

J.S. BACH - ENGLISH SUITES

Until quite recently, one adamantly supported the belief that the so-called English Suites of Johann Sebastian Bach were composed during the 1720s, possibly even after the French Suites, but at any rate during the years of Bach's sojourn at the Cöthen court which was his last posting before he took up the appointment of the Thomas cantorship in Leipzig. One recognised of course differences in style between both sets of suites which sometimes raised doubt about the accuracy of this conclusion. On the other hand, one believed that the formal and strictly constructed English Suites fitted better into the pattern of the later works of the Leipzig cantor than the shorter and fanciful French Suites.

Our view has changed considerably after nearly fifty years of academic research into the music with which Bach must have been familiar and from which he had learned and copied. Not only the notes give us a clue, but also the nature of the manuscripts, Bach's own handwriting (the way he wrote key signatures and clefs) and that of his pupils and in addition the sources of either hand-written or printed copies which were available to him, the written comments of Bach's contemporaries and especially those of his children support modern science in its investigations. Based on this research, Bach's English Suites can by now be placed nearly a decade earlier in his development, not in Cöthen but in Weimar and therefore before 1717.

It is common knowledge that Bach was an insatiably keen scholar. Certainly in the first 25 years of his career, until he was established in Leipzig, he studied and copied an extensive collection of Italian, French, English, Dutch and German works to his heart's content. For instance, after a trip to the Netherlands, Prince Johann Ernst returned to Weimar with various works which had been printed in Amsterdam by Estienne Roger. Amongst the works were probably the *Estro Armonico* by Antonio Vivaldi (published in 1711) and six harpsichord suites by Charles Dieupart (published in 1701). The influence of both these composers is to be found in the English Suites, that of Vivaldi, in particular in the preludes (with exception, perhaps, of the one in the first suite) and that of Dieupart in the subsequent dances.

The term English Suites still continues to puzzle us. This title must have already been used during Bach's lifetime. The most quoted source is an annotation from Johann Christian Bach on the title page of the First Suite (BWV 806): *'Fait pour les Anglois'*. It is hereby suggested that Bach could have written the suites for an Englishman of rank. A more likely explanation of this nickname is derived from the fact that Bach noted down these suites according to the manner of old English examples. This does not concern the style of the music, only the technique of the notation, with a treble and bass clef at the beginning of the staff instead of the soprano and bass clef common in German notation.

In a stylistic sense, the English suites are in reality mainly French suites, i.e. a series of dances (Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, a choice out of a Bourrée, Gavotte, Menuet or Passepied and mostly concluding with a Gigue) preceded by a prelude. Hence Bach's own title: *Suites avec prélude*. But the preludes are not written in the French style with a slow and sometimes ornate introduction followed by a great deal of fiery counterpoint, but in the Italian style:

strict, brilliant, concertante. Bach could make extensive use of his phenomenal command of musical dexterity in furnishing the elegant dances frequently with variants and doubles.

The stylistic unity of most of the English Suites definitely causes confusion in setting their precise date, not to say the least, in many of the French dances (and in the French Suites and the Partitas for harpsichord, also known as the German Suites) the typical repeated note at the beginning of nearly every piece and certain regularly reappearing harmonic links in some suites. In the English suites, placed now at a much earlier date, Bach's harmonic invention and turns are moreover just as surprising and daring, as they are exciting and effective.

The musettes, which sound so modern to our ears, are equally special, as in the *Bourrée I alternativement* and the *Bourrée II* from the Second Suite, the *Gavotte I alternativement* and especially the *Gavotte II ou la Musette* in the Third Suite and above all the *Gavotte I* and *II* in the Sixth Suite. In particular, the last mentioned gavottes are rather reminiscent of the later elegant music of the second half of the eighteenth century.

In contrast to the French Suites, which were seemingly intended for the intimate clavichord, the English Suites were without doubt composed for the harpsichord. Because the festive preludes in particular (reminding us here and there of the famous Italian concerto) are constructed on too grand a scale, one cannot do them justice on a clavichord. This is certainly also the case with the effervescent virtuosic *Gigue* in the Sixth Suite. If Bach had indeed committed these works to paper around his thirtieth year, then we can only conclude, especially in the English Suites, that he had reached such a level of development at such a fast rate, that he left all examples of his forefathers far behind him.

Reference has already been made to Bach's clever art of embellishment in these suites. Anyone listening without the music at hand could, for example, compare both the *Doubles* which follow the *Courantes* in the First Suite with each other. Also to be compared are the *Sarabandes* from the Second, Third and Sixth Suite with the beautiful ornamentation in the subsequent varied versions which are entitled *Les Agréments de la même Sarabande* in the Second and Third Suite and simply *Double* in the Sixth Suite. Many ornaments like trills, appoggiaturas, mordents etc. (Bach had noted them down carefully and worked them out in a manuscript book for his oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann) enrich the often already complex music creating a colourful intricately woven Baroque carpet which also on a modern clavier warrants full justice.

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