

Simplicity and Elegance in the Melodic and Rhythmic Design of Bach's Bourrée II

Bourrée II, the companion to Bourrée I in Bach's Cello Suite No. 4 in E-flat Major, BWV 1010, offers a striking contrast in character, not least due to its simplicity. While all movements of Suite No. 4 are in E-flat major, the contrast between the two bourrées is achieved primarily through rhythmic restraint rather than a shift to a minor key: moving in quarter notes.

Bourrée II follows a rounded binary form (A-B1-B2, defined by two cadences on the tonic Eb and one half cadence on the dominant Bb), with B2 serving as a clear repetition of A. The B section stands apart from A through its higher register and the use of smaller intervals (thirds instead of sixths), creating a lighter, less dense sound. This interplay highlights Bach's ability to create contrast within a single tonal space.

The following analysis reveals that, alongside a simple rhythmic design, Bach employs elegantly simple and fundamental melodic shapes.

- elaboration of $\hat{1}$ with upper and lower neighbourtones (N) in Section A and B2
- a descending linear progression from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{2}$

The melodic model in terms of main tones can be summarized as:

The derivation of the main tones is quite straightforward (note the bass clefs):

One subtlety should be noted: in measure 2 (and m. 10), Bach embellishes the main tone with G, creating a descending linear third progression: $\hat{3} \hat{2} \hat{1}$

The image shows a musical staff with three measures of music. The first measure is labeled 'm. 1 - 4' and contains notes G, A, B, A, G. The second measure is labeled 'm. 5 - 8' and contains notes G, A, B, A, G. The third measure is labeled 'm. 9 - 12' and contains notes G, A, B, A, G. Above the staff, there are annotations: 'main tones' at the beginning, 'N N' above the first two notes of the first measure, 'linear progression' above the first two notes of the second measure, and 'N N' above the first two notes of the third measure. There are also arrows pointing to specific notes and a '2' above the second measure.

Another subtlety lies in the rhythmic design, particularly in the contrast between syncopated and non-syncopated passages. Additionally, note the rhythmic differences between sections A and B1.

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'A: m. 1 - 4' and the bottom staff is labeled 'B1: m. 5 - 8'. Both staves show a sequence of notes with stems pointing up and down, illustrating the rhythmic differences between the two sections.

In conclusion, Bach's Bourrée II from Cello Suite No. 4 exemplifies his mastery of simplicity and elegance. The combination of a straightforward rhythmic framework and fundamental melodic shapes results in a refined yet expressive musical design. His use of subtle embellishments and clear tonal direction highlights his ability to create depth within a seemingly minimal structure. This analysis underscores how Bach's compositional approach balances clarity and sophistication, making Bourrée II a remarkable study in the art of musical economy.

For performances that capture these qualities beautifully, I strongly recommend those by Anner Bylisma and Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann, whose interpretations of all the Cello Suites are truly exceptional.

