

Most of Bach's works were composed for a specific purpose. His huge output of over 300 Cantatas fulfilled his duty as *Cantor and Director Musices* for the city of Leipzig, at the same time satisfying his long-held ambition to provide a "well-ordered church music", that is, a Cantata (or Passion) for every Sunday or Festival at which music was required. Bach's organ works were composed largely as test pieces for newly constructed organs, for performance by himself or the dedicating organist. His 48 Preludes and Fugues were in a sense a kind of "salesmanship" or promotion for a method of tuning growing in popularity; they explored and demonstrated all the possible tonalities afforded by equal temperament, only then coming into general use.

There were also very specifically educational works such as the *Musical offering* (Art of the Canon), *Art of the Fugue*, and his *Clavier Übung* series, the three volumes of which were basically educational in their stated objectives. Even the Six Trio Sonatas for Organ or Pedal-harpsichord were composed to provide pedal practice for Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann.

It may have been that Bach's three sets of Dance Suites, the so-called English, French and German Suites, were originally composed as pure entertainment, and indeed, early manuscript forms appeared in the first "notebook" Bach gave to his second wife, Anna Magdalena, in 1722, shortly after their marriage. But typically, Bach saw the importance of being able to compose and to perform pieces employing different dance rhythms; thus the *German Suites* or *Six Partitas*, composed and published separately between 1726 and 1730, were then collected in 1731 and published as Part One of the *Clavier Übung*. Part II of the *Clavier Übung* also contains a large Partita in B minor, entitled "Overture in the French style for a harpsichord with two manuals", and a solo Harpsichord Concerto "in the Italian Style."

In all probability, Bach originally intended the Suites for family use since Anna Magdalena was a good amateur player, and his son Wilhelm Friedemann was a talented 12-year-old. Apart from his family, however, Bach also had a widening circle of pupils. The composer Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber (1702-1775), for example, studied with him from 1724 to 1727. In 1725, Gerber copied out all the French Suites, and Gerber's manuscripts of Bach's music include much extra ornamentation, sometimes written in Bach's own handwriting and no doubt added during the lessons.

The designations *French* and *English* for the Suites are not Bach's own, and really have no descriptive significance. During the 30 years after Bach's death, when the works circulated widely in manuscripts, the French Suites were often thus described to distinguish them not only from the set of six English Suites (also written in the French style) but also from the grander set of six Partitas. During Bach's own lifetime, the French Suites seem to have been known simply as the "Little Suites", no doubt owing to the fact that they do not have long opening preludes, as do the English Suites and the Partitas.

The English Suites were apparently written in the early 1720s, and were copied out in 1725; the first suite is simpler in form, and probably dates from c.1718. The title "English" continues to be mysterious; according to older sources it was derived from an English commission for these works, but this has never been verified.

The Suites in both the French and the German sets consist of the standard four dance movements (*Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, *Gigue*) with additional short movements between the *Sarabande* and *Gigue*; each of the English Suites opens with a prelude. Some of these preludes illustrate particularly well the skill with which Bach transferred Italian ensemble forms to the keyboard: the *Prelude* to the third English Suite, for example, is a concerto *Allegro* movement with alternating tutti and ritornellos.

Leipzig was well-placed geographically between France and Italy; the three-times yearly Fair brought musicians, book-lovers and traders from far and wide, making Leipzig a very cosmopolitan city indeed. In addition, the leading continental music publisher, Estienne Roger of Amsterdam, maintained agencies in cities throughout Europe including Leipzig, his extensive catalogue offering works by all the leading composers such as Vivaldi and Albinoni for example. Displaying his wide taste in, and knowledge of different national musical styles, Bach based

the dances in both the English and the French suites on French models, and included several examples of the *double* or ornamented repetition of a movement. Yet in the French Suites, the second movement is more often an Italian *courante* than a French *courante*.

Most of the dances in all three sets of the Suites are stylized to a high degree; they represent the ultimate in this Baroque form. The Six Partitas (see **BACH 704-5**) are much more “serious” and Germanic in character; their preludes for example range through various forms and types of late Baroque keyboard music, as the titles indicate: Praeludium, Praeambulum, Sinfonia (in three movements), Fantasia, Overture, and Toccata.

Isolde Ahlgrimm was born in Vienna at the beginning of World War I, July 31st, 1914. Initially taught by her mother, Camilla, a good professional pianist, Isolde Ahlgrimm had been recognized from an early age as a genuine prodigy, a virtuoso pianist for whom a brilliant future was predicted. At the age of seven she entered the Vienna Music Academy and obtained her diploma in 1932, having studied with Vienna's most prominent teachers, including Emil von Sauer, a favourite pupil of Franz Liszt. She quickly adopted Baroque music, and the Harpsichord, as her specialty, adding an organ-type pedalboard, not only for organ practice, but to achieve many of the longer handspans demanded by Bach, and to add bass emphasis whenever the music so demanded.

Her interest in Baroque music was further encouraged by her friendship with and later marriage to Dr Erich Fiala who owned a spectacular collection of Amati violins – these would later be featured as the Amati Orchestra, which performed among other works, the complete Keyboard Concertos of J.S. Bach, conducted by Erich Fiala with Isolde Ahlgrimm taking the solos on her Ammer Harpsichord. The couple gave over a hundred performances of Baroque and Rococo music in Vienna, and as soloist, Isolde performed the complete Clavier Works of Bach on her Ammer Pedal-harpsichord and the complete Piano Works of Mozart on a 1787 “Hammerklavier”, performing both cycles entirely from memory, as was her custom. Her only acknowledgment to the modern piano was in the performance of the Chamber Works by Richard Strauss, who was himself very fond of her and dedicated to her one of his most beautiful works, the “Capriccio Suite for Cembalo”.

*Isolde Ahlgrimm has also recorded the complete Six French Suites - BWV 812-817, available on our companion volume: **BACH 756**.*