

Notes on the music

Nearly three centuries since Bach's music for solo lute was composed, the four dance suites – and a handful of shorter works not based on dances – have come to be seen as particularly representative of his intimate chamber music. They were written over a thirty-year period (c.1712–42) primarily as music to be played at home among members of the Bach family and their friends and associates. They range from the youthful exuberance of the Suite in E minor, BWV 996, composed in Weimar when Bach, at the age of 30, was beginning to perfect the art of the dance suite, to the established maturity of the Partita in C minor, BWV 997, and the Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in E flat major, BWV 998, which may have been composed around 1740, following the visit of the famed Dresden court lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss to the Bach household in Leipzig.

Bach continually explored the use of old instruments such as the viola da gamba, recorder and lute. He also substituted instruments in various compositions and wrote numerous transcriptions of chamber music. David Schulenberg has written that 'Bach knew lutenists at Leipzig and owned a lute at his death, but he probably did not play the instrument with any facility.' The only tablature he used seems to have been that for organ, rather than lute. He used the lute as an obbligato and continuo

instrument, most notably in his Passion oratorios according to St John, St Matthew and St Mark, and he quoted hymns in some of his lute pieces. The lute works may also have been performed as *sonata da chiesa* during communion services (as was other music for solo instruments, such as the six cello suites, BWV 1007–1012). Sacred overtones are evident in all three works on this recording.

The lute suite known as BWV 996 follows the dance suite format, standard to German composers, of Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Bourrée and a Gigue in binary form. By contrast, the Partita, BWV 997 uses only two of the classical dances – Sarabande and Gigue – and includes a Prelude and Fugue, as of course does the Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in E flat major, BWV 998. Both late works can be regarded as free (i.e. mixed-genre) suites in the style of Handel's *Suites de pièces* of 1720 and are among Bach's finest solo instrumental works of their period. Though their date is uncertain they may well have been occasioned by the visit of Weiss and his student Johannes Kropffgans the Younger who were 'heard at our house' in 1739, according to Johann Sebastian's cousin Elias Bach.

The Lute Suite in E minor, BWV 996 is among the earliest of Bach's extant chamber works and his first for lute, being composed

in Weimar, perhaps c.1712–17. It exists in a manuscript copy of Bach's student Johann Tobias Krebs, with title page by Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748), with another copy in 1725 by another of Bach's students, Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber. A compact, entertaining piece, it has many special features. The pietist hymn *Was bist du doch, O Seele, so betrübt?* (Why art thou yet, O soul, so troubled?) is stated in the opening Prelude and elaborated in the richly embellished Sarabande. The succinct two-part Prelude – a *passaggio* in 4/4 alternating runs and chords, and a lively 3/8 fugal *presto* – has the impromptu feel of a toccata or operatic *scena*. The slow, stately Allemande in 4/4 establishes the sequence of dance movements. The succeeding two dances in 3/2 – the stately Courante and reflective Sarabande – are unusual, kaleidoscopic studies, in changes of tempo and asymmetrical form in the former and in the complex structure with harmonic and rhythmic changes in the latter. The *alla breve* Bourrée has become the most famous of Bach's lute pieces, directly influencing Paul McCartney's *Bluebird* and earlier achieving cult status in the rock group Jethro Tull's interpretation almost half a century ago. The concluding Gigue in 12/8 is a virtuoso work with contrapuntal display amid driving energy.

The Partita in C minor, BWV 997, often also known as a Lute Suite, may have begun as

a partita for lute comprised of a Prelude, Sarabande and Gigue, according to the Bach scholar Robert Hill. On Hill's view the Fugue was added later and the Double to the Gigue 'even later still' with the later four- and five-movement versions as 'adaptations and expansions intended for performance on harpsichord or lute-harpsichord', dated to c.1740. For David Schulenberg, on the other hand, the 'uniformly mature style points to its having been conceived integrally, and it is Bach's strongest original lute work'. He points out that the title 'suite' does not occur in the chief sources of BWV 997, while 'the organization is closer to that of a *sonata da chiesa* [slow–fast–slow–fast]. Many copies survive [in various transpositions], indicating that the piece was popular.' The first two movements are a Prelude and Fugue, 'comparable in design, if not quite in dimensions' to the 'Wedge' Fugue in E minor for organ, BWV 548, 'pairing a ritornello-form movement in concerto style with a fugue in *da capo* form'. Transposed more readily to guitar in A minor, the Prelude in 4/4 has an arched symmetry of repetitive passages, followed by a magnificent, extended *da capo* 6/8 Fugue in A–B–A form, a rarity among Bach fugues, having two themes in a simultaneous double fugue. The opening of the 3/4 Sarabande recalls the closing chorus of the *St Matthew Passion*. The closing 6/8 Gigue in sophisticated French style has particular

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energy and expressivity, composed with similar bass patterns to those in the Prelude and complemented with a brilliant Double, giving the work a greater mirror symmetry.

The Prelude, Fugue and Allegro in E flat major, BWV 998, like Bach's other compositions for lute, is appropriate for either lute, harpsichord or *Lautenwerk*, the 'lute-harpsichord'. The autograph, from 1740–45, is inscribed 'Prelude pour la Luth. à Cembal. par J. S. Bach'. The placement of a slow movement after the fugue, in the style of the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C major, BWV 564, suggests its possible use as a *sonata da chiesa*, according to Schulenberg. To him, 'The fugue subject is reminiscent of the chorale melody *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott* [Lord Jesus Christ, truly man and God] and the basis of Cantata 127'. It also has similarities to Martin Luther's Christmas song, *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her* [From heaven above I come here]. The Prelude in 12/8, with its fluid rhythmic emphasis, is related to the 9/8 Prelude No. 7 in E flat major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II, composed about the same time. It is an example of *style brisé* (broken chord style) perfected by French lutenists and Baroque keyboard players, using complex melodic fragments and broken chords with a strong bass line. The three-voice Fugue in 4/4 is in tripartite A–B–A form. The concluding 3/8

Allegro is typical of a Bach Gigue with long passages in two-part texture, its constant running passages, to some ears, faintly recalling the concluding Allegro of the Flute Sonata in E flat major, BWV 1031.

There is still considerable disagreement among scholars today regarding which instrument Bach preferred when performing his lute music. All four lute suites, as well as the non-dance works for lute, were written out in two-stave keyboard style rather than in tablature. Some have suggested that this shows Bach ultimately favoured the use of the lute-harpsichord or *Lautenwerk*. He may have known the instrument in Weimar, and he had one built in Leipzig around 1740 by Zacharias Hildebrandt. Two lute-harpsichords were part of Bach's estate of musical instruments in 1750.

Little was heard of this music again until the twentieth century when these works appeared in guitar arrangements first by Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909) and then Andrés Segovia (1893–1987), which as well as bringing these pieces to wide audiences, also began to pave the way for the revival of the Baroque lute as an instrument. At the same time, however, as Nicholas Kenyon writes in the *Bach 333 New Complete Edition*, the organists Herbert Tappert and Albert Schweitzer 'maintained that most of these

suites are keyboard versions of real lute works'. While today's most prevalent theory among scholars is that Bach composed at least the later works for lute-harpsichord, as Kenyon says, many still feel that 'the most satisfying performing instrument today for these works is the guitar'.

Bach obviously relished the opportunity to recast a piece of music for a particular instrument in a new version for another. His genius lay in the original melody and harmony, which seemed idiomatic for that particular instrument, but which were assimilated into their new contexts with changes made only in interpretative factors such as phrasing, embellishments and dynamic adjustments. At the same time, Bach's continual experimentation with multiple musical forms achieved another seeming paradox in his music with its sense of unity through diversity; while in his quotation of chorale melodies he brought a sacred perspective into these seemingly secular works.

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