Keyboard Suite in F major
Commentary

The general structure of the suite is shown below in Fig. 1.

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            Metre   Tempo       Parts   Form                  Texture              Ornamentation    Bars        Duration
Overture(1) 4 / 4   Adagio      5       Symmetric prelude     Organ                None             16 + 16     7:01
Overture(2) 3 / 8   Allegro     3       Concerto fugue        Organ fugue          -                242         -
Allemande   4 / 4   Allegretto  2 + 1   Chorale fantasia      Concerto, style brisé Heavy           20 + 20     4:04
Courante    3 / 2   Moderato    2(+)    Invention             Two-part, style brisé Some            14 + 26     4:25
Air         3 / 4   Adagio      4       Free aria             Arpeggios            None             16 + 24     3:08
Scherzo     2 / 4   Allegro     (5)     Aria ritornello shape Orchestral           Dynamics (D.C.)  12 + 20     3:18
Trio        2 / 4   Allegro     3       Canon at the fifth    Duet + bass          Some             8 + 16      -
Sarabande   3 / 4   Largo       4       Galant sonata-like    Choral               Heavy            10 + 22     4:23
Bourrée I   2 / 2   Allegretto  2       Free dance            Melody + bass        Some (D.C.)      8 + 16      3:04
Bourrée II  2 / 2   Allegretto  3       Free dance            Melody + inner + bass None            8 + 16      -
Gigue       6 / 8   Vivace      3       Double stretto fugue  Fugal                Light            69 + 101    5:43
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Fig. 1. Suite structure.

I have treated the suite as a vehicle to explore general principles of composing 18th-century Baroque music. Thereby, a great deal of care has been taken to select a diverse variety of metres, tempos, textures, and importantly, forms, all arranged suitably so the movements display variety, balance, and symmetry. Consequently, the "aria ritornello shape", Bach's method of choice for composing binary dance movements, is only strictly observed in the central Scherzo. We find, across the suite, two fugues, a canon, a free aria, a chorale fantasia, an invention, and more. The degree of formality ranges across the entire spectrum too: on one end, we have the Air which is utterly free in its construction, bound only by a loose pattern and a search for the home key; on the other, we have the fugue of the Overture. Here, a small number of musical ideas: triple counterpoint, the four-bar episodic sequence, the recurring falling figure in the countersubjects – found in the ritornello theme, together with stretto, are ruthlessly and systematically developed. Everything else falls somewhere in-between.

It goes without saying that the style is supposed to be Bachian, and a few of these movements are inspired, to varying degrees, by certain Bach pieces. All comments, suggestions, critiques are welcome, particularly those concerning the style! If you spot any grammatical mistakes like part-writing errors or consecutives, then please also let me know.

The following pages provide a detailed description of each movement.

Overture

A majestic, powerful French overture with five voices. There are two key motifs at play here: the ornamented theme introduced from the outset, and the rising figure found in the top voice of bar 3.1. These motifs run across the five voices much like the exposition of a fugue. Then in the second section, these motifs are inverted, and the structure mirrors that of the first section.

What follows is a "concerto" fugue. Its structure is shown overleaf in Fig. 2. At its core we find a ritornello theme (bars 39 to 70) which consist of three permutations of the subject in triple counterpoint, and a connecting episode made of circle of fifths sequences. The fugue then develops in a similar fashion as a concerto grosso, where the upper two parts form a duet group. Duets alternate with "tutti" sections that reuses material from the ritornello theme. Towards the end of the fugue, we find a fugal re-exposition, and a restatement of the complete ritornello theme, but now with duet interjections between the three main sections of the theme.

With the fugue's conclusion, the initial French overture style is returned to, though now with three voices. The fugal subject makes a sudden and unexpected appearance in bar 263 played by the top voice, and it can quickly be seen that the rest of the overture is a recast of the complete ritornello theme (without regular countersubjects, and with new harmonisations), now united with the two ornamental motifs found at the beginning. As the texture gradually thickens back to five voices, the now ever-so-familiar bass entry finally brings the overture to a close.
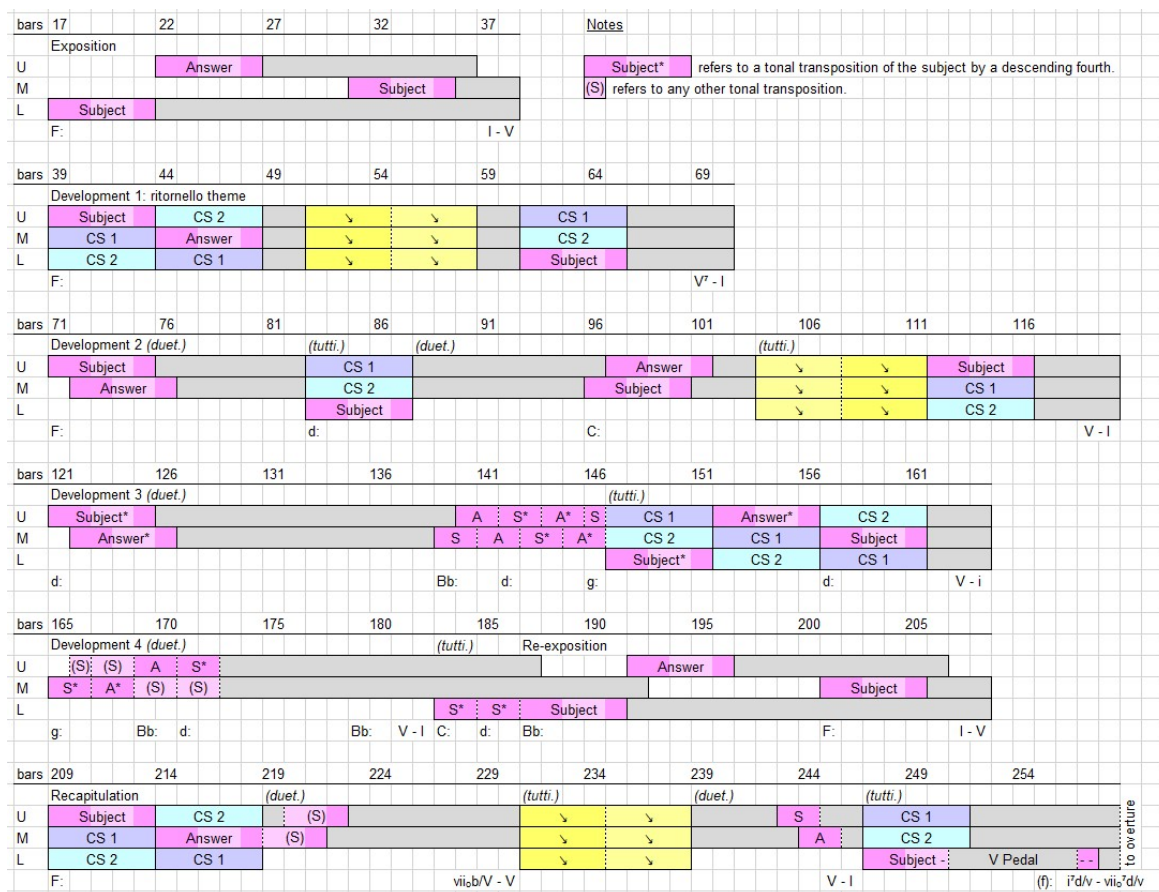
Fig. 2. Overture fugal structure diagram.

bars 17 – 37 | Exposition

	17	22	27	32	37	Notes
U		Answer				Subject* refers to a tonal transposition of the subject by a descending fourth.
M				Subject		(S) refers to any other tonal transposition.
L	Subject					
F:					I - V	

bars 39 – 69 | Development 1: ritornello theme

	39	44	49	54	59	64	69
U	Subject	CS 2		↘	↘	CS 1	
M	CS 1	Answer		↘	↘	CS 2	
L	CS 2	CS 1		↘	↘	Subject	
F:						V⁷ - I	

bars 71 – 116 | Development 2 (duet.) — (tutti.) — (duet.) — (tutti.)

	71	76	81	86	91	96	101	106	111	116
U	Subject			CS 1			Answer	↘	↘	Subject
M	Answer			CS 2			Subject	↘	↘	CS 1
L			Subject					↘	↘	CS 2
F:			d:			C:				V - I

bars 121 – 161 | Development 3 (duet.) — (tutti.)

	121	126	131	136	141	146	151	156	161
U	Subject*			A	S*	A*	S	CS 1	Answer*	CS 2
M	Answer*				S	A	S*	A*	CS 2	CS 1	Subject
L						Subject*	CS 2	CS 1	
d:				Bb:	d:	g:		d:	V - i

bars 165 – 205 | Development 4 (duet.) — (tutti.) — Re-exposition

	165	170	175	180	185	190	195	200	205
U	(S) (S) A S*					Answer			
M	S* A* (S) (S)							Subject	
L				S* S*	Subject				
g:	Bb:	d:		Bb: V - I	C: d:	Bb:		F:	I - V

bars 209 – 254 | Recapitulation — (duet.) — (tutti.) — (duet.) — (tutti.) — to overture

	209	214	219	224	229	234	239	244	249	254
U	Subject	CS 2	(S)			↘	↘	S	CS 1	
M	CS 1	Answer	(S)			↘	↘	A	CS 2	
L	CS 2	CS 1				↘	↘		Subject -	V Pedal	- -
F:				vii₀b/V - V			V - I		(f): i⁷d/v - vii₀⁷d/v

Allemande

The main gimmick of this allemande is the weaving of a "chorale melody" into the texture of an otherwise traditional "concerto" allemande (c.f. BWV 825/2, BWV 892/1 etc.), exemplified by the opening chords I – IV – V – I over a tonic pedal, then a descending bass – all built from scales and arpeggios. But this is quickly interrupted, and the true form of the piece revealed to be a chorale fantasia. Whenever the melody is played, gentle imitation follows.

It still feels quite surreal to plaster the words *"Littleroot Town"* on a formal composition like this, but the theme is iconic, nostalgic, and serves as a reminder of a begone, golden era. The bonus is that it's already in the right key! I have considered chromatically altering certain intervals of the melody to make the overall key and motivic scheme more in-line with a Baroque dance. But ultimately, I decided against it: the melody must be wholly untarnished. The surrounding harmony, however, is fresh, and independent of the original piece.

Note that the playback has the chorale melody played on a coupled harpsichord, and the rest of the voices on a single manual, in order to make the melody clearly audible. This is not possible in a live performance unless one wishes to use a piano for dynamic control.

Courante

An elegant French courante, serving as a continuation of the Allemande using the semiquaver ideas heard in its repeats, and remaining in style brisé. The form is that of a two-part invention, though more in line with BWV 877a than Bach's *Inventions and Sinfonias*. In the latter, the general guiding idea is that of fixed double counterpoint, whereas the former employs a fixed theme used in conjunction with various counterthemes in free counterpoint. The initial theme is inverted after the first set of repeats. A key idea of this work is the gradual escalation of overheld notes, with a peak reached by the last theme entry.

Air

Inspired principally by BWV 197/3 (Suzuki's recording is recommended; it is an indulgent but utterly beautiful aria). The effect of "throbbing" provided by the strings in the aria is not particularly suited for the keyboard without pedals, but I wished to create something similar here. My solution was to let the inner voices roughly trace out arpeggios. It seemed to have worked well!

If one of you would be interested in setting the music to some text (or vice versa) I'd be intrigued to see the result!

Scherzo & Trio

Whilst a scherzo and trio is largely a Romantic contraption, it can be thought of, in this context, as a variant of a pair of bourrées. The overall texture is definitely orchestral. Perhaps it's not tough to imagine a flute and strings playing the Scherzo, and the Trio being a flute and violin duet over continuo. The "aria ritornello shape" is used in the Scherzo here, defined loosely by a characteristic theme, sequential material, and finally a cadence (with chromaticism). It is 12 bars long, and what comes after is a development comprising of reruns in different keys and the combination of previous ideas.

Note that the meaning of "trio" is taken literally here (a piece "for three instruments") as a canon at the fifth over a free bass. It's been quite a challenge since I've had to write music both forwards and backwards, eventually trying to "join the pieces in the middle". The main thematic material is shamelessly taken, and adapted, from BWV 1014/2.

Sarabande

A sarabande with a gallant sonata-like structure (c.f. BWV 874a, BWV 881a). There are clearly two contrasting themes and accompanying figures, but the introduction of the second theme is delayed until after the first repeats. The "development" is also hugely condensed, and the recapitulation involves the combination of the two themes in double counterpoint.

Bourrées

A rework of an older composition I wrote seven years ago! I still like it to this day, and I thought it was a good opportunity to patch up all the mistakes like missing thirds, and make the pieces more cohesive, more florid, have greater emphasis on utilising motifs – in other words, more Bachian. Harmonising all those chorales over the years have certainly helped me to be better at all of this! It's this very piece that inspired me to build a whole keyboard suite.
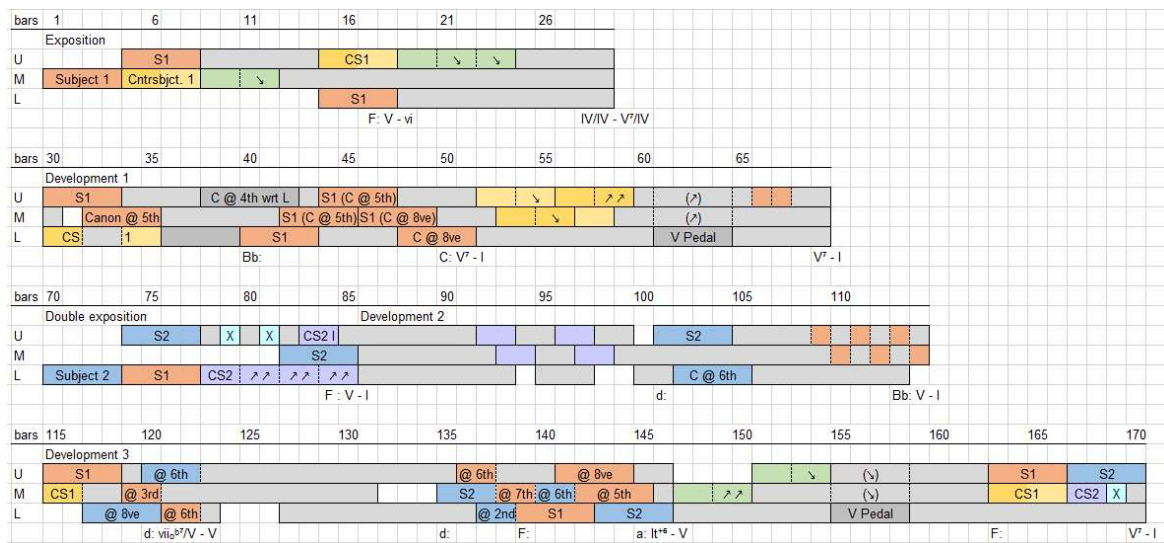

Fig. 3. Gigue fugal structure diagram.

Gigue

The (fugal) structure of the gigue is shown in Fig. 3 on the previous page.

What originally started as a silly sketch, has been turned into a full-blooded fugue in earnestness. Given my previous encounters with...interesting fugue subjects (c.f. fugue on *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* on my YouTube channel), I think this is both fitting of my style and a perfect finale for the suite. It's probably more fugue than gigue: Bach's gigues are more often fughettas as opposed to proper fugues. But it is obvious that *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* both is a satisfactory theme for a double fugue with stretto, and has the characteristic rhythm of a gigue. And so, a binary gigue was born. Some of these stretti are the obvious ones (at the octave). Others less so.

Given that the first half of *Row Your Boat* is almost immediately reintroduced in the second half, there's an almost natural impulse for the complete *Row Your Boat* theme (full 8 bars) to appear in some capacity, and this is indeed what the voices gradually try to do as the stretti get more intense throughout. The bass eventually states the correct full theme in bar 139, in the midst of a stretti jungle, but the music quickly diverges to the completely wrong key (A minor), with the final note forming part of an augmented sixth chord rather than the tonic. A closing episode follows and at long last, the complete theme appears, along with the "natural" countersubject, made of motifs found abundant across the entire gigue.

There are a few gags here. Most of them are obvious (e.g., the subject, the text) but one in particular is not easy to spot. Keep your screaming down!