

Toccatà in E minor BWV 914

Johann Sebastian Bach

Bach

Johann Sebastian Bach was a German composer and organist from the late Baroque period. He was born into a family of musicians in Eisenach (northern Germany) in 1685. Bach received early training in the violin and organ from his father and his older brother, Johann Christoph. At the age of 15 he became a paid chorister at St Michael's church in Lüneburg, followed by various other positions as violinist and organist.

In 1708, Bach was appointed court organist to the Duke of Weimar. He later became concertmaster of the court orchestra as well. Bach composed many of his great organ works, as well as cantatas and other instrumental music, at this time.

In 1717 he became *Kapellmeister* (director of music) to the Prince of Cöthen. Prince Leopold was a keen amateur musician who played the viola da gamba, and he maintained a fine orchestra of around 18 members for his own entertainment and the esteem of his court. Bach wrote many of his great instrumental works specifically for these musicians. Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara, died in 1720, and the following year he married Anna Magdalena.

From 1723 until his death, Bach was *Cantor* (singing master) at St Thomas' Church, Leipzig. This church had a well established and quite elaborate instrumental and choral tradition; in his first few years there he wrote an astounding number of new cantatas for use in the church services - sometimes as frequently as one each week. His eyesight deteriorated in the final years of his life, and he died in Leipzig in 1750, at the age of 65.

Bach was an unrivalled master of counterpoint, and a lot of his music is highly complex. Throughout his life, he was appreciated more for his brilliant organ playing and improvisatory skill than for his compositions. By the end of his life, his music was regarded as old-fashioned, as a simpler, more superficially elegant (*galant*) style was in vogue.

Bach's compositions

Bach's compositions for keyboard instruments include:

- six Partitas, six 'French' Suites and six 'English' Suites.
- seven Toccatas.
- fifteen Inventions and fifteen Sinfonias.
- *Goldberg Variations*.
- *Italian Concerto*.
- *The Well-tempered Clavier* [48 preludes and fugues in two books].
- shorter works such as preludes and dances.
- more than 250 works for organ, including chorale preludes, trio sonatas, solo concertos and toccatas (e.g. Toccata and Fugue in D minor).

His choral music includes:

- *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion*.
- *Mass in B minor*.
- *Magnificat*.
- *Christmas Oratorio*.
- over 200 church cantatas, including "Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele", "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" and "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme".

- over 20 secular cantatas, including the “Wedding”, “Peasant” and “Coffee” Cantatas.

His instrumental and orchestral music includes:

- six “Brandenburg” concertos.
- concertos for one, two, three or four harpsichords.
- two violin concertos.
- a concerto for two violins.
- four orchestral suites.
- six suites for cello.
- six sonatas and partitas for violin (i.e. three of each).
- six sonatas for violin and harpsichord.
- three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord.
- *The Musical Offering*.

An Index to Bach’s works (*Bach Werke-Verzeichnis*) was made by the German musicologist Wolfgang Schmieder in 1950. The BWV number identifies the piece.

Bach’s contemporaries

- Dietrich Buxtehude (Danish, c.1637-1707).
- Johann Krieger (German, 1651-1735).
- Johann Pachelbel (German, 1653-1706).
- Johann Kuhnau (German, 1660-1722).
- François Couperin (French, 1668-1733).
- Tomaso Albinoni (Italian, 1671-1751).
- Antonio Vivaldi (Italian, 1678-1741).
- Johann Mattheson (German, 1681-1764).
- Georg Philipp Telemann (German, 1681-1767).
- Jean-Philippe Rameau (French, 1683-1764).
- George Frideric Handel (German, 1685-1759).
- Benedetto Marcello (Italian, 1686-1739).
- Domenico Scarlatti (Italian, 1685-1757).

Bach’s compositional style

Music from the late Baroque period (c.1600-c.1750) is often elaborate and complex. Characteristics of Bach’s compositions include:

- counterpoint (two or more equally important voices heard simultaneously).
- ornamentation and embellishment (e.g. trills), particularly at cadence points.
- imitation between the voices.
- many sequences, sometimes based on “circle of 5ths” harmonic progressions.
- modulations to closely related keys (typically up or down a 5th).
- monothematic form (one main theme per movement).
- long phrases.
- steady rhythmic pulse.
- *hemiola* rhythm before some important cadence points.
- *terce de Picardie* endings for works in minor keys.

Toccata in E minor BWV 914

A *toccata* is a piece for a keyboard instrument. The name comes from an Italian word meaning “to touch”. Toccatas are pieces that display the performer’s touch, or allow the performer to test an instrument’s touch. Bach would sometimes improvise a toccata when trying out a new organ or harpsichord. Earlier composers of toccatas include Frescobaldi, Froberger, Buxtehude and Alessandro Scarlatti.

Bach wrote five toccatas for organ during his time at Weimar, or possibly earlier, including the famous *Toccata and fugue in D minor*, BWV 565. He also composed seven toccatas for harpsichord around this time. Bach’s toccatas usually contain a combination of rhapsodic (quasi-improvisatory) and contrapuntal (fugal) passages, although some of his toccatas contain greater rhythmic regularity, typically using continuous semiquavers. The latter *moto perpetuo* style (associated with some 18th Century Italian composers of toccatas, such as Domenico Scarlatti, his pupil Carlos Seixas, and Domenico Paradies) became the model for most toccatas written during the 19th and 20th Centuries.

The Toccata BWV 914 contains four movements, all in the same key. The outer movements are in a *moto perpetuo* style, using continuous quavers or semiquavers. The second and fourth movements are fugal, while the third movement is lyrical and improvisatory. All four movements demonstrate various aspects of touch, namely agility, *cantabile* tone and contrapuntal layering.

I. [No tempo marking]

The opening movement has the character of an improvisation, with a through-composed formal structure and a continuous quaver pulse.

- b.1-3 The opening statement establishes the key of **E minor**. Each bar begins with tonic harmony, approached by dominant 7th harmony at the ends of bar 1 and 2. The left hand embellishes a tonic pedal with a lower neighbour note and an octave leap. The answering right hand figure forms the main melodic motive of the movement, imitating then extending the left hand’s lower neighbour note group. It contains a falling 4th and rising 3rd, but otherwise moves by step, beginning and ending with a lower neighbour note group (B-A-B and G-F#-G).
- 3-6 The main motive is used in a rising sequence, outlining a iv-V-i progression in E minor. Each chord is heard on the main beat of bars 4-6, respectively, and is approached by its dominant 7th at the end of the previous bar.
- 6-13 The closing passage begins with another sequence, still beginning with a lower neighbour note group, but now using a falling 5th and rising 4th, with an increase in textural density. There is extended dominant-tonic movement in the bass from b.9, forming a V-I cadence in b.10-11, with a further increase in textural density. The tonic chord contains a *tierce de Picardie* (i.e. G#) in b.11, and is extended throughout b.11-13. There is a final reference to the main motive in each hand in b.12-13.

♩ or ♪ indicates a *trill*.

II. Un poco Allegro

This movement is a double fugue in four voices. The two subjects are introduced by pairs of voices. Due to its brevity, the movement could be referred to as a *fugato*.

- 14-16 Subject 1 is introduced by the tenor, in counterpoint with Subject 2 in the alto, in **E minor**. Both themes begin on the dominant note. Subject 1 contains a distinctive rhythm and some wide leaps (falling 5th and rising 8ve), ending on the tonic note at the start of b.3. Subject 2 moves entirely by step, often using a ♩ rhythmic motive. The longer notes often form suspensions (e.g. 1st beat of b.15).

	The short codetta in b.16 modulates to B minor, using a transposition of part of Subject 1 (originally heard at the end of b.14 and start of b.15).
16-18	Subject 1 is restated by the bass (beginning on the last beat of b.16) in B minor (the dominant key), with Subject 2 in the soprano and free counterpoint in the other voices. This passage forms a "real answer", since both subjects have been transposed without alteration into the dominant key.
19-22	Episode 1, in three voices (the tenor is absent). The upper voices are in dialogue. The bass contains rising semitones in b.19, then outlines a circle of 5ths progression in b.20-21 (E-A-D-G), bringing passing hints of A minor and G major. Bar 22 returns to E minor, with rhythmic motives from both subjects heard in the upper voices.
23-25	Subject 1 returns in the soprano in E minor , with Subject 2 in the tenor and free counterpoint in the other voices.
25-27	Subject 1 returns in the alto in A minor (the subdominant key), with Subject 2 in the soprano and free counterpoint in the other voices.
27-28	Episode 2, in three voices (the bass is absent), returning to E minor. The upper voices are in dialogue in b.27, using a semiquaver motive from b.19, above broken octaves in the tenor. Bar 28 contains rhythmic or melodic motives from both subjects.
29-30	Subject 1 returns in the bass in E minor (omitting the final note), with Subject 2 in the tenor. The soprano is absent. The alto is in dialogue with the tenor in b.29, and these voices mostly move in 3rds in b.30.
31-33	Episode 3. The tenor extends Subject 2 in b.31, with the alto continuing to move mostly in 3rds with the tenor, and free counterpoint in the bass. The alto and tenor reverse roles in b.32-33 (i.e. the alto has the start of Subject 2, answered in dialogue by the tenor).
33-35	Subject 1 returns in the soprano (beginning at the end of b.33) in B minor , with Subject 2 in the tenor and free counterpoint in the other voices.
35-37	Episode 4, recalling b.19-20, transposed down a 4th and rhythmically displaced by half a bar, returning to E minor. There is strong dominant-tonic movement in the bass in b.36-37, but the resulting cadence is a type of interrupted progression, delaying harmonic closure by avoiding the tonic chord.
37-39	Subject 1 returns in the alto in E minor , with Subject 2 in the soprano. The lower voices are mostly absent.
38-41	Subject 1 partially returns in the bass in E minor, slightly overlapping the previous alto entry, with Subject 2 in the tenor. There is another strong dominant-tonic movement in the bass in b.39-41, but the full arrival of the tonic chord (including <i>tierce de Picardie</i>) is not heard until b.41.

Un poco Allegro means moderately (i.e. "a little") fast.

III. Adagio

This lyrical movement has the character of an improvisation, with a through-composed formal structure and few internal cadence points. The tonality never completely leaves the realm of E minor, since the other keys used are not fully established by closing cadences. The texture is predominantly arpeggiation.

42-49	The movement begins with a languid arpeggiation of the tonic chord of E minor in semi-quavers. Some of the notes are approached by their lower neighbours (F \sharp -G, D \sharp -E). The arpeggiation continues as a single voice in b.43. By the end of this bar, the tonic chord of E minor has become the dominant 7th of A minor. Bar 44 begins as a transposition of b.42 up a 4th to A minor (the subdominant key), followed by further arpeggiation and some scale flourishes, with demisemi-quaver rhythm
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	introduced in b.45-46. There is a dominant pedal in the bass throughout much of this passage. Imitative dialogue between the right hand voices in b.47 leads to an arpeggiation of the dominant chord of A minor in b.48, somewhat recalling b.12.
49-50	A rhapsodic interlude, briefly moving into B minor (the dominant key), using a diminished 7th in tremolo texture in b.49, and a first inversion tonic chord in b.50, embellished with a rapid descending scale flourish.
51-54	The opening theme is restated in E minor , with some harmonic variation (becoming VI ⁷ in the second half of b.51). The rhythm becomes more florid again in b.52-53, leading to an arpeggiation of the dominant chord at the end of b.53.
54-60	A rising demisemiquaver scale flourish leads to a transposition of the opening theme into G major (the relative major key), beginning on the 4th beat of b.54. The key shifts to D major (the dominant of G major) in b.56. Bars 56-60 are largely based around an arpeggiated tonic chord of D major, with a continuous semiquaver pulse. There are some references to the dominant 7th, particularly in b.58, though never in root position, so there is no strong feeling of cadence.
60-62	Returning to A minor , with rhapsodic rhythms. There is a V ⁷ -i progression in b.61-62, though the dominant 7th chord is again not in root position, and there is no feeling of coming to rest yet.
63-70	The final section brings a return to more regular rhythms, with a continuous semiquaver pulse (divided between the hands) in most bars, as the key of E minor gradually returns. There is a faster rate of harmonic change and greater harmonic intensity in b.65-66, including the use of major 7th (VI ⁷), diminished 7th and applied dominant 7th chords in b.65, with a dominant pedal in the bass in b.66. A variation of the opening theme in the bass, in b.67, leads to a V ⁷ -I cadence in b.67-68. The tonic chord (with <i>tierce de Picardie</i>) in b.68 does not have the keynote in the upper voice, and the melody still does not come to rest. As with the first movement, the tonic chord is prolonged and embellished over a tonic pedal in b.68-70, and there is a clear reference to the end of the first movement in b.70.

Adagio means slow.

IV. Allegro

The final movement is a 3-voiced fugue in E minor. The term fugue, or *fuga*, comes from an Italian word meaning "flight" (i.e. the voices chase one another). The subject is introduced by each voice in turn at the start of the fugue, in the tonic or dominant key. It continues to return throughout the fugue, alternating with contrasting passages called *episodes*.

This fugue remains predominantly in the tonic and dominant keys. The perpetual motion rhythm creates a mostly through-composed structure, although the cadence in b.84-85 marks the end of the "exposition", and bars 125-142 could be considered as a "recapitulation", with a strong return of the subject in the tonic key (combined, in this fugue, with a new countermelody).

71-74	The subject is introduced by the alto in E minor . The 4-bar theme is in continuous semiquavers, in the <i>moto perpetuo</i> style that is often associated with toccatas. The theme begins on the dominant note, and proceeds by rising 2nds and falling 3rds to the tonic in b.71, followed by arpeggiation of the tonic triad. As is common in Baroque melodies, the theme contains distinct upper and lower voices. The lower voice gradually descends by semitones from the tonic note (end of b.71) to the dominant (start of b.74). The opening motive returns in b.74, ending on the tonic note at the start of the 4th beat, followed by a short connecting link.
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- 75-79 The subject is restated a 5th higher by the soprano, in **B minor** (the dominant key). Since the answer in this fugue is an exact transposition of the subject, it is described as a *real answer*, and the fugue is described as a *real fugue*.
The alto has the *countersubject*, which is complementary in rhythm to the subject (i.e. using longer note values or rests, with some syncopation in b.78), providing rhythmic impetus and harmonic support.
The short codetta, beginning with the last three notes of b.78, uses the opening motive of the subject imitatively in the alto then soprano, preparing for the return to E minor, with a hint of A minor in b.79.
- 80-85 The subject is restated by the bass in **E minor**, an octave lower than originally. The countersubject returns in the alto, and the soprano supports the countersubject, usually moving in the same rhythm, often a 3rd or a 6th above.
The concluding rising 2nd and falling 3rd motive of the subject is extended in b.83-84, leading to a V-i cadence in b.84-85. The cadence is embellished with an ornament in the soprano and a 4-3 suspension (E-D#) in the alto, bringing the opening section of the fugue to a close.
- 85-86 Episode, with imitative use of the opening motive of the subject in all three voices, returning to B minor. The continuous semiquaver pulse is maintained, divided between the voices.
- 87-90 The subject returns in the bass in **B minor**, forming another answer. The countersubject returns in the soprano, supported by the alto. The final notes of the subject are omitted, so that it does not end on the tonic note, instead leading directly to the next episode.
- 90-96 Episode, mostly in E minor, in two voices (the alto is absent from b.91). Motives from the subject are used, including the broken leaps (soprano b.90-92) and the opening sequence (both voices in b.93-96). The episode ends on the dominant chord of E minor on the 3rd beat of b.96.
- 96-100 The subject returns in the alto in **E minor**, with the countersubject in the soprano. The bass is absent.
There is a short codetta in b.100, similar to b.79, but now returning to B minor.
- 101-104 The subject returns in the bass in **B minor**, forming another real answer, with the countersubject in the soprano. The alto is mostly absent.
- 104-111 Episode, mostly in two voices, although the use of broken figuration often gives the impression of more voices. The constant semiquaver pulse remains uninterrupted.
Bars 104-107 contain sequences loosely based on the broken chord motive from the subject. There are clearer references to the opening motive of the subject in the right hand in b.108-110, now also using rising 3rds as well as rising 2nds and falling 3rds, in counterpoint with the broken figure in the left hand.
There are passing digressions into other keys, including A minor and E minor, but the passage essentially remains in B minor. There is a closing cadential figure in b.111, embellished with an ornament (though root position tonic harmony is slightly delayed).
- 111-115 The subject returns in the soprano in B minor, with the countersubject material in the lower voices, preserving the original rhythm but sometimes altering the pitch contour.
- 115-125 Episode, based on the opening motive of the subject, in counterpoint with longer note values in the other voices. The constant semiquaver pulse remains uninterrupted.
Bars 116-119 briefly settle in G major (the relative major key).
Bars 119-125 are in imitative 2-part texture, gradually returning to E minor.
- 125-128 The subject returns in the alto (tenor) in **E minor**, with a new countermelody in the soprano. The bass is absent. The subject remains unfinished, and is extended by a sequence, leading directly to...
- 128-132 Episode, an extension of the previous subject entry in two voices, using sequences based on motives from the subject, remaining mostly in E minor.

- 133-136 The subject returns in the bass in E minor, beginning in the lower register, then moving to the upper register via a 2-octave leap in b.133. The alto has the countersubject, and the soprano part is based on the new countermelody from b.125-128, so that this final presentation of the subject is the most richly contrapuntal.
- 136-142 The concluding passage extends the subject in the manner of the episodes, remaining in E minor, with an increase in rhythmic complexity (demisemiquavers) and textural density (an additional voice) from b.138.
- The culmination of the passage is a V^7-I cadence in b.139-140. The tonic chord, with *tierce de Picardie*, gradually unfolds in b.140-142, initially in a single voice, but eventually forming an 8-voiced triad. There is a clear resemblance to the closing bars of the first section (b.11-13). The semiquaver pulse remains uninterrupted until the final bar.

Allegro means fast and lively.

↪ indicates a trill that begins with a *turn*.

Bibliography

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