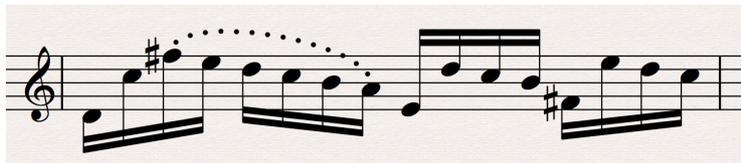


⁴ "Winfried Michel, "Ein Ton" - Das "Fis" im zwanzigsten Takt von Bachs Flötenpartita BWV 1013" In "Travers und Controvers", Celle 1992 - Festschrift für Nikolaus Delius

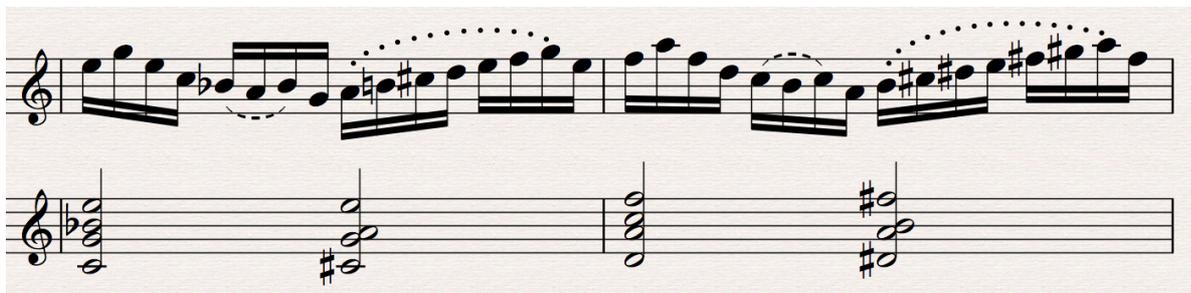
We will never know what really happened, but it is extremely rare to catch Bach in a compositional “faux-pas” of this kind.

Harmonic progressions continue until *m.* 25, at which point the opening material returns, now placed in a more harmony-oriented context and elaborated in the form of a sequence with the help of this modulating fragment:

m. 27



This is the first time that we find a descending scale-like passage (marked by a dotted slur), until now conspicuously absent. It is mirrored in *mm.* 31-32, where the opening idea is further harmonized and, so to speak, a complete fusion of melody and harmony is achieved (the implied chromatic bass-line of C-C#-D-D# only adding to the rising tension):



The scale now moves “*contrario motu*” in relation to the preceding fragment and encompasses practically an octave instead of a sixth. The meaning of these expanding scales will soon become clear.

In the next three measures the harmonic rhythm intensifies, reaching its apex of density in *m.* 35 and the first beat of *m.* 36. After this, the music “explodes”: the next two measures do not in any way fit their surrounding context, before or after. The use of two long scales, secretly prepared (as we have just seen) in the passages before, does not make any logical musical sense, whichever way you look at it. Furthermore, they are each flanked by a little group of a falling and rising third, again unique in the whole composition and musically inexplicable.

There are two possible conclusions: either Bach didn’t know what he was doing, which is hardly likely, or this:



E major
V

E⁷ A^{minor} A minor
(V) I (I)

E major A minor
V I

In other words: **GOLGOTHA!**

It is not music, but a symbol of the cross, carefully placed at the culmination point of the Allemande, with melody (a scale) and harmony (V-I) reduced to their bare essentials.

The temperature induced by this “explosion” needs to cool down in order to arrive at a peaceful conclusion of the piece, which Bach achieves in the next five measures through a final flare of chromaticisms, first encountered at the end of the first part. This process starts in *m.* 38, a number that is exactly twice the length of the 19 measures constituting the first “half” of the piece. Technically speaking, the Allemande is finished here. However, a last anomaly occurs in the form of a kind of coda, embellishing and improvising on the final A-minor chord and concluding with a long, rising arpeggio which ultimately lands on an impossible A’!’ That this is a note out of range for the entirety of the Allemande (and indeed the Partita as a whole) again raises the question: what did Johann Sebastian have in mind? As was the case with “Golgotha”, the meaning is symbolic rather than musical, but we can only speculate on its specific significance. Is it Christ’s spirit rising up to the heavens at the moment of his passing?

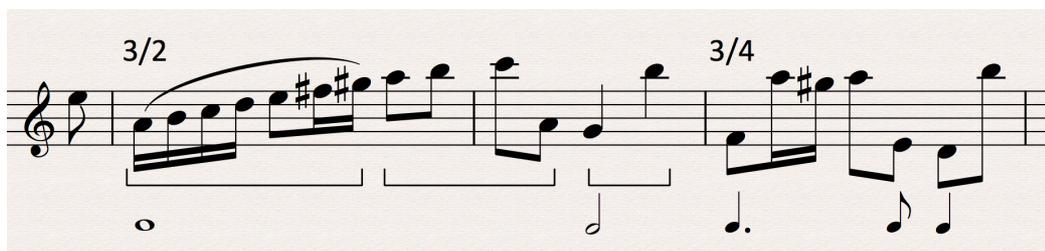
We will never know, but the flute traversière is certainly one of the few instruments that can pull off such a vanishing diminuendo into these highest spheres...

Corrente

In the *Six Partitas* for Keyboard (1726-31), Bach distinguishes precisely between *Courante* (French) and *Corrente* (Italian), with the French specimens notated in 3/2 and the Italian in 3/4. On the other hand, in the *Six Suites for Solo Cello* (1717-23) all the courantes are named *Courante*, although only the fifth suite has the French form in 3/2 with all the other suites employing their Italian 3/4 counterparts. The *Courante* in the first solo violin Partita (1718-23) is decidedly Italian, as is the one in the second Partita with its typical triplets rhythm. In the six *French Suites* (1722-25), the name obviously had to be *Courante*, but, astonishingly, the numbers 2, 4, 5 and 6 are really *Correnti*, with the aforementioned triplet movement in the fourth Suite. Finally, in the *English Suites* (the set which Bach composed first, between 1713 and 1714), all six courantes are *Courantes*, and French! At that time it seems that the Italian influence on his music had not yet taken the upper hand and that French style and taste were still prevalent.

The quintessential ingredient of the French Courante is the alternation of 3/2 with 6/4 measures, in other words, the presence of *hemiolas*. Put differently, the music moves back and forth between groups of three half-notes and three quarter-notes.

In the *Solo pour la flute traversière* this has been (deliberately?) obscured by Bach’s covering of the whole piece with an almost continuous string of sixteenth notes, practically a “double” of a regular Italian Corrente in eighth-notes. However, if we observe well, we can deduce a different message even in the initial two bars of this movement:



m. 36

m. 39 40 41

(stars show descension in fifths)

In fact, the “mega” hemiola in *mm.* 39-40 is built upon just one long note (G): for a moment “time stands still” only to crash into the densest harmonic rhythm of the whole composition in *m.* 41. This leads to a false cadence articulated by a wide arpeggio at *m.* 42, a true moment of crisis that is finally stabilized in *m.* 44. In these three measures the subject matter of the Corrente is condensed into its most extreme form, not unlike the “Golgotha” moment in the Allemande. The symbolism here, however, is of a different nature, numerical rather than religious.

The golden ratio (also known as the golden section/proportion/mean) is obtained when two segment lengths have the same proportion as the proportion of their sum to the larger of the two lengths. Applying the golden ratio to the number of measures in Bach’s piece, we find the following: the total number of measures (62) divides proportionally into the numbers 23 and 39, exactly the number of bars of the Corrente’s first and second parts respectively. What’s more, the moment of the “mega” hemiola happens in *m.* 39, with 23 more measures to follow to end the piece - an amazing example of inverted symmetry!

To re-establish order and calm, Bach now introduces two larger sections, undisturbed by conflict. First comes a long chain of hemiolas (*mm.* 44-49),

followed by an almost equally long passage unmistakably in 3/4 rhythm (*mm.* 50-54), culminating again in a grand hemiola in the following two bars:

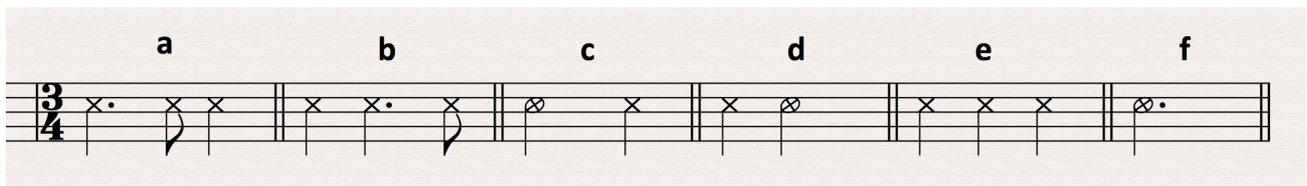
m. 55

This hemiola is in a way the mirror image of the one in *m.* 39-40, now ascending by fourths rather than descending by fifths and bringing us back to the principal tonality of A-minor. The last six bars (*mm.* 57-62) are a coda, a postludium, reaffirming the tonic key.

Sarabande

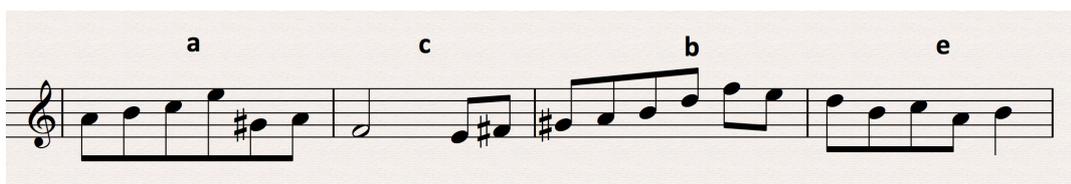
Where *is* the Sarabande? It seems a legitimate question to ask in these Baroque surroundings. Once again the composer plays hide and seek and presents us with a beautifully melodic piece which, on the surface, does not exhibit most of the features characteristic of this very common slow “dance” movement, typical of the standardized Suite. We recognize the common four-bar structure (at the beginning at least) and the 3/4 time signature. But where are the dotted rhythms and, above all, where is the accentuated second beat of the measure?

To understand this, we must take a step back and realize what are the building blocks of a very classic, no-frills French Sarabande. These elements are exclusively rhythmical and can be summarized essentially as follows:

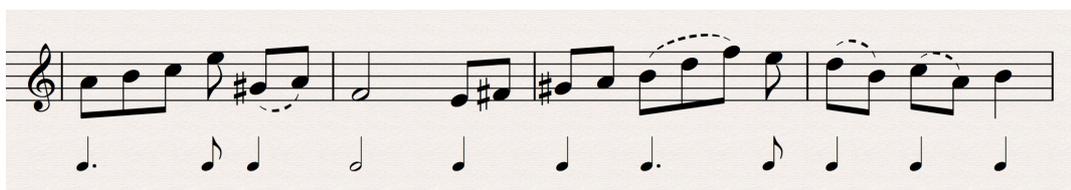


With these elements, and following the four-bar principle, anybody can compose a household Sarabande.

We will now try to identify how this rhythmical framework underlies Bach’s Sarabande. The chord progressions and melodic shape inform us about what is and what is not “essential” in a measure. For example, *m. 1* is entirely made of an A-minor chord, with the second eighth-note being a passing note, but the fifth a dissonant appoggiatura and therefore important. The fourth note is part of the harmony, but stands out melodically because of the double intervallic jump. In *m. 3* the situation is different. The chord, built up from the final two notes of *m. 2*, constitutes a very dissonant 9th chord on E, which finds its resolution on the final E of *m. 3* and is therefore a separate harmony. The only rhythmic model that presents an eighth-note at the end of the bar is element **b** and, as a result, the Sarabande signature surprisingly emerges!



It would be more illuminating to write it like this (but that would be giving away the secret):



And so the Sarabande reveals itself!

Treated in the same way, the rest of the first part looks like this:



The beginning of the second “half” seems to restate the first four bars, but closer analysis reveals a different picture:

m. 17



Finally, the six bars that can be considered the movement’s climax and which are characterized by a total absence of rhythm (*mm.* 27-32), confront us with an uninterrupted string of eighth-notes under high harmonic tension. Here in particular the harmonic context informs the underlying rhythmical structure, which in turn itself gives rise to the harmony:

B⁷ C E⁷ (G^{#6/5}) A B⁷ (D^{6/5}) C G[#] A

- *m.* 27: the last note G is the resolution of the 7th chord (cf. *m.* 3), but could also be interpreted as in *m.* 29.
- *m.* 28: G# is a dissonant appoggiatura for A. The first four notes all mean simply C.
- *m.* 29: the opposite of *m.* 27, here the chord is a 6/5 on G#, making the F an appoggiatura for E, especially since it is a minor second (but it still could be interpreted as in *m.* 27).
- *m.* 31: in the context of a D^{6/5} chord, both C and G# are dissonant appoggiaturas.
- *m.* 32: the diminished G# (or implied dominant E⁷) chord is resolved in the final A.

It is the juxtaposition of rhythms in *mm.* 31-32 that suggests, not an equal rhythmic treatment (which is possible in theory), but the same chiasmic intention as in *mm.* 27 and 29.

Bourrée Anglaise

Many musicians are also *gourmets*, a French word used in the English language. They will probably know exactly what a *zuppa inglese* is or, even more to the point, an *assiette anglaise*, but they will most likely not be able to answer the question regarding the nature of a Bourrée Anglaise (as opposed to the familiar Bourrée Française, simply called *Bourrée*).

A recent article by Michelle Cheramy expertly traces the English and subsequent Scottish origins of the rhythmic material in this last movement, but bypasses the significance of the rhythm in the context of the Partita as a whole. She acknowledges the pervading presence of the anapest, but without putting it in its right place:

“The first measure of the Bourrée Anglaise announces its departure from these conventions. It does contain two anapest (short-short-long) rhythmic figures, but here placed metrically so that the short rhythmic values fall on the beat, rather than in the expected weak position on the half-beat. This shift of emphasis, from starting as an upbeat to starting on the beat, creates a significant shift of musical character as well: instead of lending the movement an “upbeat” quality, the anapest rhythm now engenders a feeling of groundedness.”⁵

Instead of upbeat qualities or feelings of groundedness, the real observation to be made here is this: an anapest in upbeat position is not an anapest, but its mirror image, the dactyl (‘long-short-short’ as in the Bourrée Française), whereas for this specific dance Bach chose the true anapest, probably to give it that typical English flavor.



In fact, in the first two measures the anapest’s ‘short-short-long’ rhythm is present on three different levels:



Once again, Bach hands us the key to “how to read” the piece in the first two bars, just like in the Allemande and Courante. But this time the key is rhythm. The entire Bourrée is a play on (this) rhythm, with two notable exceptions: the running sixteenth-notes in the arpeggios of *mm.* 7-10 and 29-32 or the scales in *mm.* 39-42, and the chromatic eighth-note moments in *mm.* 51-52 and 63-64. Both instantly give us the feeling that rhythm is momentarily suspended.

The C major passage below, with its internal V-I cadence, is followed by a C^7 chord leading to F major.

⁵ Cheramy, Michelle. "‘BIZARRE’ AND ‘UNUSUAL’: A Search for the Stylistic Sources of J.S. Bach’s Bounce Anglaise: THE AUTHOR’S HUNT FOR BACH’S MOTIVES BENEATH THE APPENDAGE OF ‘ANGLAISE’ TO HIS ‘BOURREE’ REVEALS AN UNEXPECTED FINDING." *Flutist Quarterly*, 2019, p. 20+

m. 7



I I^{6/4} V⁶ V⁷ I I^{6/4} V⁷ V

The subtle discrepancy between this passage (in C) and the almost identical one that follows (transposed to D) is often “corrected” in modern editions of the piece. However, there is a difference in context that explains the correctness of the original manuscript. The passage in C is ‘closed’ and is followed by a new harmonic and rhythmic statement, whereas the second version in D ends on the open dominant 7th chord leading to a cadence.

Here is the passage in D major followed by cadence in D:



I I^{6/4} V⁶ V⁷ I I^{6/4} V⁶ V⁷

The introduction of chromaticisms at the end of the movement feels like an “alien” intrusion, one which successfully breaks up the relentless activity of the piece. After two abortive peaks in *mm.* 60 and 68, it ends with a dismissively tongue-in-cheek anticlimax, a rare glimpse of humour from that very serious composer, J.S. Bach.

The rest is mystery.

Kees Boeke, 2021⁶

⁶ My warmest thanks to Fred Thomas for reviewing this text and straightening out all my English irregularities.