

**Strategies for Hearing the First Movement of  
J. S. Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto**

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For most of the history of J. S. Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos, scholarship has not kept pace with their popularity. Though frequently performed (and in this century recorded), they have been infrequently discussed in print. Recently, however, several large strides have been taken to narrow the gap. If one concerto draws more attention from listeners and researchers alike, it is the fifth. In particular, the first movement, with its greater length and complexity relative to the other concertos, and its dazzling harpsichord solo near the end, holds great fascination. This paper attempts to braid together various strands of recent research into a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the first movement of J. S. Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto.

Only a few comments about the six concertos as a set will be offered here. More will be written about the genesis of the fifth concerto, and about the ritornello structure of the first movement with respect to the conventions of the time. Finally, some ink will be spilled over the brilliant harpsichord solo that comes near the movement's conclusion.

That there are precisely six Brandenburg Concertos is not a random occurrence. Standard publication practice in the eighteenth century was to draw together similar works by a composer into groups of six, or a multiple thereof, under a single opus number. This practice carried over into situations in which the

compositions were not necessarily intended for publication.<sup>1</sup> The occasion for compiling the six Brandenburgs was such a situation. The concertos derive their name from a minor nobleman named Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, who spent a considerable portion of his income on a musical establishment. Bach met the Margrave in Berlin in 1719 and played for him at the keyboard, which prompted the Margrave to request some compositions for his own orchestra. For various reasons it took Bach two years to fulfill the commission, which he did by preparing a fine autograph score of six concerti grossi for diverse combinations of instruments, dedicated to the margrave and dated 24 March 1721. Although Bach was happily employed by Prince Leopold of Cöthen at the time, a certain phrase in the dedication has fostered the notion that Bach was sending out feelers for employment with the margrave.<sup>2</sup>

No record exists for how the concertos were received and used by the Margrave of Brandenburg and his musicians. This should not lead to the conclusion (one which has entered popular consciousness) that no use at all was made of them—lack of evidence for performance should not be taken as evidence for lack of performance. Nor should one assume, as many do along with the pioneering Bach scholar Philipp Spitta, that “after the Margraf’s death ... Bach’s precious manuscript experienced the risk of being carelessly sold of among a lot of other instrumental concertos at a ridiculously low price...”<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Boyd has shown that the valuations placed on the margrave’s music scores do not indicate a

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<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Boyd, *Bach: The Brandenburg Concertos*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> “...I desire nothing more than to be employed on occasions more worthy of you and your service...”

<sup>3</sup>Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750*, 129.

desire to sell them, but a desire to distribute them equitably among his beneficiaries.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance the selection and ordering of the six concertos seems random. Indeed, Bach's chief concern with respect to instrumentation seems to have been diversity. Boyd points out, however, that the two works with exclusively string concertinos are placed in positions 3 and 6, in effect bisecting the set, and that No. 3 uses three groups of three instruments and No. 6 uses six instruments.<sup>5</sup> Further, Michael Marissen argues for a trend of increasing chromaticism within the set, and for a trend of increasing competition or contentiousness between the concertino and ripieno.<sup>6</sup>

One final commonly-held notion that needs qualification regards Bach's process of compiling the six concertos. It is easy to imagine "that when Bach came to compile the presentation copy of the Brandenburg Concertos for Margrave Christian Ludwig he was able to select the six works from a much larger corpus of such compositions already to hand"<sup>7</sup>, but Boyd points out the lack of documentary proof for this idea. He casts further doubt on this assumption on the grounds that there simply are not a large number of concertos among Bach's output that would fit the bill for the Brandenburg set, and it is unreasonable to assume that such a storehouse of compositions would be entirely lost today. In addition, source studies reveal a surprisingly diverse ancestry for a few of the concertos; for example, the third

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<sup>4</sup>Boyd 18.

<sup>5</sup>Boyd 41.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Marissen, in *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos*.

<sup>7</sup>Boyd 16-17.

movement of No. 1 originated as a cantata chorus.<sup>8</sup>

One concerto which did begin its life as such, however, and which required comparatively little adaption for inclusion in the set, is the fifth. A set of parts copied mostly by Bach's assistant Altnikol sometime between 1744 and 1759 preserves a version of the concerto which predates its Brandenburg incarnation. These parts are catalogued as St 132 (in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin — Preußischer Kulturbesitz) and the version they represent has been catalogued in the *Bach Werke Verzeichnis* (BWV) as 1050a. St 132 gives no clue as to the original date of composition, but as the first concerto in history to implement a harpsichord as a solo instrument, it seems likely that Bach wrote it to celebrate the acquisition of a new harpsichord (by instrument-maker Michael Mietke) by the Cöthen court in the spring of 1719. Among many minor differences between BWV 1050a (the early version) and BWV 1050 (the Brandenburg version) stands the major difference that the final harpsichord solo has been expanded from 18 to 65 bars.

This state of affairs has led some scholars to conclude that Bach expanded the solo *specifically to impress the margrave*.<sup>9</sup> Some doubt may be cast on this conclusion, however, by the existence of an intermediate version, St 130. This set of parts reproduces variant readings from St 132, but also shows signs of corrections. Most importantly, this intermediate version already contains the 65-bar solo,<sup>10</sup> which means that Bach expanded the solo before officially fulfilling the margrave's

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<sup>8</sup>Boyd 17.

<sup>9</sup>George Stauffer, "Bach as Reviser of His Own Keyboard Works", in *Early Music* 13 (1985), p. 194, and echoed by Marissen, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>Boyd 87.

commission.

<u>Version</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Status of the harpsichord solo</u>
A: BWV 1050a (St 132)	spring 1719 ?	18 bars
B: St 130	[between A and C]	65 bars
C: BWV 1050	24 March 1721	65 bars

That the concerto was initially composed in spring of 1719 to show off a new harpsichord is a reasonable hypothesis, but without firm documentary support. If one accepts 1719 as the *terminus ante quem* for A, then B must fall between 1719 and 24 March 1721. Otherwise, B could also have been written before 1719, the year Bach initially received the commission.

If in fact Bach did desire a job with the margrave's orchestra, and if it is true, as Spitta declares, that the harpsichord part required "a finger dexterity which no one except Bach could have possessed at that time"<sup>11</sup>, then perhaps the solo was a calculated attempt to show up the "weakness" of the resident Brandenburg keyboard player and to suggest Bach himself as the natural replacement. On the other hand, one can question whether Bach would put energy into composing music that he would perform in public only on condition that he land a particular job, an uncertain proposition. Perhaps the most likely scenario is a combination of motivations: Bach revised A to produce B for an occasion at the Cöthen court (where he was certain to play the harpsichord part), but with a view to eventually including it in his submission to the margrave (since he had known about the commission since 1719). Version C (from the dedication score) was the product of Bach's inclination to revise and improve at every step. At any rate, the *precise date* and motivation for the expansion of the solo seems less important than the idea

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<sup>11</sup>Spitta 135.

that Bach was trying to reinforce a statement of some kind, a theme which will be taken up later.

As a concerto grosso written in the early eighteenth century, Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto naturally uses the ritornello principle. Bach's well-known study and arrangement of scores by his Italian contemporaries, especially Vivaldi, highlighted for him the potential of the ritornello structure. Boyd offers a succinct description of what it entails:

Fundamental to ritornello structure is the alternation of a passage containing the basic thematic substance of the movement (ritornello) with others in which the music is largely or wholly new (episodes). In the 'classical' structure the ritornello, heard in full and in the tonic key at the beginning, returns in related keys and usually in truncated form at various points during the course of the movement, and again in the tonic, and usually complete, at the end. The episodes are more dynamically conceived, effecting a move from the key of one ritornello to that of the next.<sup>12</sup>

The ritornello principle, which is primarily concerned with thematic material, must be kept distinct from the concerto principle, which is primarily concerned with instrumentation. A "typical" baroque concerto features an alternation between small and large instrumental forces, between soloist(s) and orchestra, between concertino and ripieno (or ripieno *plus* concertino, which equals "tutti"). While the ritornello and concerto principles very often coincide, one cannot necessarily or automatically map one onto the other. In other words, the ripieno typically plays ritornelli and the concertino typically plays episodes, but there are many counter-examples. As a case in point, Vivaldi's well-known "Spring" Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra, Op. 8 No. 1, maintains the ritornello principle (thematic differentiation between ritornelli and episodes) but occasionally violates the concerto principle (e.g. some episodes are played by the ripieno).

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<sup>12</sup>Boyd 46-47.

By contrast, the first movement of Bach’s Fifth Brandenburg Concerto mostly maintains the concerto principle, but “violates” ritornello principle, i.e. effects thematic integration between ritornelli and episodes. While the soloists do present material that is distinctly their own, they also make use of material derived from the ritornello. The following chart should help one to visualize the extent to which the ritornello theme permeates the episodes.

Ritornelli	Episodes
1 -- complete	
	1 -- new thematic material (N)
2 -- partial ( <i>Vordersatz</i> )	
	2 -- variation on ritornello (R)
3 -- partial ( <i>Fortspinnung</i> )	
	3 -- mix of R and N
4 -- partial ( <i>Fortspinnung</i> )	
	4 -- mix of R and N
5 -- partial ( <i>Fortspinnung</i> )	
	5 -- R, then N
6 -- partial ( <i>Vordersatz</i> )	
	6 -- mix of R and N
7 -- partial ( <i>almost complete</i> )	
	7 -- R
8 -- partial ( <i>Fortspinnung</i> )	
	8 -- N (all 3 soloists) -- then harpsich. breaks free!
Final -- complete	

This chart also points up another of Bach’s methods for achieving continuity in the movement. Often the ritornello enters not with a bang as one would expect from a Vivaldian concerto, but slides in through the back door with *Fortspinnung*

material.<sup>13</sup> “The result is an extremely fluent and unpredictable structure, in which the interests of continuity and of contrast are nicely balanced.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Bach undergirds his fluid thematic structure with a tonal structure that sometimes intentionally misses cadences or otherwise fails to create closure.<sup>15</sup>

While Bach’s innovative treatment of ritornello form is noteworthy in itself, it alone cannot fully explain the popular fascination with this movement—*that*, of course, is due to the astonishing harpsichord “cadenza”. Spitta’s opinion that the difficulty of the part would require Bach himself to play it has already been noted. J. A. Fuller-Maitland picks up this strain, and also comments on the solo’s seemingly ungainly proportions: “It is impossible to resist the conclusion that Bach must have played the harpsichord himself in this piece, for nothing but the participation of the composer could excuse the want of proportion that is caused by the length and elaborateness of this solo.”<sup>16</sup>

As previously discussed, the outlandish size of the solo came only after a revision of the concerto. The practice of revising an existing piece to suit the needs of a new occasion was part and parcel of Bach’s compositional process. In his article, “Bach as Reviser of His Own Keyboard Works”, George Stauffer identifies Bach’s

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<sup>13</sup> W. Fischer, in “Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Wiener klassischen Stils”, *Studien zur Musikwissenschaft*, 3 (1915), pp. 24-84, labelled and described the three components of which a complete ritornello statement is typically made: *Vordersatz*, *Fortspinnung*, and *Epilog*. This twentieth-century theoretical construction has entered the vocabulary of concerto discussion. While some of the Brandenburg ritornelli do not fit this scheme, that of the fifth concerto’s first movement can be more or less successfully mapped onto it.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during the Bach Year”, in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> J. A. Fuller-Maitland, *Bach's 'Brandenburg' Concertos*, 34.

two main methods for composing keyboard music: 1) “at the desk”, i.e. as an exercise away from the keyboard, and 2) capturing an improvisation in notation after the fact.<sup>17</sup> The harpsichord solo in BWV 1050a, the early version of the concerto, bears marks of the second process. “The original 18-bar cadenza is improvisatory in nature; further, the concluding bars demonstrate extempore playing with little clear structure.”<sup>18</sup> When Bach came to revise the concerto, he performed minor maintenance on everything except the harpsichord solo, which experienced a major overhaul. Only the last four bars of “flawed” material was dropped altogether, however; for the rest, the frugal Bach “did not discard the original material, but rather took each individual gesture, expanded and refined it.”<sup>19</sup> The refinements included new chromaticism, subtler changes of harmony, and stronger harmonic progressions. Finally, Bach preceded the improved improvisation with a discursive 40 bars of newly written material that is thematically linked to the episodes, which, as Marissen points out, helps to clarify the ritornello structure by bringing this last episode into closer kinship with the others.<sup>20</sup>

Although BWV 1050a was already unusual for giving the harpsichord a position in the concertino as well as an 18-bar solo spotlight, Bach was motivated to take the first movement of the piece to even further extremes when revising it. Susan McClary in “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during the Bach Year” has suggested a socially grounded interpretation which may pinpoint this particular

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<sup>17</sup>Stauffer 186.

<sup>18</sup>Stauffer 194.

<sup>19</sup>Stauffer 194.

<sup>20</sup>Marissen 107.

motivation. In general, the concerto principle, pitting soloist(s) against tutti, can be seen as an allegory for the individual in society. A “typical” concerto represents the dialectic of fostering individuality while at the same time promoting the good of society. The ritornello serves as a frame and as a constant backdrop for the forward-looking innovations of the soloists, just as society underlies and ultimately appropriates the progress of individuals. In the case of this particular concerto movement, however, the individuality of the harpsichord soloist becomes outright rebellion. In the first place, the harpsichord asserting itself as a soloist rather than minding its business as a continuo player is unheard of. (It actually plays a double role, acting as a continuo instrument during the ritornelli, and as a soloist during the episodes.) Then, Bach

creates a ‘Revenge of the continuo player’: the harpsichord begins in its rightful, traditional, supporting, norm-articulating role, but then gradually emerges to shove everyone else, large ensemble and conventional soloists alike, out of the way for one of the most outlandish displays in music history. The harpsichord is the wild card in this deck that calls all the other parameters of the piece—and their attendant ideologies—into question.<sup>21</sup>

The final ritornello puts on the appearance of restoring order, but ultimately does not succeed in absorbing the harpsichord’s rebellion.

Elements of McClary’s interpretation are reiterated and amplified in Marissen’s *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos*. In his view, the harpsichord

moves from its traditional role as continuo, to an obbligato role still somewhat overshadowed by the solo flute and violin, to an obbligato overshadowing the concertino, to a role completely overwhelming the full ensemble, and finally to one that, during the first section of the extended episode, in effect *becomes* the ensemble.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>McClary 25.

<sup>22</sup>Marissen 105-6.

He sees this first movement of the fifth concerto occupying an important position within a pattern of intensifying contentiousness in the set of six. It displays an “overt struggle from within the members of the concertino for central position. During the course of this struggle (in the first movement), the one member ends up successfully overwhelming not only the concertino but the ripieno as well.”<sup>23</sup>

Marissen also offers a tonal explanation for why the final ritornello seems not to succeed in absorbing or appropriating the harpsichord’s out-of-control individualism. “Although the larger group does have the last word, so to speak, Bach’s conventional closure by the ritornello ... may not have the power straightforwardly to succeed in containing the disruptiveness (musical and social) of the solo harpsichord material.”<sup>24</sup> Near the end of the solo, it seems that the 10-bar pedal point on A (mm. 203-213) should naturally resolve to the final ritornello in the tonic, D. Instead, the bass line slips to A# and then B (mm. 213-4), effecting a deceptive cadence that stirs up five more bars of intervening material before the ritornello finally enters. On top of this, a decelerating rhythm (from 32nds to triplet 16ths to straight 16ths) helps to diffuse the mounting tension. It should be noted that in the earlier version of the solo, the pedal-point A led directly to the final ritornello in D (and the rhythm did not decelerate), allowing the ritornello to effect a satisfying tonal closure. Thus, Bach’s revision not only expanded the movement’s size but also lent it an extra element of rhetorical sophistication.

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<sup>23</sup>Marissen, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup>Marissen 106.

The interpretations of McClary and Marissen rely to a large extent on the unprecedented nature of the harpsichord part. Indeed, according to J. Peter Burkholder, it is precisely Bach's norm-bending or "rule-breaking" in this movement that demands attention to the message he is trying to convey.

One may agree or disagree with [these] interpretation[s], but it is impossible to contest [the] point that this movement violates many norms of the concerto and that this wholesale and dramatic breaking of rules requires interpretation on the part of the listener. We misrepresent the music if we do not acknowledge it as a work that violates norms and thus demands explanation in rhetorical terms.<sup>25</sup>

While the awarding of a concertino position to a harpsichord is without a doubt unprecedented in music history, Philip Whitmore believes he *has* identified a precedent for the so-called cadenza itself.

Whitmore's article "Towards an Understanding of the Capriccio" focuses primarily on Italian baroque violin concertos, but almost as an afterthought he tacks on a discussion of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto. He describes a tradition of virtuoso solo episodes or "capriccios", a tradition quite distinct from that of the cadenza, in the violin concertos of Vivaldi, Locatelli, and Tartini. The capriccio vs. cadenza terminology is used the most correctly and consistently by Locatelli; the slightly older Vivaldi was less careful, and in the works of the slightly younger Tartini, the terms began to merge. Despite the terminological confusion, however, most of the solos in this repertoire can be clearly categorized as either a cadenza or a capriccio.

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<sup>25</sup>J. Peter Burkholder, "Rule-breaking as a Rhetorical Sign", in *Festa Musicologica: Essays in Honor of George J. Buelow*, 385.

Whitmore describes at length the differences between the two, but the most important differences for the purpose of this discussion can be highlighted as follows:

capriccio:

- found after a perfect cadence
- one could stop before the capriccio and omit it altogether
- idiomatic for the violin
- often very long
- could modulate freely
- metrical
- often in complete contrast to the surrounding movement; those which do use material from the surrounding movement treat it extensively

early cadenza:

- occurred during a cadence, as a cadential prolongation
- one could omit the cadenza, but not the cadence—there was no question of stopping beforehand
- vocally inspired (originated in arias)
- usually quite short
- was expected not to stray far from the harmony of the cadential chords
- metrically free, rhapsodic
- expressed the prevailing affect of the surrounding movement, but thematic references were never more than a hint

While Bach labelled his harpsichord ramble neither capriccio nor cadenza but simply *cembalo solo senza stromenti* (harpsichord solo without instruments), most writers use the term “cadenza”. The fit is not perfect, but this particular solo displays more characteristics of the capriccio than of the cadenza. Among the repertoire discussed in the article, Whitmore calls Bach’s passage “the earliest thematically derived capriccio”<sup>26</sup>, but one should remember its two incarnations. The solo in the early version of the concerto was thematically unrelated to the rest of the movement, which carries forward to those bars in the later version that are derived from the earlier. But the later version also features a newly written, 40-bar

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Whitmore, “Towards an Understanding of the Capriccio”, in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113/1 (1988), p. 55.

passage that is motivically linked to the other episodes.

As mentioned, Bach's solo harpsichord passage fits the capriccio mold well, but not perfectly. Indeed, a case can be made for the cadenza as well—Boyd interprets the passage as a forward-looking phenomenon that anticipates the Classical concerto cadenza. “What makes the cadenza of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto so exceptional (perhaps unique) is its *prophetic* combination of thematic reference and brilliant passage-work in an improvisatory style.”<sup>27</sup> But Whitmore would counter this by reaffirming that “‘capriccio’ seems a better label than ‘cadenza’... It makes little historical sense to interpret this passage as an unprecedented and unrepeated anticipation of the Classical concerto cadenza; surely there is a stronger case for linking it with the capriccio tradition and pointing to Vivaldi as the model.”<sup>28</sup>

If one accepts Whitmore's conclusion, one must temper interpretations such as McClary's that rely on the solo passage being “one of the most outlandish displays in music history”. Apparently violinists at the time were accustomed to playing very long, overtly virtuosic solos. Perhaps Bach's capriccio-like episode would not have raised eyebrows had it been written for the violin—but the fact that the harpsichord usurped a solo that by all accounts should have been given to the violin must have astonished those who first heard the concerto. It seems likely that the clever Bach made his point very clearly.

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<sup>27</sup> Boyd 90. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Whitmore 56.

Perhaps Bach would be surprised that many people today are still getting the point. The movement's legacy of refinement and its seamless construction, combined with the rapt attention demanded of the listener by the brilliant harpsichord solo, more than justifies J. S. Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto as a perennial favorite of audiences and record buyers.

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