

First movement from
brandenburg
concerto no 2 by j s
bach



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

One of Bach's most celebrated compositions, Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 was part of six compositions (known as the Brandenburg Concerti, collectively, though they were mostly musically unrelated) that Bach submitted in March 1721 to Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg as a job application of sorts. Bach, in the wake of the death of his wife, was trying to leave his musical position with Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. However, the individual composition dates for the Brandenburg Concerti cannot be precisely determined. The only thing that can be said with certainty about their chronology is that they were all composed by March 1721, the date on Bach's autograph copy, (Boyd, 1993) including Concerto No. 2. (Ironically, Bach did not get the job.)

This piece is identifiable as being in the style of a Concerto Grosso. Concerto grosso, literally translated as great concert, was a popular compositional/performance style from the Baroque period, which is localized between 1650 and 1750. Generally, a concerte grosso was distinguished by a small set of solo instruments (the concertino) that interacted in a musical duel of sorts with a larger group (the ripieno), one answering the other. The Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 is just such an example, with the trumpet playing the most commonly well-known concertino voice.

Concerto No. 2 was written in the key of F major, and scored for the following instruments: trumpet (as alluded to above), flute or recorder (the original instrument used), oboe, and violin from whose ranks came the solo instruments; and the viola, cello, and continuo (most commonly a harpsichord), which together formed the ripieno. The piece is divided into three movements, as follows:

<https://assignbuster.com/first-movement-from-brandenburg-concerto-no-2-by-j-s-bach/>

1. Allegro (without tempo indication)
2. Andante
3. Allegro assai

We shall focus on the first movement. The trumpet part stands out most notably, as it is written to be performed in the difficult clarion style, in which the trumpeter plays in the very highest registers within the instrument's capacity, using only the power of rapid lip movements and precisely controlled breathing to change the instrument's pitch. In Bach's time, trumpets did not have valves as they do now. In most contemporary performances, a piccolo trumpet is used to perform the original trumpet part as the piccolo trumpet is tuned higher. Whatever the case, the trumpet part stands out starkly in the texture of the piece, with its aggressive and lively tones soaring over the sonic landscape within this piece as it mirrors the orchestra and flies off on its own fancies. This trumpet part is considered a worthy challenge for any advanced player who dares take it on.

Interestingly, in the first movement, it is the uniquely high pitch of the trumpet part, as opposed to the part it is playing, which endows it with its tendency to stand out. The reason for this is that here in the first movement, Bach toys with the expectations of the genre and has written the concerto and ripieno instruments the same or similar parts during a portion of the movement, rendering them in some cases indistinguishable.

Melodically speaking, there are basically two repeating themes, or ritornello, upon which each instrument, whether concerto or ripieno, bases its movements. Even when the solo instruments deviate as they should in the

genre, they are still 'riffing,' if you will, off the material forming the two-movement foundation. They move off the first theme in pairs, venturing forth into repeating and augmenting the second theme while complimenting the first theme.

Both the concierto and ripieno parts contain a large number of notes within most measures, often clusters of sixteenth notes. The net effect is parts and instruments blending together both textually and tonally. Two instruments that might normally be easily discernable from one another instead may be perceived by the inexperienced listener as one unique and different one playing the same rapid-fire series of notes. This sonic clustering, combined with the fact that the particular combination of instruments Bach specified for this particular concerto, makes the piece stand out and accounts in part for its enduring popularity.

As far as overall texture in the first movement is concerned, the piece is certainly marked by a busy set of contrapuntal elements. The texture can also be generally described as somewhat generally higher and thinner, if you will, or at least less full-sounding and spread out than some other pieces in the Brandenburg family or other music of the time period. There is a good deal of sonic transparency, or open sonic space, left by the frequent collective high pitching of the concierto instruments, which are clustered together by virtue of the repeating ritornello.

The individual instruments popping off their sixteenth-note creates a very unique polyphonic texture, and where the instruments diverge, also creates

a nice sense of momentum which is reinforced by the well-organized and (deceptively so) focused harmonic structure of the piece.

The harmonic structure of the piece is mainly a showcase of very deliberate and calculated dynamic harmony, intended to use harmonic elements to ensure the piece propels itself consistently forward, both emotionally and structurally. Specifically, Bach employs 'strong' chord progressions, I-IV-V-I progression in many instances, as opposed to, for example, merely oscillating purposelessly between chords, which would have resulted in a lack of direction in the piece. The underlying dynamic harmonics serve to satisfyingly push along the already organically fluid chord progressions. Even though the texture of the music is contrapuntal, and the writing is in two parts, the dynamic harmony is nevertheless much in evidence. (Sutcliffe, 1999)

This harmonic structure, along with the other standout elements, are a testament to the sharp planning evident in so much of Bach's work. In particular, this first movement in the piece is so sprightly, energetic, and almost manic in some instances that it is easy to forget that the entire Concerto is in fact a tightly written and plotted piece, that simultaneously allows a certain creativity in interpretation which can vary by performance.

All in all, the first movement in Concerto No. 2 is not only a time-honored musical standout in its own right, both in structure and difficulty, but an intriguing reflection of the larger musical trends evident in the classical music of the time, and Bach's own life.