

## **J.S. BACH - PARTITAS**

The publication of the first Partita in 1726 by Johann Sebastian Bach was carried out at his own expense. This was the first time in his career that he had taken such a step. Maybe this was why he considered that the right dedicatee would add extra value to the work. In spite of his post in Leipzig as cantor of the Thomas church, Bach still felt an alliance to the Cöthen court, where he had worked from 1717 to 1723; so when a son was born to prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen on 12 September 1726 the right choice was very easy.

And so Bach dedicated “*this modest musical firstling in deep humble devotion*” to the newborn Emanuel Ludwig (who incidentally would die on 17 August 1728) adding a poem of twenty lines. The remaining partitas followed consecutively in the following years. In 1731 Bach issued all six partitas as a set complete with the following title page.

**Clavir Übung**  
bestehend in  
Praeludien, Allemanden, Couranten, Sarabanden, Gigueen,  
Menuetten, und andern Galanterien;  
Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths Ergoetzung verfertigt  
Von  
**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
Hochfürstl. Sächsisch-Weissenfelsischen würcklichen Capellmeistern  
und  
Directore Chori e Musici Lipsiensis  
OPUS 1  
In Verlegung des Autoris  
1731

We may of course wonder if Bach’s comment at the appearance of the First Partita as his firstling when it is applied as an inscription to the final full publication in 1731 as his Opus 1 is a sign of false modesty or a pure commercial ploy. After all no one would buy an old work, but when such a well known composer as Bach was at that time with his record and reputation publishes a first opus, then it had to be something special.

The title Clavier Übung should not be taken too literally. It does not imply études in the sense of those that would become popular in the nineteenth century, but at most it is probably comparable to the “*essercizi*” that Scarlatti composed for harpsichord during these same years. Exercises in

style and mastery of form, but also in phrasing and playing technique. Bach had many pupils during this period and his teaching practice consisted of a combination of lessons in composition, interpretation and performance skills. Nevertheless the set of works, as the titles states, was written primarily for amateurs who could enjoy this music wholeheartedly. It was thus for music lovers who could really appreciate the delicacy of the “galanterien” in the partitas and who could derive pleasure from playing the many dances that Bach had compiled.

As for the choice of the title Clavier Übung, Bach closely followed the example of his immediate predecessor in Leipzig, Johann Kühnau, who in 1689 and 1695 published his own collections as Klavierübung habitually with seven (!) Partitas. It is possible that Bach too initially intended to compose seven partitas like Kühnau. Taking this into consideration, is it possible that a partita has been lost? At the time of the publication of the Fifth partita, an article in the newspaper the Leipziger Post, dated 1 May 1730 stated that two more were yet to follow! But there have been no traces of a seventh.

In contrast to the rigid unequivocal forms in the English suites and the somewhat greater freedom and unrestricted movement in the French Suites, the Partitas (sometimes labelled German Suites) are notably more grand and more compositionally ingenious in their construction. In all aspects Bach has reached the peak of his mastery in these works: in the structure of each individual Partita, in the binding of the figures within each Partita, in the ornate embellishments in many separate parts, in the melodic and contrapuntal richness throughout the whole cyclus and in the ingenious clavier technique.

The Partitas, just like the French and English suites are above all French suites, that is to say suites in the French style wherein a series of elegant and somewhat richly ornamented dances follow a short introduction in which little attention is paid to fugal technique. The set order of these dances is *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue*. Bach conforms meticulously to this pattern with one exception in the Second partita in which he replaces a *Gigue* with an Italian *Capriccio*. Each of the Partitas has an introduction with a different characteristic: *Praeludium* (I), *Sinfonia* (II), *Fantasia* (III), *Ouverture* (IV), *Praeambulum* (V) and *Toccata* (VI).

The **First Partita** in B flat has a noticeably intimate character, the short lyrical *Praeludium*, the brisk *Allemande* with its gentle contrapuntal technique (just enough to be noticed and yet not overdone to detract from the fluent movement of the parts), the playful Italian *Corrente* with its mixture of 9/8 and 3/4 rhythm with which a link is made to the concluding *Gigue*, with an ornately decorated *Sarabande* and two rather stylised *Menuetti* in between.

This *Gigue* is a marvel of elegance, expression and pianistic (clavier) technique. Like most of the dances, it consists of two segments each of which is repeated. The first segment passes from the tonic B flat to the dominant F. Bach starts the second segment by modulating extensively which results in an unexpected harmonic tension herewith to amble back to the fundamental tonic B flat via the same dominant F. It is specifically this modulating section of this *Gigue* that reveals how much both Scarlatti (in his “Essercizi”) and Bach, almost simultaneously, paved the way for the modulation technique of Haydn and Mozart that was to follow.

The *Sinfonia* of the **Second Partita** in C minor begins with a *Grave adagio* in punctuated French style, followed by a beautifully flowing Italian *Andante* that meanders above, what in jazz would be called a walking bass eventually leading to a two-part fugue. The brisk *Allemande* joins on to the *Andante* from the *Sinfonia*. A French *Rondeau* and an Italian *Capriccio* follow a French *Courante* and a *Sarabande* which is almost Italian in its simplicity. The *Capriccio*, especially, is a gem of harmonic and contrapuntal technique without even momentarily becoming dense in structure.

The Italian *Fantasia* from the **Third Partita** in A minor has a strong resemblance to a lengthy two-part “invention”. The French *Allemande* with its ornate embellishments and somewhat jaunty Italian *Corrente* are followed by a compact almost aria-like *Sarabande*, a short *Burlesca* and *Scherzo*, both in Italian style, that finally lead to a fugal *Gigue*.

The *Overture* from the **Fourth Partita** in D major is once more utterly French with an imposing Italian tinged fugue. Also the French *Allemande* is much more extensive here than in the earlier partitas. The *Courante* is followed by a beautiful *Aria*, then a richly ornamented *Sarabande*, a shortened *Menuet* and finally an extremely brilliant *Gigue* in 9/16 time.

The **Fifth Partita** in G major opens with a *Praeambulum* in the style of a toccata. Once again there is a succession of a French *Allemande*, an Italian *Corrente* and a French *Sarabande*. Bach did not write a *Menuet* for this Partita but instead a *Tempo di Menuetta* (sic), briefly, a piece in menuet time without dancing characteristics. Moreover he breaks up the 3/4 metre with a suggestion of duple time. The suite is rounded off with a short *Passepied* and a sizeable and once again brilliant *Gigue*.

The final and **Sixth Partita** in E minor opens with an extremely varied *Tocatta* in which French (punctuated pulse), Italian (aria-like melody and brilliant clavier technique), and German (fugal) characteristics intermingle. Subsequently, three extremely ornately decorated dances follow: an *Allemande*, a *Courante* and after a more modest *Air* a *Sarabande*. It is obvious that Bach has

surpassed himself here. Also the ingenious *Tempo di Gavotta* and especially the magnificent *Gigue* make us aware that Bach intended this Partita to be a unique conclusion to the complete cyclus of six partitas.

For all his modesty in the inscription to the very young Emanuel Ludwig of Anhalt-Cöthen, Johann Sebastian Bach was one of the greatest clavier masters of his time. He was as composer unsurpassable in combining the French, Italian and German styles of the eighteenth century in an exceptionally inspired and notable oeuvre.

Leo Samama, 2001

Translation Elly Leegte