JS BACH PARTITAS FOR HARPSICHORD

COLIN TILNEY

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Disc 1 (48:34)

Partita No.1 in B-flat major (BWV 825)

Partita No. 2 in C minor (BWV 826)

Disc 2 (56:51)

Partita No. 3 in A minor (BWV 827)

Partita No. 4 in D major (BWV 828)

Disc 3 (51:54)

Partita No. 5 in G major (BWV 829)

Partita No. 6 in E minor (BWV 830)

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js bach partitas for harpsichord

Disc 1 (48:34)

Partita No.1 in B-flat major (BWV 825)

1.	Præludium	2:24
2.	Allemande	4:59
3.	Corrente	4:09
4.	Sarabande	6:16
5.	Menuets 1 & 2	3:30
6.	Gigue	3:48

Partita No. 2 in C minor (BWV 826)

7.	Sinfonia	5:50
8.	Allemande	5:32
9.	Courante	3:34
10.	Sarabande	3:34
11.	Rondeaux	2:15
12.	Capriccio	2:43

Disc 2 (56:51)

Partita No. 3 in A minor (BWV 827)

1.	Fantasia	3:17
2.	Allemande	3:19
3.	Corrente	2:12
4.	Sarabande	3:54
5.	Burlesca	2:59
6.	Scherzo	1:50
7.	Gigue	5:34

Partita No. 4 in D major (BWV 828)

8.	Ouverture	7:57
9.	Allemande	6:12
10.	Courante	5:16
11.	Aria	2:57
12.	Sarabande	3:27
13.	Menuet	2:13
14.	Gigue	5:42

Disc 3 (51:54)

Partita No. 5 in G major (BWV 829)

1.	Præambulum	3:14
2.	Allemande	2:55
3.	Corrente	2:49
4.	Sarabande	4:11
5.	Tempo di Minuetta	2:30
6.	Passepied	2:24
7.	Gigue	3:24

Partita No. 6 in E minor (BWV 830)

8.	Toccata	8:24
9.	Allemanda	4:33
10.	Corrente	3:24
11.	Air	2:06
12.	Sarabande	4:16
13.	Tempo di Gavotta	2:59
14.	Gigue	4:43

J.S. Bach's Partitas for Harpsichord

The essential dances in the classical French suite are the allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue. Rich in variety, from the introspective allemande to the light-hearted gigue, the four dances answer to many moods and suit various skills, being adaptable to a large range of performers, from full court orchestra to a single player, lute or harpsichord. With the exception of the allemande, which as a dance for dancing seems to have disappeared early in the seventeenth century, the suite also provides an inexhaustible supply of music for social entertainment, both on or off stage. It seems indispensable.

Indispensable, perhaps, but not invariable. Movements could be added to suit different tastes; subtractions too were allowed. Five of the six early keyboard suites by Froberger (1649) have no gigue; the South German composer Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer in 1696 published eight suites, five of which contain not a single one of the four original "noble" dances; and Handel found only two sarabandes necessary for his *Eight Lessons* of 1720. The dates chart a gradual trend from simple conventional formula to growing flamboyance and the desire to introduce less aristocratic dances to new audiences. Whereas Chambonnières in his sixty printed harpsichord pieces of 1670 includes only one minuet and a couple of pavanes and gaillardes—everything else is standard fare—his protégé Louis Couperin, a generation younger, makes room not only for his extraordinary and elusive unmeasured preludes, but also for numerous gavottes, chaconnes and passacailles, canaries, voltes and branles.

Johann Sebastian Bach in his three sets of keyboard dances (English, French, Partitas) almost always restricts himself to two of these peripheral dances in each suite, often a contrasted pair and usually in well known forms like the minuet, gavotte and bourrée; occasionally he risks something rarer, a *passepied* or a *loure*. He could have left them out, but they are short, lively and undaunting to play, facts which may have sold a copy or two to amateurs of modest technique. In 1731 on the title page of the collected Partitas, perhaps with a slight smile, he calls them *Galanterien*, a term borrowed from the French, like so much else in fashionable Germany at that time. It is a momentary hint that Bach considered, in this particular kind of keyboard writing, dance music—he could hardly have forgotten the first book of the Well Tempered Clavier—that his greatest challenge and most signal achievement had been to take the four imposing central dances and gradually transform both the French and the early German versions of them, in so doing giving his own suites a more massive scale and a far more inventive contrapuntal richness.

From the French he borrowed the meter, time-signature, approximate length proportions and much of the ornamentation—but not always the actual rhythms of their dances. Earlier German composers had already started to substitute contrapuntal reasoning for the expressive French sighs and breaks in the line and the heavy accents and light upbeats that sent implicit messages to the feet of the dancers: when to lift or step, where to stay balanced. Bach's flood of sixteenths and eighths was infinitely more inspired than those of Reincken and Kuhnau, and he generally built in longer, more complex phrases than the French. By the time he planned the Partitas (the first appeared in public in 1726) this was of course already work a long time in progress. Twelve unpublished courantes, twelve sarabandes and other dances lay ready to be drawn upon, perhaps to be adapted and made more elaborate, as frequently happened in his revisions. Bach however had far grander ideas about this, his first publication for solo harpsichord. It had not only to dazzle the amateur public, but also astonish his professional colleagues, the organists and harpsichordists of North Germany. To underline Bach's keyboard mastery it had to be suitably hard to play. Outside Scarlatti (Rameau in well-deserved second place) this must surely be the most virtuoso eighteenth-century harpsichord writing there is—until Bach followed it up with the Goldberg Variations. It is also some of the most puzzling.

However long those pious Lutherans practised the difficult bits, they might well also at some time have danced a French minuet in such places as Lüneburg, Celle or Dresden and would surely have been perplexed by the *tempo di minuetta* of Partita 5, where Bach takes the three standard beats of a minuet and divides them neatly down the middle. How do you dance that? The accents obviously come in the wrong place, something perhaps explained by the title of the dance: not a real minuet, no use for dancing. The whole question of whether or not Bach's suites, keyboard, chamber or orchestral, should be danced at all is contested, enthusiasts for the revival of Baroque dance feeling they should not be denied such masterpieces, others pointing to obvious discrepancies of intent between French model and German realization. It should of course be remembered that Bach is not supplying an evening's entertainment for Versailles but, rather, adding to the repertoire of chiefly German keyboard players, using traditional forms to frame his own new ideas. This is in essence music by the fingers for the mind, and it is doubtful whether Louis' dancers took much if any notice of their accompaniment, except to mark the accents that guided their feet and hands as they concentrated above all on graceful steps and elegance of gesture. Equally it can be wondered if even today's Baroque specialist, in the concentration of dancing, closely follows the contrapuntal intricacies of a gigue in three voices. Probably not much—perhaps to some poor modern choreographer's relief.

Today there are unquestionably more listeners than dancers, so for us that problem is not critical. We follow the long span of Bach's imagination, astonished and moved—but deeply untroubled by what Versailles might have thought—and happy that he clearly felt he had not yet said everything about the suite in his first two unpublished collections. There was in fact a great deal more to say, not only about suites. Following the Partitas came the remaining three parts of Bach's immense *Clavierübung* (keyboard practice): first the Italian Concerto and his last suite, the French Overture; then a collection of organ works; and finally the climax of the whole plan, the Goldberg Variations. The unfinished and unexpectedly romantic *Art of Fugue* may have been intended to close the series, though Bach died leaving this matter unclear.

One thing we cannot share with his early audiences is anticipation. Not having been alive in Leipzig between 1726 and 1731, we miss the excitement of having to wait for next year's instalment; they appeared roughly every year for six years, one suite at a time, all six being issued together in the final year. For the last suite of the set Bach seems to have responded keenly to universal expectation. Apart from the *Air*, in itself a quite sophisticated *Galanterie,* the movements in E minor reach a more consistent and profound level of invention than anything in the previous suites, their culmination an enigmatic gigue with a medieval time-signature and a notation that has baffled many players—and perhaps till now most editors, the excellent Wiener Urtext an honorable exception. A clue to solving the rhythms of this strange piece and of other similar notational puzzles by Bach has actually been in print since 1970, and an attempt will be made here to show its relevance to understanding that aspect of the Partitas. The most instructive movements are the B-flat prelude, the D major courante and the E minor gigue itself, although other less seminal examples will also be relevant.

Playing Bach's Opus One: Tempo, Affect and Text

In 1963 Oxford University Press issued two modest anthologies of early keyboard music edited by the British composer, pianist and musicologist, Howard Ferguson. Under the name *Style and Interpretation* and covering (1) France/ England and (2) Germany/ Italy, they were specifically designed to guide pianists who wished to extend their repertoire backwards in time. Modest in format but widely researched, with copious background information and admirably easy to follow, they became an essential study for the Early Music performer as well. Three years later Dr. Ferguson proposed an extension to the series: each country to be given two books to itself, in the following order of publication: France, Italy, Germany and England.

At the end of the introduction to the German selection (1970) Howard Ferguson devotes several pages to pointing out that some dances in German sources, especially gigues, are given the time-signature C and written in duple values, eighths and sixteenths, while the same music in French manuscripts appears in familiar ternary notation, and he closes the introduction with twenty-five examples of this practice, some inferred but others from actual documents, especially a number of Froberger gigues (*figure 1*). He then cites the opening of Bach's French Suite courante in E-flat, presumably to show that some part of this apparent confusion is now generally understood and that nobody would take those particular conflicting note-values literally anymore. However there is still room for further misunderstanding of Bach's text and this will be discussed below in greater detail.

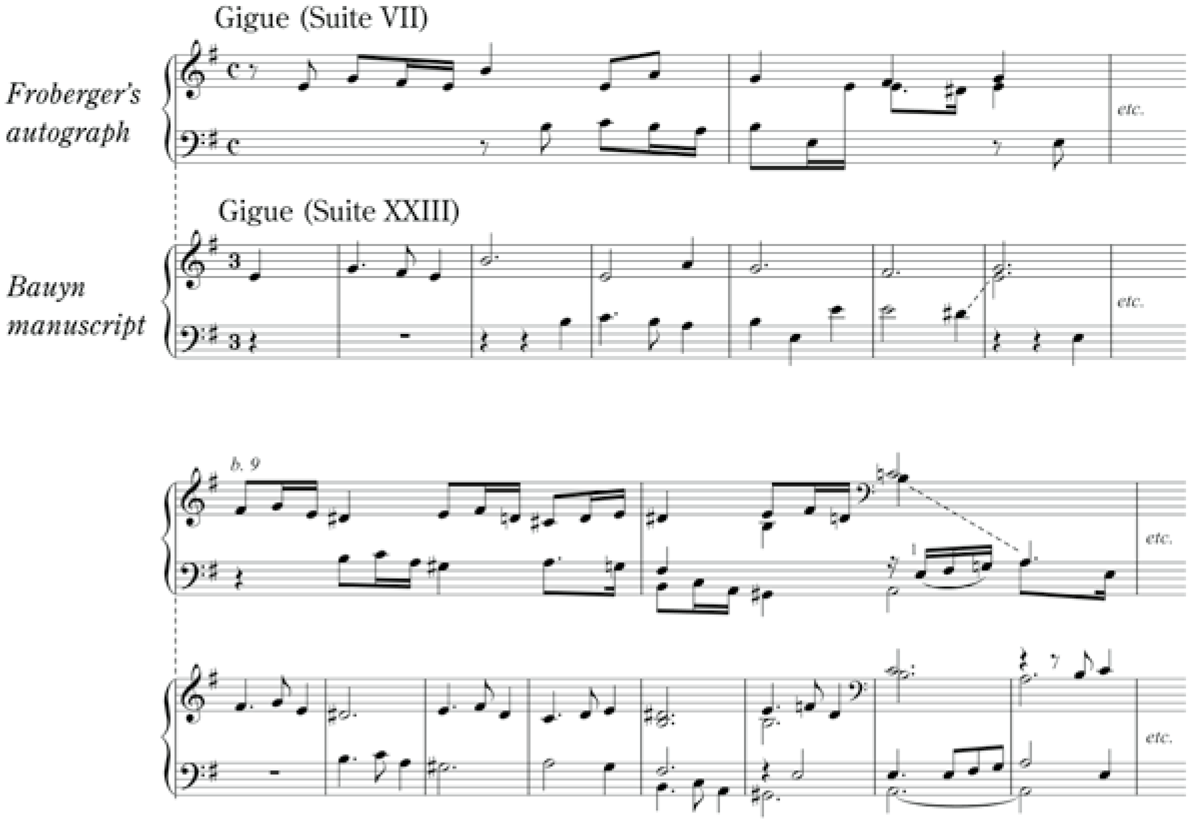

Gigue (Suite VII)
Froberger's autograph
etc.
Gigue (Suite XXIII)
Bauyn manuscript
etc.
b. 9
etc.
etc.

figure 1. Gigue from Suite No. 7 by Johann Jakob Froberger in duple, but recast in Suite No. 23 in triple metre.

Partita No. 1 in B-flat major

Praeludium. We have not even reached the end of the second measure before a disruptive swarm of thirty-seconds (*figure 2*), for no particular musical reason, invades and undermines this quiet *pastorale*, so utterly different from the dynamic preludes of the English Suites. Two explanations seem possible: first, that the thirty-seconds should not be played literally, but rather as two triplets with a central tie, which is exactly the ternary form of Ferguson's example 20 (and compare the same almost inescapable interpretation of measure 8, beat one of the second F-sharp minor prelude in the Well Tempered Clavier); secondly, that Bach has marked the piece in C because much of it really is in two or four and that the contrast between duple and triple is something that interests him very much, as we shall see later in the work, as well as here in the rising seven-note scales of measures 4, 7 and 15. The lovely calm of this opening movement is surely a reflection of Bach's happy memories of living and working in Cöthen, a feeling expressed in a charming poem he wrote to the Prince's first-born baby son, where he asks forgiveness from the child for having wakened him. Both the noble child and the B-flat partita that he now presented to his former employer were "first-fruit" offerings, he said.

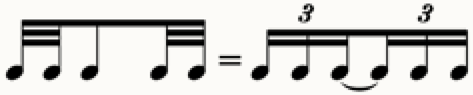


figure 2

Allemande. The sixteenths, which in this movement run without a break from start to finish, derive from Bach's long experience as a continuo player, especially the opening phrase, which expands a well known four-bar harmonic sequence. This is the first time in the Partitas that we meet a single continuous dominant note-value, here the sixteenth, a texture that requires great care, especially at cadences, if it is not to sound monotonous. There will be many more throughout the work and it may be wise to mention them occasionally as a reminder.

Corrente. Bach seems to have become more and more fascinated by this virtuoso Italian form of the courante as time went on. The English Suites have none, but in the French Suites Bach chooses to include twice as many *correnti* as French *courantes*, something he does again here in the Partitas. The dance might have been written in 9/8 if it were not for the ubiquitous long-short figure (*figure 3* - see the French suite in E-flat), which presumably even in 9/8, written as a quarter followed by an eighth, would possibly have looked too separate and dangerously unattached in the eyes of a German composer. The latter seem to feel safer tying two unequal notes to a beam, even if the note-values actually contradict the meter.

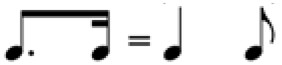


figure 3

Sarabande. In the same distinguished company as the four glorious sarabandes of the English Suites, those in A major, G minor, F major and D minor, but perhaps in some ways harder to interpret, especially if it is played too fast and its expressive harmony ignored. Although it could be danced as a sarabande (it has many heavy accents on the second beat), it seems in fact less of a dance than a song, an extended solo for an oboe or a violin. The movement has to have a coherent slow pulse in three throughout, and the notes in very small values must resolve into audible triplets or similar figures; they should certainly not be played literally. Notice the last left-hand beat in the bar, silent in nearly half the piece, thus allowing the right hand considerable rhythmic freedom and if necessary a slight stretching of the beat.

Menuets 1 & 2. The first minuet, here played on the buff stop, is structured in a form very common in eighteenth-century thinking: a short two-bar phrase, answered by another of equal length and then followed by a third, longer one, which takes the music to the next internal cadence. The second minuet, only sixteen bars long, provides the perfect contrast: harmony to the melody of the first; slightly French to not quite Italian.

Gigue. Understanding the importance of accent in this unique gigue is more important than showing how fast you can play, especially as its time-signature is C, rather than *alla breve*. Bach writes an expressive A-flat in the second bar and a G-flat in the third, and the climax of the second half is ten straight consecutive bars of chromatic harmony, dropping by semitones. Who cares how fast you play? Every movement in this first partita has been unprecedented, an unmooring from familiar models, but the B-flat gigue could be said to mark the true start of a long and spectacular ride into unknown territory.

Partita No. 2 in C minor

Sinfonia. Seven bars in French Overture style, marked *Grave Adagio*, open the suite. Though extremely dramatic, they do harmonically little more than move from the tonic to the dominant via the subdominant. They must move very slowly and heavily if the first section is not to be made meaningless by what doesn't follow. (Where is the rest of the overture?) The tempo has to be very slow, counted in eight, the chords as loud as possible and the rests exaggerated. The whole passage should last almost a full minute, What does follow is first an invention (*andante*) and then a fugue, both in two voices. The first has a long wandering melody over the walking bass indicated by the Italian tempo marking; the second is introduced by a short cadenza and circles round the chord of a dominant minor ninth. With his usual cunning Bach sets sixteenths in one hand against eighths in the other, so that the counterpoint is always transparent.

Allemande. A strange and memorable movement, even for Bach who wrote so many, with much use of canon and dependent in performance on clear recognition and treatment of structure. The first two phrases each begin with a three-note upbeat that allows only a second's breath (twice) before the third phrase starts, after which there should be no rest until the cadence in measure 2. Again we meet the anapest meter (short-short-long) which so upset the tranquil pace of the B-flat prelude. It sounds much less disturbing if played as triplets, for instance in measures 7 and 8, but has an even gentler effect on the harsh clashing sevenths of measure 12. In measures 13 and 14 Bach indicates strong initial accents by placing slurs over both hands and repeats them towards the end in measures 29 and 30. They need to be heard.

Courante. This is one of only two French courantes in the Partitas, so for the player the task is to see what tactics might help to suggest something of a French atmosphere. The first step could be to slow down the tempo; a second perhaps to play the four descending eighths in measures 16 and 19 slightly short-long (François Couperin sometimes puts a lengthening dot over the second and fourth notes in similar cases); lastly to wait for a second when phrases end on a prepared dissonance—for instance the third beat of measures 4, 10, 20 and 22—and relish the harmony. Even so, the passionate counterpoint is plainly Bach's.

Sarabande. A feature of this sarabande is that its phrases never end together in both hands at the same time. In the first half the right finishes first, in the second the left, though the first phrase waits patiently for the other to catch up. Another thing that stands out here is that at two points in the piece (measures 5 to 7 and again at measures 17 to 19) Bach's writing—as so often—straddles the treble stave and we have the impression that a third voice has joined the conversation. In many harpsichords, both antique and copies, the sound seems to differ noticeably at the top of the right-hand stave from that at the bottom and we feel we could be listening, almost operatically, to a soprano talking to a contralto.

Rondeaux. Bach's plural title shows a slight confusion in his understanding of French, the form *rondeau* consisting of a repeated refrain set against a varying (but always plural) number of *couplets*. Here there are three of these, as well as four statements of the actual *rondeau* theme itself. Bach is amusingly ingenious at the end of the *couplets*, using counterpoint instead of French-style repeat signs to hide the joins. Tempo is set by the triplets in measures 86/ 7, which sound absurd if they are rushed. The harpsichord register used for this movement is again the buff stop.

Capriccio. The second partita is the only one of Bach's major keyboard suites that lacks a gigue. Why such a basic dance is missing here is not known, although Bach's alternative provides the suite a lusty enough ending, usually regarded as the proper winding-up function of a gigue. This capriccio seems a piece of rough and tumble on the surface, a kind of rustic humor whose mad scales and rollicking tenths seem to call for a bassoon on the bass line and two oboes higher up. Underneath, it is a perfectly textbook three-voice fugue with eight episodes and an inverted theme in the second part. If played too fast it immediately loses half its craziness and fun.

Partita No. 3 in A minor

Fantasia. Both first and last movements in this suite are contemplative and restrained; both have a single dominant note-value throughout. In the fantasia the first four notes of the right hand recur in about half the bars in the piece, taking positions 2 to 5 in the six sixteenths of the 3/8 signature. At several important cadences like measures 15 and 30 (and most notably at the very end) Bach changes the accentual pattern so that the last of the four notes falls on a strong beat instead of a weak one. He must surely have smiled at his own wit as he did so; the effect of this shift of balance is memorable and dictates a moderate tempo. Already in the first two bars the expressive falling seventh, one of so many in this movement, demands great care if is to be heard clearly.

Allemande and Corrente. The next two movements form a vivid contrast to the fantasia, as do the Burlesca and Scherzo later on to the gigue. In fact the whole suite pivots round the stately central sarabande with its perhaps Spanish gravity.

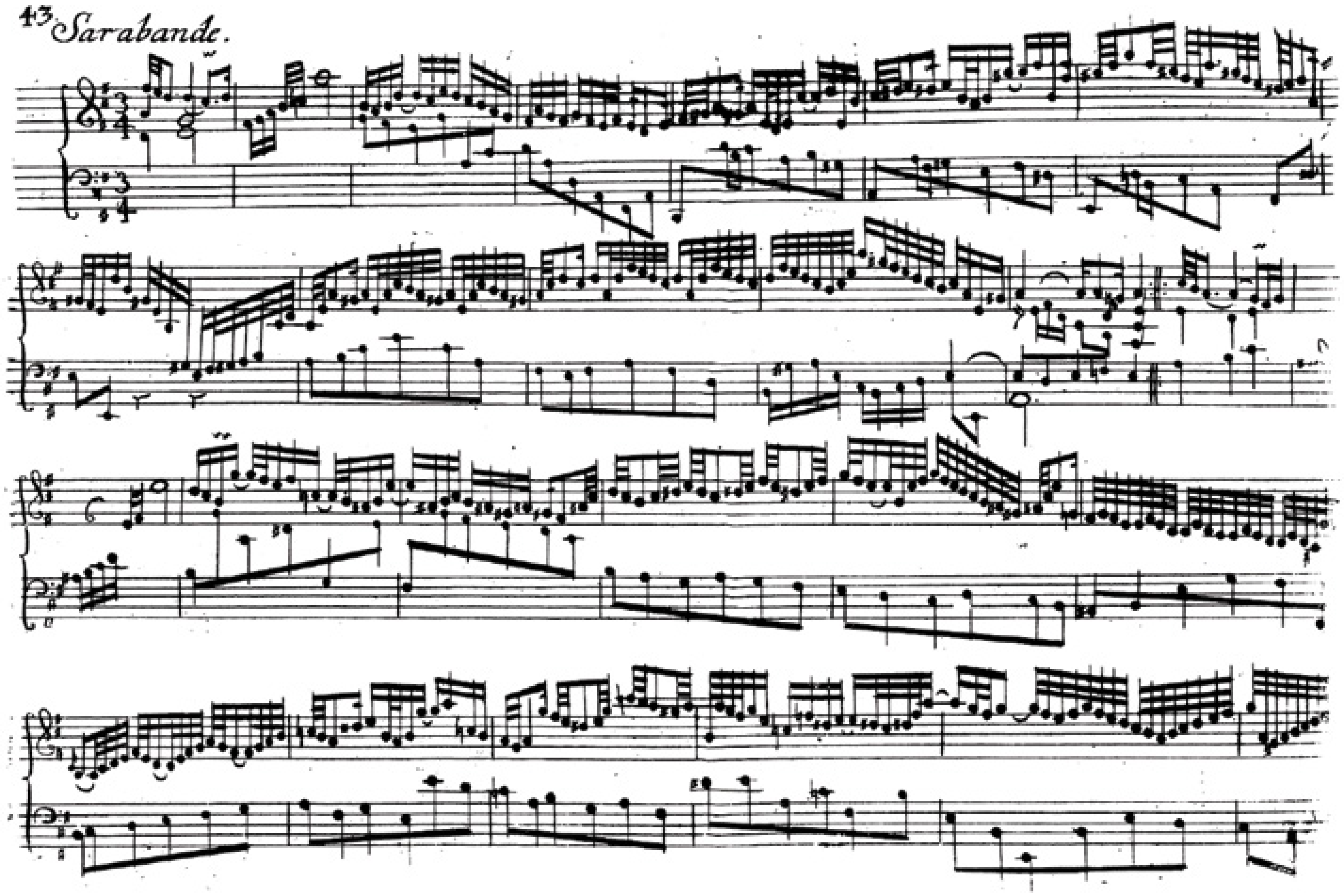
Sarabande. The engraver's ornament signs in the original print look inconsistent in this movement. The three first eighth notes in Anna Magdalena's 1725 notebook have a short trill sign over the G-sharp, indicating a plain three-note trill (G-sharp, A, G-sharp—an upper-note start to the trill would be clumsy and spoil the note-sequence). However, what Bach later seems to want, in the print, looks more like a trill with an ending, since the vertical line is frequently placed far to the right, ∿ not in the central position that would indicate a mordent ∿. A compromise solution might be the one suggested and played here: a five-note turn pausing on the last note—Bach's *trillo und mordant*, notes 4 to 8, in fact. The ornament on the fourth note of the dance does look like a mordent in most places and makes good sense as one. The sarabande is thought to have originated in Spain or in the Spanish New World, as Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne write in their invaluable *Dance and the Music of J.S.Bach*, so is it a step too far to hear the sound of a guitar in the triplets and Phrygian cadences of this piece? Its mood is at any rate severe and ceremonial, qualities which we credibly associate with some aspects of Spanish life.

Gigue. If any of Bach's tempi could be called inexorable, this is certainly one of them. Its dominant value is the 12/8 triplet, heavily in two beats and outlining a scale of four adjacent notes with absolute regularity. Halfway through, its subject is inverted (not quite exactly), and a leisurely duet between bass and middle voice explores a region that is not often heard in a Bach fugue. As the movement ends, we have a vivid impression of slow waves falling quietly on a very long wide far-off beach—an understated, unhurried, most evocative gigue, whose spell is hard to forget.

Partita No. 4 in D major

Ouverture. Noisy and orchestral, the D major partita bursts into the rapt silence left behind by the third. Far more substantial than the fragment that opens the second partita and repeated in full, it leads to the expected fast central section, a very long and brilliant three-voice allegro. After this extrovert fugue Bach might have been planning a return to the emphatic dotted style of the opening, a practice common in French overtures, but possibly intrigued by the versatility of his main theme, its ability to change shape and generate new material (and by its sheer drive), he lets it run its course without any kind of sectional *da capo*.

Allemande. Appearing as a rough peasant dance in the sixteenth century the allemande had by the early 1600s more or less ceased to be danced, but curiously had then found itself a new character, almost the complete opposite of its former boisterous self. As a means of expressing refined emotion, lament or quiet joy, the allemande was unrivalled and much


43. Sarabande.

Sarabande from Partita No. 4 in D major (BWV 828), first edition, 1731.
Juilliard Manuscript Collection.

treasured by the softer instruments, especially lute and harpsichord. Of unprecedented—but welcome—length, this exquisite D major allemande seems to record Bach at the harpsichord, unobserved. Over a two-voice accompaniment in longer notes—and with three short pauses in the flow of the melody—he writes fifty-six slow decorative bars for the right hand, using a sometimes inconsistent notation that shows clearly his indifference to any pedantically exact resolution of the given rhythms, threes turning gently into fours and back again. In this unique outpouring of song we can perhaps still hear something of Froberger's allemandes with their *tombeaux* for Hapsburg emperors and meditations on death. In his own way Bach is taking pleasure in revisiting his ancestry.

Courante. The second real French courante in the Partitas is marked as 3/2 but often seems to alternate with 6/4, an ambiguity found in many French settings of the dance: phrases towards the end of each half move quite distinctly in two, not three, giving an enchanting lilt to the music. This quiet rocking motion is made even more attractive if we substitute triplet eighths for the rather martial figure (*figure 4*) which runs through the whole piece; in fact triplets turn out to be one of the ternary equivalents suggested in Howard Ferguson's table, the first of three alternatives for his example 11.

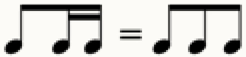


figure 4

Aria. Of all the *Galanterien* this is quite the oddest and most mysterious. It separates two of the work's most lyrical movements, the second French courante and the equally serene sarabande; indeed Bach may well have placed it there for that very reason, as a striking contrast to its companions, like serving an ice between the fish course and the meat. What are we to take away from it? Rough humor certainly in the scoring for full harpsichord, as well as an attempt at elegance in the lighter two-voice sections (two keyboards seem essential here). It could be a sketch for a harpsichord concerto, if the orchestra didn't sound so like a brass band and the soloist had really anything much to say. Perhaps we should be content to enjoy its high spirits and forget what came before and what will come next; at least the final ritornello is great fun to play. Or might Bach be just parodying the music of one of his contemporaries—and if so, who?

Sarabande. Most of this movement consists of an extended lyrical solo for the right hand over a steady walking bass, but at three points in the dance, the opening, the start of the second half and the recapitulation, Bach writes two bars of sudden intensity that have caused much trouble for performers. Why? The two tempi cannot be reconciled, simply because they were surely never meant to be related. Though Bach doesn't use the term here—he does in the D major toccata and Froberger employs it quite often—Bach seems to want these bars to be played *con discrezione*; that is, remote from any idea of a fixed tempo. They are a kind of incantation or call to someone's attention (whose?)—and waiting for an answer takes time. The opening figure, a downward slide in very short notes, like those in the B-flat prelude, should probably be persuasive, rather than military. Triplets, in fact.

Gigue. The only example in Bach's keyboard writing of a gigue in 9/16; presumably therefore to be played as fast as is reasonable.

Partita No. 5 in G major

In this suite the praeambulum and the *corrente* test the player's technique and sense of humor; the allemande demands intelligent phrasing to make sense of the overwhelming sea of triplets; and the sarabande calls for skill in choosing the best length for its small-note ornaments. In the *tempo di minuetta* (possibly Bach's answer to a little hand-crossing minuet by Emanuel in the same key at the end of the 1725 notebook), the task is to create a convincing minuet out of a changing meter that is mostly inappropriate to the dance; and finally in the gigue to match the graceful fugue subject to its demanding and highly athletic contrapuntal treatment. Only the *passepied* sounds carefree and happy—and is as French as Bach can make it. There seem to be no problems of deceptive notation in this suite, except perhaps in the sarabande, where one unfamiliar appoggiatura sign might set an unexpected trap.

Partita No. 6 in E minor

Toccata. A first version of this suite, together with No. 3 in A minor, is already present in Anna Magdalena's 1725 notebook. However, as usual Bach takes care to update some of his first thoughts, adding a whole new *Galanterie*, the Air, as he had added the Scherzo to the third partita, perhaps in both cases to avoid a blank page in the book. An arresting opening to the toccata (arpeggio, dotted figure and a seven-note flourish divided between the hands) introduces a strong central three-voice fugue, and the movement ends triumphantly in the major, after a further mad contest between the dotted figure and the increasingly wild chromatic flights of the septuplets. It is the longest and most dramatic of all the partita introductions and perhaps gives us a brief glimpse into Bach's delight in free improvisation.

Allemande. The constant short-long rhythm of the opening prepares us for the same effect in the coming gigue, though here the mood is not visionary but, rather, touching in its gentle chromatic dialogue and perfectly balanced responses.

Corrente. Often played for speed alone, this intriguing *tour de force* is not really about dexterity: it's more a stage over which two fantastic runners chase each other up and down, *corrente* style. Here raised up an octave, both voices seem enhanced. While the treble takes off into space, the left hand proves itself as fascinating as its acrobatic partner and is clearly in complete control of the phrasing. The movement, one of Bach's most original two-part inventions, is of course certainly not meant to be played slowly. Speed is just not the point, that's all.

Sarabande. When Bach in a relaxed mood started playing the harpsichord at random, something like this movement must occasionally have happened. It would be hard (and certainly inappropriate) to dance to it, although as in the B-flat sarabande there has to be some kind of subterranean pulse. In fact it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to do anything but listen in awe to something so deeply felt and private.

Tempo di Gavotta. *In alla breve*, with traditional gavotte accents on the weaker beat and the opening three notes always played as a triplet, as confirmed by measure 13, second half, where Anna Magdalena gives two sixteenths and an eighth (*figure 5*) and the printed edition has a straight triplet. The only coded notation comes at the cadences in measures 6, 22 and 26, where the tied sixteenth should become a dotted eighth and the others sound the length of a half-triplet (*figure 6*).

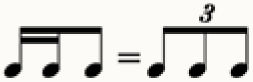


figure 5

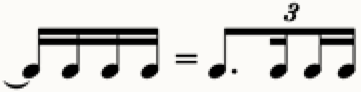


figure 6

Gigue. Bach used nine different triple time-signatures for his keyboard gigues, including the one in the French Overture and for number seven of the Goldberg Variations; only those in the D minor French Suite and in this last partita are marked C. Since all gigues (and jigs), wherever they come from, move at some level in threes, we have at least to consider that he intended these two dances to be realized in some kind of triple rhythm, not in some rare duple form just because for whatever reason, variety or jest perhaps, he wrote it down that way. As we have seen earlier in the B-flat prelude and the D major courante, it was quite common for German writers to use square *figure corte* (*figure 7*) for triple rhythms and equally common for French sources to have to explain them to performers unused to the German notation.

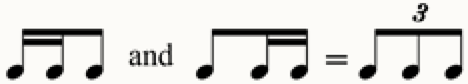


figure 7

The French Suite gigue is less difficult to unravel than the one in the last partita. Turn the dotted eighth figure followed by two thirty-seconds into a normal dotted triplet (*figure 8*), and you have a standard jig rhythm that makes tolerably decent harmony with the other voices.

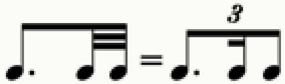


figure 8

The task in the E minor gigue is more complicated, since there is the basic short-long rhythm of the main theme to interpret correctly, as well as attributing

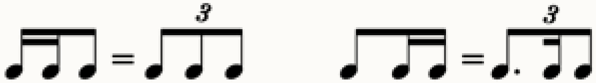


figure 9

the two short rhythmic patterns (*figure 9*) to their rightfulplaces. Bach had originally marked the gigue *alla breve* for Anna Magdalena and written the short-long rhythm as sixteenth/dotted eighth. For publication he later changed much of the counterpoint—infinitely for the better—and doubled all note-values. This new alteration from one dominant note-value to another, sixteenth to eighth, may well suggest a different tempo, but does nothing to promote any sort of ternary rhythm. That must somehow be the function of the strange time-signature, an antiquated proportional symbol, diversely understood by scholars as meaning several contradictory things. In proportional terms one of the meanings indicates "perfection" at some level or other, i.e. the undisputed perfection of the Trinity—three persons in one God—which seems to imply the rhythm of some kind of triple pulse.

Having established that the meter of the gigue might have been more helpfully written in 24/8 and that in the first two notes of the theme the second is five times as long as the first, not three times, we need to consider the overall affect of the piece. For the long-awaited final movement of the last of his six suites Bach might have been expected to bring out all the trumpets and fireworks at his command. Instead, once the rampaging toccata is past, he begins a gradual diminuendo, of mood, not dynamic: apart perhaps from the teasing *corrente*, each movement—sarabande, gavotte, gigue—is more intimate than the one before, and each seems to retreat further from the listener. On the surface the gigue has many apparently unquiet elements: the five staccato repetitions of the main theme with its outline of a rising and falling minor ninth; the ceaseless dove-tailing of this and the counter-subject; the melodic as well as harmonic dissonance; and finally the bleak and despairing chromatic measures that end both halves, where in the very last bar Bach allows an A minor chord to sit for a moment over a G-sharp in the bass before resolving the music into a scarcely believable E major. Curiously, the effect of all this negative energy is not a feeling of chaos, but rather, one of personal loneliness and controlled desolation. The farewell is that of Haydn, the stage left practically empty. It is as if Bach is here, in this deeply moving parting, reminding us for a moment, by its gentle but relentless rhythm, of earlier gigues in a dance tradition that he had done so much to change.

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For William, again

Colin Tilney is internationally known for his harpsichord, clavichord and fortepiano playing, with many solo recordings on DG (Archive), EMI Electrola, Decca, Hyperion, Dorian, Doremi and CBC SM 5000. Originally working in London as an accompanist and repetiteur, in 1979 he moved to Canada, first to Toronto, where he taught at the Royal Conservatory of Music and founded the chamber group Les Coucous Bénévoles; more recently (2002) to Victoria where he is on the staff of the Music School at the University of Victoria. For Music & Arts he earlier recorded a Scarlatti disc, Bach's English Suites on an antique Italian harpsichord, the French Suites on clavichord, an album of fugues by Bach and his forerunners, and a collection of suites, toccatas, fantasias and a lament by Froberger.

Credits

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In memory of Frederick J. Maroth, 12 June 1929–23 November 2013

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Performances by Colin Tilney on Music and Arts

CD-1226 • FUGUE: BACH AND HIS FORERUNNERS
Colin Tilney, harpsichord. J.S. BACH: The Art of Fugue (excerpts). LOUIS COUPERIN: Prelude in D minor. GIROLAMO FRESCOBALDI: Capriccio la, sol, fa, mi, re, do. GIOVANNI GABRIELI: Fuga del nono Tono. FRESCOBALDI: Capriccio sopra un soggetto. J.J. FROBERGER: Ricercar 5 (1656). Total time: 66:31. UPC # 017685122620.

CD-1268 • J.S. BACH: THE SIX FRENCH SUITES
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CD-1280 • FROBERGER 1649
Colin Tilney, harpsichord. Johann Jakob Froberger (1616 –1667): Suite No. 1 in A minor; Suite No. 2 in D minor; Suite No. 3 in G; Suite No. 4 in F; Suite No. 5 in C; Suite No. 6 in G (Auf die Mayerin); Canzon 2; Fantasia 2; Fantasia 5; Toccata 3; Toccata 4; Lamento sopra la dolorosa perdita della Real Maestà di Ferdinando IV. Total time: 68:45. UPC # 017685128028.

CD-1288 • CONTRAPUNTAL BYRD: Keyboard Works by Byrd (c. 1543 – 1623)
Colin Tilney, harpsichord 1. Pavan 7 (My Ladye Nevell's Booke); 2. Fantasia in d (My Ladye Nevell's Booke); 3. The Maiden's Song (MLNB); 4. The Quadran Pavan; 5. The Quadran Galliard; 6. Pavan 8 (MLNB); 7. The Second Ground (MLNB); 8. Prelude in a; 9. Fantasia in a; 10. Pavan "Lachrymae." (Dowland - arr. Byrd). Total time: 62:33. Audio engineering: Kirk McNally. UPC # 017685128820.

COLIN TILNEY

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Disc 1 (48:34)

Partita No.1 in B-flat major (BWV 825)

Partita No. 2 in C minor (BWV 826)

Disc 2 (56:51)

Partita No. 3 in A minor (BWV 827)

Partita No. 4 in D major (BWV 828)

Disc 3 (51:54)

Partita No. 5 in G major (BWV 829)

Partita No. 6 in E minor (BWV 830)

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