

J.S. BACH - FRENCH SUITES, FRENCH OVERTURE AND ITALIAN CONCERTO

When Bach took up the post as harpsichordist, violinist and court organist to Count Wilhelm Ernst of Sachsen-Weimar he came into contact for the first time with the Italian concertos of Corelli and Vivaldi. This resulted in the production of a great number of klavier transcriptions of the Vivaldi concertos. Bach mastered the style and technique of the Italian solo concerto to perfection, specifically basing his work on Vivaldi's violin concertos opus 3. This is not only very noticeable in its many transcriptions but also in his further work. At the same time, Bach became increasingly engrossed in the French style and in particular in the elegant suites with their series of (court) dances. Bach, uniquely, knew how to combine the clear and virtuosic Italian style with the rather more "learned" contrapuntal techniques adopted by the German masters and the elegance and rich ornamentation of the French.

To illustrate how promptly Bach followed new developments is shown by the fact that he, while in Weimar, made a transcription for harpsichord of the ninth violin concerto from Vivaldi's *L'estro Armonico* which had only just been issued in 1712 by the Amsterdam publisher Etienne Roger. Vivaldi's concerto is in three parts: Allegro-Larghetto-Allegro and is moreover very concise and strict in its construction. Because of their vitality, the playful solo violin passages, specifically had a decisive influence on Bach's melody and melismatic form. We rediscover similar quasi-virtuosic and sparkling sprightly figures in the later violin and klavier concertos, in numerous instrumental passages in the cantatas and in the large organ works and of course in the brilliant Italian Concerto for solo harpsichord.

The English Suites date from the last year of this important learning period for Bach. Soon after this, Bach moved from Weimar to the court at Cöthen. Compared with provincial Weimar, Cöthen gave him a better chance to become acquainted with Central European culture with its many French influences. In Cöthen he succeeded Augustin Reinhard Stricker as leader of the court orchestra Collegium Musicum. Thus Bach began his work for the music-loving Elector Leopold of Cöthen-Anhalt. Changing from one function to another did not only have favourable financial consequences but above all secured Bach with the leadership of an ensemble with a pure secular function: that of providing concerts for the Elector. Leopold had selected the best musicians mainly from Berlin for his orchestra. It was in this position, that Bach, between 1717 and 1723 wrote most of his secular work: the violin concertos, concertos for two or even three violins, the Brandenburg concertos, the orchestral suites, some harpsichord concertos and a vast amount of chamber music for one or more instruments.

Bach composed the so-called French Suites (BWV 812-817) during the years 1720-22. Some parts of them appeared in the *Clavierbüchlein* for Anna Magdalena. This does not only explain the existence of some variants but also the intimate character and the simpler, rather more instructive technique of these 'small' suites (particularly with regard to the more virtuosic English suites, which could then be considered as the 'large' suites, and of course with regard to the 'very large' Partitas!). The numerous handwritten copies which circulated at that time show the popularity of the 'small' suites during Bach's lifetime.

Incidentally while making the distinction between the 'small' and 'large' suites: the designations used today, French and English suites, did neither originate from Bach nor from his period. In fact, in both cases, they are typical German suites with a combination of predominantly French and German style techniques. The linked progression of stylised dances based on the sequential scheme: allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue supplemented with quite a number of other dances, is typically French; the strict vocal and melodic lines and the ingenuous counterpoint is more German. The first three suites are written in the minor keys of d, c and b respectively. The following suites are written in the major keys of E-flat, G and E .

In 1723 Bach moved again and took up his last and ultimately most important function as cantor in Leipzig. In 1731 and 1735 the first and second parts of the *Clavier - Übung* were published subsequently including the well-known Partitas under the collective title *Clavier-Übung bestehend in Präludien, Allemanden, Couranten, Sarabanden, Gigue, Menuetten und andern Galanterien*, and in the second part of the *Clavier-Übung* the *Ouvertüre nach Französischer Art* (BWV 831) together with the *Concerto nach Italienischem Gusto* (BWV 971). The last two compositions, as the title correctly implies, are classical examples of the French and Italian style. "Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths-Ergötzung verfertigt" is applicable to the entire *Clavier - Übung*.

The French Overture consists of an elegant and imaginative sequence of dances preceded by a large overture (hence the name), which for example, like the overtures of the four orchestral suites, is built up out of a slow, strictly punctuated introduction, a faster mainly fugal section and a repeat of the introduction. This is followed by a courante, two gavottes, two passepieds, a sarabande, two bourrées and a gigue.

To conclude, Bach added an echo, not a dance, but an abstract coda in which he made use of the possibilities of a two manual harpsichord (this instrument is emphatically specified in the title) in order to play piano and forte. Incidentally this is also possible on the notorious "piano-forte" with its single keyboard by using pressure on the keys and the use of touch...

The form of the Italian Concerto is comparable to the transcriptions that Bach had made of Vivaldi's Klavier concertos twenty-five years before. In the meantime, Bach's style had changed considerably, gaining more emotional depth and strong contrapuntal motive unity. He achieves this intensity of emotion through ingenuous modulations which result in the effect of a development (especially in the first part of the Italian Concerto). His concert style projects beyond his time to that of his sons and the Mannheim generation.

On the other hand, the Andante is a beautiful instrumental aria (compare it to Vivaldi's opus 3:9) which demands great rhythmic refinements and nuances from the musician. The Finale is a spirited Presto which like the first section has very clear contrasts between solo and tutti which are easy to accomplish on a two manual harpsichord. Bach has put his perfect hallmark on the *Italiänische Gusto* for the instruction and enjoyment of music lovers and for the wonderment of the many generations after him for whom he was the greatest and unsurpassable master of the science of composition.

Fortunately, Bach never lost sight of the 'Gemüths-Ergötzung', considering this to be the ultimate and necessary goal of his work.

Leo Samama, 1999

Translation Elly Leegte