

**J.S. BACH**



**PARTITAS**

BWV 825-830

**MENNO VAN DELFT**  
CLAVICHORD

# Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

## Partitas (Clavier-Übung I) BWV 825–830

Menno van Delft *clavichord*

*Clavichord by Christian Gotthelf Hoffmann, Ronneburg, 1784*

About Menno van Delft:

*‘Van Delft charged through the work in a state of high energy, maintaining a strong rhythmic thrust and a real zest for music.’*

The Houston Post

*‘[...] une sensibilité extrême [...] à la fois galant et tragique [...] pur XVIIIe, en somme’  
(an extreme sensitivity [...] at once gallant and tragic [...] pure eighteenth century, in sum)  
L’Obs (formerly Le Nouvel Observateur)*

### DISC ONE

#### Partita No. 1 in B-flat major, BWV 825

1. Praeludium	[2:09]
2. Allemande	[4:48]
3. Corrente	[3:03]
4. Sarabande	[4:50]
5. Menuet I & II	[2:54]
6. Giga	[2:39]

#### Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826

7. Sinfonia	[4:36]
8. Allemande	[2:37]
9. Courante	[2:41]
10. Sarabande	[3:07]
11. Rondeaux	[1:54]
12. Capriccio	[4:34]

#### Partita No. 3 in A major, BWV 827

13. Fantasia	[2:39]
14. Allemande	[3:27]
15. Corrente	[3:34]
16. Sarabande	[4:44]
17. Burlesca	[1:42]
18. Scherzo	[1:12]
19. Gigue	[2:11]

Total playing time [59:31]

### DISC TWO

#### Partita No. 4 in D major, BWV 828

1. Ouverture	[6:29]
2. Allemande	[4:48]
3. Courante	[2:44]
4. Aria	[1:31]
5. Sarabande	[3:55]
6. Menuet	[1:26]
7. Gigue	[4:39]

#### Partita No. 5 in G major, BWV 829

8. Praeambulum	[2:53]
9. Allemande	[4:02]
10. Corrente	[2:07]
11. Sarabande	[4:09]
12. Tempo di Menuetto	[2:04]
13. Passepied	[1:37]
14. Gigue	[4:46]

#### Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830

15. Toccata	[6:59]
16. Allemanda	[2:45]
17. Corrente	[2:40]
18. Air	[1:33]
19. Sarabande	[7:01]
20. Tempo di Gavotta	[2:07]
21. Gigue	[3:34]

Total playing time [74:01]



### **J.S. Bach: Partitas (Clavier-Übung I), BWV 825-830**

It was not until 1731 that Johann Sebastian Bach, at the age of forty-six, published his opus 1: six keyboard suites (partitas) under the title *Clavier-Übung* (keyboard exercise). To test the market, Bach had prudently published one partita at a time from 1726 until 1730, at which point, encouraged by the success of the individual issuing, he had the six suites printed in a single volume.

The limited dimensions of this booklet cannot begin to accommodate a thorough description and analysis of Bach's keyboard partitas: their structure, the many striking details of the music, the multiple stylistic influences and the place of these suites in the history of the genre. Fortunately, literature on all these matters is both abundantly available and easily accessible; thus, let me here point out just a few remarkable aspects and explain the use of the clavichord, for many an unknown instrument and possibly a surprising choice.

The *Clavier-Übung* was Bach's third collection of six keyboard suites, preceded by the so-called English and French suites. The Partitas differ in several ways from the earlier sets: rather than using the standard dance forms (allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue,

etc.) in accordance with established practices, Bach here creates pieces of indubitable individuality, linked to traditional forms yet shaped as novel creations and filled with new ideas. Bach herewith takes the keyboard suite into new territory and to the pinnacle of its development. The writing is lighter and more elegant than in his previous suites, always transparent, often with only two voices. The galant style develops here into true rococo art: inventive, capricious, and elusively playful.

From his earliest youth Bach studied and absorbed all the good music within his reach. The latest artistic achievements in suite composition – especially in France – have clearly been a source of inspiration for the partitas. Bach's creative process often started with pre-existing material or an improvisation (his own or someone else's) that ignited a process of elaboration, addition, and conception of new ideas. It is thus worth noting that, just before Bach started to compose his partitas, the *Troisième livre de pièces de clavecin* of François Couperin came out in 1722 and Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Pièces de clavessin avec une méthode pour la mécanique des doigts* appeared in 1724. These French masters, too, had left the traditional keyboard suite behind and were creating new textures and new forms. Although Bach must have immediately recognised a fertile opportunity for

innovation, he didn't just emulate the French examples. As always, when incorporating influences and novel stylistic ideas, Bach integrated these with his own craftsmanship and his intricate, thorough and efficient use of patterns, motives and shapes combined with an astounding ease with all kinds of contrapuntal and imitative techniques.

The six Partitas also show masterful planning on a large scale. Bach's decision to title his opus 1 *Clavier-Übung* is a reference to Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), his predecessor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. Kuhnau was the first to use the title *Clavier-Übung*, which he applied to two sets of seven keyboard suites published in 1689 and 1692. Kuhnau opts for a rather simple arrangement for his suites: seven major tonalities in ascending diatonic order in the first volume (from C to B-flat) and seven minor tonalities in the second (in the same order, but with B minor as the last). Bach reacts by choosing a more adventurous order for the six tonalities of his partitas: B-flat major, C minor, A minor, D major (for a festive beginning of the second half, the second group of three suites), G major and E minor. A pattern becomes visible: the tonalities form an outward-facing wedge, from B-flat major up a tone to C minor, then down a third to A minor, up a fourth

to D major, down a fifth to G major, and finally up a sixth to E minor. Bach also ensures a balance between major and minor keys: three of each. If one would continue the wedge-shaped order of tonalities, one would go down a seventh from E minor to arrive at F major, which happens to be the opening key of the second part of the *Clavier-Übung* (see below).

The Partitas also contain some typical Bachian number symbolism: the total number of movements in the six suites is 41, which is Bach's way of writing his personal signature: J. (=9) + S. (=18) + B. (=2) + A. (=1) + C. (=3) + H. (=8) = 41.

After the 1731 publication, the *Clavier-Übung* was extended: in 1735, part 2 containing the Italian Concerto and the French Overture came out, and part 3, the monumental 'organ mass', appeared in 1739. With the publication of the fourth and last part (the Goldberg Variations, c. 1741) Bach had created an encyclopaedic overview of contemporary keyboard art, covering a wide range of styles, genres and compositional techniques. Parts 2 and 4 were explicitly written 'vor ein Clavicymbel mit zweyten Manualen' (for a harpsichord with two manuals), whereas part 3 was 'vor die Orgel' (for the organ). It is notable that for the first part of the *Clavier-Übung*, Bach did not specify any

instrument. The wide keyboard compass used in the six Partitas – more than four and a half octaves – makes them unplayable on the Baroque organ. Moreover, the style of writing and the kinds of textures that Bach uses clearly point to a stringed keyboard instrument. But which of the many available keyboards would Bach have intended, if any in particular? All these preludes, dance movements and *Galanterien* can be played on a larger spinet, on a harpsichord or even on an early piano, which was growing increasingly popular in 1730s Germany.

An abundance of historical evidence suggests yet another instrument as possibly the most likely candidate for Bach's keyboard suites: the clavichord. Since the fifteenth century this traditional house keyboard had assumed considerable importance and widespread popularity in Germany. At the end of the seventeenth century, during the years that Bach was growing up, important developments took place in clavichord building. Out of a smaller type clavichord (the so-called 'fretted' clavichord, in which the same string was shared by two or more keys) grew a bigger instrument with a larger compass and more keys, every one of which had its own strings. These 'unfretted' clavichords offered a wider range of expressive possibilities such as the use of legato touch and all possible chord

combinations. They could be tuned according to the latest developments in temperament theory and practice, which allowed for the use of all twenty-four tonalities and a work like *The Well-Tempered Clavier* c. 1720).

From the creation of the modern clavichord at the end of the seventeenth century, many developments in German solo keyboard playing go in the direction of this whispering but very expressive instrument. The importance of the clavichord at this time is reflected in iconography, such as the engraving in Johann Kuhnau's *Biblical Sonatas* (1700), which features a clavichord; Kuhnau himself affirms his appreciation for this instrument in a letter to Johann Mattheson from 1717 in which he writes that the clavichord is the keyboard instrument best suited to experiment with and express harmony.

In 1698, Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer – a composer with great influence on Bach – published his *Musicalisches Blumen-Büschlein*, describing its contents as 'eine etwas stillere Musik, und gegenwärtige alleine auf das Clavichordium ... eingerichtete Partheyen' (a somewhat quiet music; partitas intended expressly for the clavichord). In his *Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* of 1713, Johann Mattheson writes: 'Hand- und Galanterie-Sachen als da sind Ouverturen, Sonaten, Toccaten, Suiten, &c. werden am besten

und reinlichsten auff einem guten Clavicordio herausgebracht als woselbst man die Sing-Art viel deutlicher mit Aushalten und adouciren ausdrücken kan denn auff den allezeit gleich starck nach-klingenden Flügeln und Epinetten' (Solo and galant pieces, like overtures, sonatas, toccatas, suites, etc., can be brought out best and most cleanly on a good clavichord, as on this instrument the cantabile manner can be expressed more clearly, with prolonging and softening, than on harpsichords and spinets, which always sound equally strong). Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720–1774), who was Bach's student from 1738–1740, writes that Bach often played his six violin solos (sonatas and partitas, BWV 1001–1006) on the clavichord: 'Ihr Verfasser spielte sie selbst oft auf dem Clavichorde, und fügte von Harmonie so viel dazu bey, als er für nöthig befand' (Their composer played them often on the clavichord, and added as much harmony as he thought necessary). Even in a much later period, the prominence and importance of the clavichord is confirmed, e.g. by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, author of the first biography of J.S. Bach (1802). Based on extensive correspondence with Wilhelm Friedemann and Philipp Emanuel Bach (Johann Sebastian's eldest sons), Forkel writes unequivocally that Bach's favourite instrument had been the clavichord. The six Partitas also receive

mention in Forkel's book: 'This work was at that time in the musical world a big sensation; one had never before heard such excellent keyboard compositions. He who was able to perform some of these pieces well, could therewith make his fortune in the world'.

Although historical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the clavichord was the instrument of choice for much of the eighteenth-century German keyboard repertoire, the harpsichord remained indispensable, not only in *Generalbaß* accompaniment and for the *starcke musik* in the church or the theatre but also for solo keyboard music. After all, some of Bach's most glorious keyboard compositions (the Goldberg Variations, Italian Concerto, French Overture) were written *expressis verbis* for that aristocratic symbol of wealth, beauty and distinction. For the works that Bach did not specifically designate as being intended for one of the many stringed keyboard instruments available to him (including e.g. the *Lautenwerck*), it is our pleasant task to try them out on whatever instrument seems fit. Many pieces work wonderfully on a variety of instruments, each of them shedding a different light on the music. It could even be that only through trying and hearing Bach's works on a wide variety of instruments can one fully appreciate the amazing versatility of



his creations. The elusive and kaleidoscopic character and the multi-layering of Bach's keyboard art is such that no performance on any one instrument can fully capture all the colours and unsuspected possibilities that this music offers.

For this recording the clavichord was chosen as the vehicle for Bach's last set of keyboard suites. With its subtle dynamic shading and inherent flexibility – the player is in touch with the string for as long as a note lasts – the clavichord enables a most immediate and intimate interaction with the fabric of the music, responding to the finest nuances of its weave.

It seems that, in the late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German keyboard tradition, the clavichord served as a kind of melting pot. This modest instrument of study and domestic entertainment allowed Bach to translate and integrate cosmopolitan ideas and forms of various origin into an intimate, transcendent and universal art.

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### The 1784 Hoffmann Clavichord

The clavichord used in this recording is owned by The Cobbe Collection Trust and is housed at Hatchlands Park, near Guildford in Surrey, England. It was made in 1784 by Christian Gotthelf Hoffmann in Ronneburg, in the German region of Thuringia. It is unfretted, and has a compass of five octaves (FF to f<sup>3</sup>). The case and lid are of oak; the soundboard is of spruce, undecorated except for the single rose (made of card); the natural keys are covered with ebony, with bone coverings to the accidentals. All this gives it a sober appearance, typical of the late-eighteenth-century Saxon/Thuringian style. In contrast, contemporary instruments made in North Germany are much more flamboyant: they are often enriched with gilding and lacquer-work, and sometimes incorporate precious materials such as tortoiseshell, ivory and mother-of-pearl. Hoffmann's restraint extends to his own signature, which is on the back of the nameboard, invisible to the casual observer. Like other Saxon/Thuringian instruments, this clavichord does not have the octave strings so beloved of the North-German makers; however, it yields nothing to them in tone and musical flexibility. It is typical of the kind of clavichord preferred by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who expressed his dislike of the North-German instruments

in a famous letter to J. N. Forkel dated November 1773.

About the maker himself, not much is known. He was born in 1758, the son of Ambrosius Hoffmann, gardener and magistrate. It is possible that he learnt his craft in the Friederici workshop at Gera, which is only a few miles from Ronneburg. He was married on 13 November 1780 to Theresia Christiane Dikin; he died in Ronneburg on 28 September 1811. One other clavichord by Hoffmann survives, in the Yale University collection. It was made in the same year as this one and closely resembles it.

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*Special thanks go to:*

*Peter Bavington (who restored the Hoffmann Clavichord in 1998), for his introduction to the instrument*

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### Menno van Delft (clavichord)

Born in 1963 in Amsterdam, Menno van Delft studied harpsichord, organ and musicology at the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam, the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and the University of Utrecht. Amongst his professors were Anneke Uittenbosch, Gustav Leonhardt, Bob van Asperen, Piet Kee, Jacques van Oortmerssen and Willem Elders.

In 1988 Menno van Delft won the clavichord prize at the C.Ph.E. Bach Competition in Hamburg and subsequently made his debut at the Holland Festival Early Music Utrecht. He has given concerts and master classes throughout Europe, Japan and the U.S.A. and has made numerous recordings for radio and television.

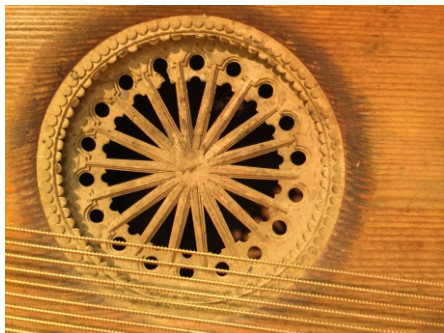
As a continuo player and soloist Menno has performed with Pieter Wispelwey, Bart Schneemann and Jacques Zoon as well as with the Nederlandse Opera, Al Ayre Español, Nederlands Blazersensemble, Cantus Cölln, Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest, Nederlands Kamerkoor, Nederlandse Bachvereniging, the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century and the King's Consort. He has also recorded for labels such as Globe, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, Chandos, Channel Classics, Capriccio, EMI and Decca.

With Johannes Leertouwer he recorded J.S. Bach's six violin sonatas and with Ensemble Schönbrunn, including Marten Root and Viola de Hoog, Bach's *Musikalisches Opfer*. Menno van Delft recorded the *Kunst der Fuge* and Bach's toccatas; he also took part in a complete recording of the keyboard works of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, which received a 2003 Edison and the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. In 2004, Teknon released the first in a series of recordings on important historical clavichords featuring Van Delft playing sonatas and variations by J.G. Mützel on the 1763 J.A. Hass clavichord from the Russell Collection in Edinburgh. A recording on instruments from the Musical Instrument Museum in Berlin will soon be released. For Resonus Classics, van Delft has made two recordings of works on two harpsichords in cooperation with Guillermo Brachetta: *Divine Noise* (with music by Rameau, F. Couperin and Gaspard le Roux) and *Concerto* (with J.S. Bach's Concerto in C major for two harpsichords). Together with Siebe Henstra he forms the clavichord duo Der Prallende Doppelschlag.

Menno van Delft teaches harpsichord, clavichord and basso continuo at the Conservatory of Amsterdam (formerly the Sweelinck Conservatorium) and the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg.

[www.mennovandelft.com](http://www.mennovandelft.com)





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Hoffmann clavichord maintained and tuned by Menno van Delft

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