

BACH 704-5 - J. S. BACH: The Six Harpsichord Partitas Vols. 1-2

While Bach became active during the 1730s and 1740s as an agent both for publishers and instrument-makers, his own published works were few, financed mainly by himself, and were produced largely for academic reasons; as guides to scholars, summarizing his own Baroque art. Thus the title page of these Six Partitas, published by Bach himself in 1731, reads: *Keyboard Practice, consisting of preludes, allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, gigue, minuets, and other galanteries, composed for music-lovers, to refresh their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, Actual Capellmeister to the Court of Saxe-Weissenfels and Directore Chori Musici Lipsiensis. Opus 1. Published by the Author. 1731.*

The Suite of Dances for instrumental ensembles or a solo instrument such as lute or harpsichord, was an important and popular musical form of the Baroque era; the separate movements were of contrasting speeds, metrical patterns and textures, but bound together into a coherent group by generally sharing the same key and thematic material. The form grew out of the customary “paring” of dances (e.g. *Pavane* and *Galliard*) – a duple time dance of moderate or slow tempo being followed by a faster one in triple time, the second often being a rhythmically-varied version of the first. The most significant of these couples was the *Allemande and Courante*, which became the main pair of movements of the Suite.

A central figure in the history of the Suite was the Austrian composer Froberger (1616-1667), a pupil of Frescobaldi and tireless traveler; in his music he drew together many of the separate national styles of his time and his great talent fused these disparate elements into a coherent and powerful style that was to have a formative influence on German music. He had learnt from Chambonnières the adaptation of the French Suite of Lute Dances to the harpsichord, and in his own Suites fixed the order of the three main movements: *Allemand* (in moderate tempo), *Courante* (faster) and *Sarabande* (the slowest of the three).

The *Gigue* was not included as a matter of course, but was an optional movement placed between two of the others – not yet the brilliant display piece that concludes the typical later Baroque suite. The movable *Gigue* and the freedom of the French composers in the arrangement of the order of movements established another important principle in the make-up of the *Suite*: the option of placing other dances and character pieces between the main movements which form the cornerstones of the whole. Froberger introduced this French Suite of Dances to the German School of harpsichordist-composers, who, with their love of polyphony, developed the free voice techniques of the lutenists into a new technique of close imitation between parts and rich melodic embroidery during sustained harmonies, admirably suited to the sonorities of the harpsichord.

Bach was no revolutionary innovator, but chose to play a different role; he was part of the tradition of his times and his work summed up this tradition, combining all its skills with an emotional depth and visionary quality which has ensured that his music comes fresh and alive to each new generation, crossing the barriers of time as easily as if the style and the technical devices of the writing were still part of the common language. He naturally inherited the highly developed form of keyboard Suite as a part of his musical background and wrote three complete sets of Six Suites for Keyboard, which we know as the French, English and German Suites (the latter also known as the *Partitas* – a term synonymous with *Suite* in the late baroque period). These works demonstrate almost the entire range of forms that the German-style Suite could contain.

Each Partita begins with a Prelude; German composers often began their Suites in this way and Bach here showed the variety of forms that these movements could take, giving each of the six a different title: *Prelude, Sinfonia, Fantasia, Ouverture, Preambulum* and *Toccatà*. The dances follow; the basic order of *Allemande, Courante, Sarabande* and *Gigue* being preserved, interspersed with other stylized dances: *Minuets, Passepieds, Gavottes...* the “*Galanterien*” of the title page. The late Baroque Suite traditionally closed with a *Gigue*; in four of the Partitas, Nos. 3, 4, 5 & 6, Bach wrote a superb fugue in *Gigue* style; in two cases, Partitas 3 & 6, the second section commences with the inversion of the original subject. The *Gigue* of the first Partita is not fugal, but is based throughout on a running *arpeggio* figure which involves the continuous leaping of the left hand over the right.

Derek Adlam writes: “The creative genius of Bach is so obviously at work in these Suites – all are remarkable for the way in which the musical essence is distilled from each dance whilst formal limitations are left behind in the unimpeded stream of musical invention and intense emotional expression that places these Suites apart from almost all others of the genre. The progress away from stylistic limitation is shown by the use of such titles as “*Tempo di Menuetto*” and “*Tempo di Gavotta*” and the way in which a piece such as the *e-minor Sarabande* is treated almost as a free improvisation, the richness of the harmony being matched only by the glittering fantasy of the decoration of ornament, scales and arpeggios.”

It has become fashionable in recent years to define the lightly-framed, preferably single-manual harpsichord giving forth a thin, resonant sound as “authentic”. While such an instrument may be suitable for early Italian music, and less so for

Flemish and French music, it bears little resemblance to the much more solid, larger and more richly-toned instruments which would have been found in Baroque Germany. A major role of the domestic harpsichord, particularly in Lutheran Germany, was to provide an organ practice instrument. Two manuals at least would have been essential to practice “terrace dynamics”, a technique considered vital to display the architecture of the piece. A painting of the Jena Collegium Musicum giving an outdoor concert, painted in 1744, clearly shows a three-manual harpsichord. A 16’ stop was normal (Bach’s main harpsichord had one) and a separate pedal-board would be placed under the harpsichord. The German harpsichord thus bore more resemblance to a small organ, and was far removed from the light, single-manual instrument more typical of Baroque Italy.

During Bach’s later Leipzig years he directed a Collegium Musicum which gave regular concerts in Zimmermann’s Coffee House. Gottfried Zimmerman frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments, one of his prize possessions in the late 1720s being “*a Clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity*” which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. A further instrument was obtained in 1733 described as “*even finer*” – perhaps a three-manual instrument similar to one illustrated in a 1744 print of a concert by the Jena Collegium.

As for the sound itself, the typical Baroque German harpsichord would certainly have sounded rounder and richer, without the “jangle” often associated with “authentic” instruments; but even this sound did not exactly match Bach’s personal taste, as evidenced by his long-time wish to own a harpsichord with the soft sound of the lute. He would ultimately have two such “Lute-harpsichords” custom-built for his own use.

On this disc Derek Adlam plays a harpsichord by the Sevenoaks, Kent firm of John Feldberg, pictured here in the Oryx Sound Studios at the time of recording in 1969. The instrument has two manuals, with an 8-foot and 4-foot stop on each, and a 16-foot on the lower manual. It is our firm contention, for which we believe there is substantial historical evidence, that the instrument recorded here resembles far more closely that which Bach would have used, rather than the lighter, thinner sonorities of those currently dubbed as “authentic”. Its strong ‘Germanic’ character makes it particularly suitable for these Partitas, or ‘German Suites’.

Derek Adlam has been mainly involved in the restoration of historic keyboard instruments. At the time of this recording, he was Curator of the Colt Clavier Collection of early Harpsichords and Forte-pianos near Ashford, Kent. He later moved to Finchcocks, a fine old English Country House in Kent which contained an extensive collection of early instruments, where he not only restored instruments but also built a number of harpsichords, fortepianos and clavichords to his own designs. Derek is currently based near Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, on the northern edge of Sherwood Forest and the traditional home of the Dukes of Portland. He has given recitals in many European countries and the United States, and is currently President of the British Clavichord Society.