

J.S. Bach, BWV 806, ii: an analysis

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In the hands of Bach, traditional genres were often endowed with a character quite removed from the context for which they were originally conceived. Thus, although an Allemande may have traditionally been composed for a courtly environment, and for the purpose of dance, there seems little reason to believe that Bach would have allowed himself to be confined by this convention. Indeed, the intricate polyphonic texture of the Allemandes in Bach's English and French Suites—the present one included—makes one wonder about the plausibility of dancing to this music.

As is typical of the Allemande sub-genre, this piece is in simple binary form. Both the A section and the B section are sixteen bars in length, despite there being no obvious internal symmetry within the sections. The A section exhibits a gradual shift to the dominant key, and ends on a perfect authentic cadence in the same. The B section moves through the keys of E (V), b (ii), f \sharp (vi), c \sharp (iii) and, finally, back to A (I).¹

The composition exhibits strong motivic unity. The repeated appearance of the motifs discussed below, in different tessitura and in the articulation of different harmonies, endows the piece with a definite sense of unity. And my analysis here will hopefully serve to demonstrate the significance of motivic

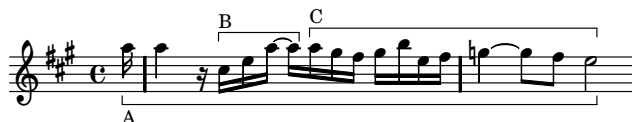
¹Major keys/chords are indicated with upper-case letters; minor keys/chords with lower-case.

transformation within the piece.

1 The A section, bars 1–16

Much of the melodic material of the entire piece is derived from those motifs which are initially presented in the opening phrase of the A section. These are shown in Figure 1. By the time the pedal on the note A in the left-hand is released in bar 3, we have already been introduced to a wealth of motivic material. It is readily discerned, as demonstrated in Figure 2, that the motif

Figure 1: Opening gesture, bars 1–2



$$A \supset B + C$$

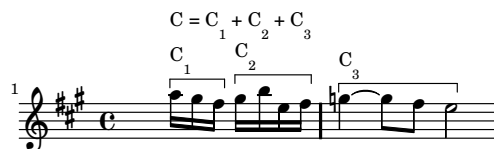
labeled B occurs frequently in the piece. In many instances, it appears in inverted form, as in bars 2 (Figure 3a) and 4 (Figure 3b).

Figure 2: Motif B



The motif marked C in Figure 1 can be subdivided in three smaller units, as shown in Figure 3. If we were to regard C as a monolithic musical unit, rather than a composite phrase with a number of sub-motifs, this would preclude the possibility of our recognising the significance of these sub-motifs later in the

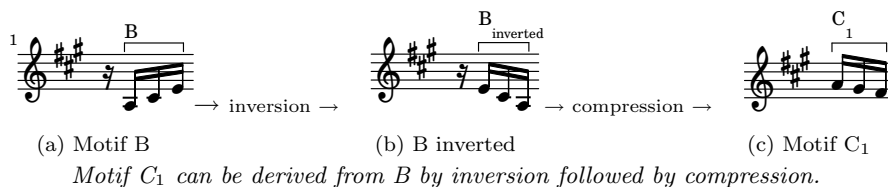
Figure 3: Motivic construction



composition. C_1 and C_2 generally appear in conjunction throughout the piece, but sometimes they appear in separate voices. It is useful, thus, to accord them individual significance, beyond that of merely a subcomponent of C .

1.1 Motivic transformation

As shown in Figure 4, C_1 is related to B by inversion and intervallic compression. In B , the notes outline the chord of A major; in C_1 , they merely constitute conjunct motion from $\hat{8}$ to $\hat{6}$. In either case, however, the notes adhere to the same semi-quaver rhythm. It would be presumptuous to declare that Bach

Figure 4: Motivic relationships between B and C_1

consciously derived the composite units shown in Figure 1 from this simple rhythm. Nonetheless, intentional or not, the motivic correspondence does confer a sense of unity upon the music.

In bar 5, we are introduced to what seems to be a new motif, labeled D in Figure 5. Reduced to a more basic form, it appears as shown in Figure 5b. Bars 5–7 offer a good example of Bach’s tendency to build a complex melodic line from

a very simple figure. Figure 5c shows three variations of the motif. The upper staff in this figure shows the notes as they appear in the score; the lower staff is a melodic reduction. The first variation, D_1 , is a straightforward embellishment featuring neighboring notes and a mordent; the second, D_2 likewise. The third, D_3 , as well as being an embellishment, is also an augmentation; the duration of the notes is doubled. We see, thus, that even in this short musical span, Bach has varied the initial figure to such an extent that it is almost unrecognisable. Simultaneously, the activity in the other voices is also engaging our attention, so that the motivic relationship just described may not even impinge directly on our awareness.

(a) D, bar 5

(b) Motif D

(c) D in varying guises

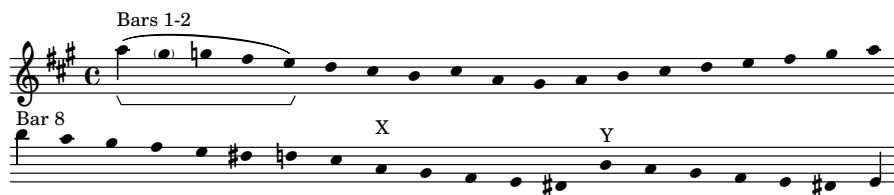
Figure 5: Motif D

1.2 Voice-leading characteristics

Motivic unity aside, there is another remarkable characteristic of the music in the A section of this Allemande, one which is perhaps not as easily perceptible, residing, as it does, beneath the melodic surface. Looking more closely at the upper voice, we can discern the voice-leading shown in Figure 6. In bars 1–2, we can discern a descending chromatic tetrachord from $\hat{8}$ to $\hat{5}$. The smooth voice-

leading does not finish there, however. Conjunct motion continues uninterrupted until bar 11 (labeled X in Figure 6), at which point the voice jumps a major third from a $c\sharp$ to an a. There is another brief interruption of the conjunction motion in bar 13 (labeled Y), but the voice-leading is otherwise smooth.

Figure 6: Bach, BWV 806, ii, bars 1–16, voice-leading



The voice-leading depicted in Figure 6 brings the upper voice to its highest peak at the beginning of bar 8. This triggers a flourish of semiquaver motion in response, a rapid downward descent, that seem to emanate spontaneously from the note B that precedes them. This impression is aided all the more by the fact that the scale begins on the lower neighbor note of the B just reached. And the conjunct motion downwards is a fitting acknowledgement of the ascent just completed. The contrary motion is subtle but effective. We have here what seems to be a sort of celebration upon reaching the zenith of the A section.

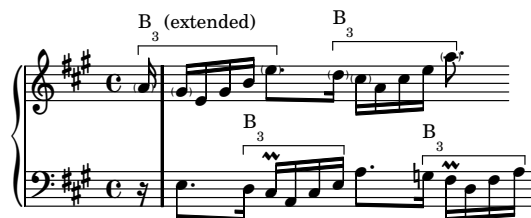
Looking more closely at bar 8, we can notice that its voice-leading is deceptive. Without the aid of the score, the listener might harbour the notion that we are dealing only with a single voice in the upper register in this instance, unless they are able to perceive that the upper B is in fact held for the duration of a minim, and that the descending semiquaver motion is actually contained in the voice directly beneath. The composition abounds with such voice-leading ambiguities.

2 The B section, bars 17–32

In terms of thematic material, the B section does not contain much that is new. What distinguishes it from the A section is the harmonic context. The latter part of the A section had brought the music to the dominant key, and this is the tonal region in which the B section begins its trajectory. The music does not linger in this tonal region for long however. Within the space of two bars, the music has travelled to the key of b minor. This is indicative of the general character of the section. It exhibits considerably more harmonic instability than the first half of the composition.

As was previously mentioned, the motivic material presented at the beginning of the composition is invoked not only within the A section, but throughout the entire composition. As an example, we can examine the occurrence of the motif labeled B in Figure 2 in the present section. In bar 27, Bach employs an extension of motif B in playful imitation between the left-hand and right-hand (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Motif B in the B section



(parentheses denote notes which are not in the original presentation of motif B)

One of the most important musical units in the B section is closely related to C_2 shown in Figure 3. Indeed, the motif in question—labeled E in Figure 8—seems in fact to be derived from C_2 . The context in which it occurs exhibits precise correlation to that of C_2 in the beginning of the A section. They both

begin on the third beat of the first bar of their section, immediately after the presentation of motif B. The E motif occurs 6 times in the B section, on beats 3–

(a) Basic presentation

(b) Embellished

Figure 8: Motif E

4 of a bar in all cases (Table 1). As demonstrated in Figure 8b, its appearance in bar 25 is in an embellished form. In every instance, the motif spans an interval of a ninth. C_2 also appears outside this context, by itself, throughout

Table 1: Occurrences of motif E in section B (bars 17–32)

Bar:	17	18	19	22	24	25
Staff:	LH	RH	LH	LH	RH	RH
Tessitura:	$F\sharp_2$ – G_3	$F\sharp_4$ – G_5	$C\sharp_2$ – D_3	$D\sharp_3$ – E_4	$F\sharp_4$ – G_5	E_4 – $F\sharp_5$
	<i>Tessitura are indicated with reference to middle C as C_4.</i>					

the B section. In bar 28, for example, it appears in sequence, separated by the interval of a third (Figure 9).

The piece ends with a demi-semiquaver flourish similar to that which signalled the end of the A section. This time, however, the ornament is part of a cadence in the original key of A major. And thus Bach brings the Allemande to a close.

Figure 9: Motif C_2 in bar 28

A comparison with rhetoric Beyond a purely motivic analysis, one may also attempt to apply the ideas of rhetoric to the music. The viability of a comparison with rhetoric seems to be undermined by the presence of the repeats. Whatever about the use of repetition to add rhetorical weight to an idea, it is hard to believe that the exact repeat of a minute-long presentation has a meaningful precedent in the history of oratory. If Bach had conceived the composition as an oration, surely he would have made recourse to a device more sophisticated than the bald repetition of entire sections.

3 Conclusion

Bach's Allemandes have been referred to as an 'artistic high point of the genre' [Little and Cusick]. And it is hoped that the brief motivic analysis presented here serves to demonstrate the plausibility of this claim.

References

Meredith Ellis Little and Suzanne G. Cusick. Allemande. *Grove Music Online*.