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HISTORY OF MUSIC DIVISION OF THE DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON GESELLSCHAFT

IX. RESEARCH PERIOD

The Works of Johann Sebastian Bach

SERIES G: KEYBOARD WORKS

PATRIMONIO UC

6 English Suites (I)

No. 1 in A major, BWV 806

No. 2 in A minor, BWV 807

Prélude

Allemande

Courante I

Courante II avec deux doubles

Sarabande

Bourrée I/II

Gigue

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Les agréments de la même Sarabande

Bourrée I/II

Gigue

Ralph Kirkpatrick, Harpsichord

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6 English Suites (I):
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There is hardly another example which shows the growth, flowering and decline of a musical form so well as that of the short but brilliant history of the Suite, which starts to establish itself at the beginning of the 17th century, soon reaches world-wide fame, but quickly and irrevocably becomes unfashionable before the middle of the 18th century. The name Suite means "a sequence", i. e. a succession of dance movements. These movements were however (if we confine our studies to the *clavier-suites*) not meant for actual dancing; they were rather gathered in a collection, a welcome addition to music for domestic use, specially liked by the women, who found fugues too artificial and toccatas too difficult. The framework of the Suite was already completed about the middle of the 17th century, comprising the four dances Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue, which already at that time had partly lost their true dance character. Around 1700 new dances, the Gavotte, Bourrée, Passepied and Minuet (optional group), originated in France and were inserted between Sarabande and Gigue. Before these, too, could lose their dance connotation, the Suite itself (soon after 1730) had already lost its importance. The Suite reaches its peak period shortly before the decline with the eight great Suites by Handel, published in 1720, and even more so with the three famous collections of Suites by Bach, of which the first two (the French and English Suites) were composed between 1721 and 1723, and the last one (the Partitas) between 1725 and 1730. Whilst Handel's Suites already show signs of disintegration — one Suite for instance consists of the movements Prélude — Largo — Fuga — Gigue — Bach on the other hand, with his three collections of 6 Suites each, has endowed the Suite form with the stamp of maturity and perfection. The so-called French Suites consist of dance movements only, as was customary in France; their name is therefore borne with some justification (Bach himself called them simply "Suites pour le clavecin"). The question why the "English" Suites are so named has often been discussed, but so far no convincing answer has been given. According to Forkel, they

were composed for "an English Gentleman", but no trace of such a personage has yet been discovered. Bach himself called them "Suites avec prélude", to distinguish them from the shorter French ones. All six English Suites show the same structure: Prélude — Allemande — Courante — Sarabande, followed by one of the optional dances, either Gavotte, Bourrée, Passepied or Minuet, with a Gigue at the end. Thus these Suites are not only better developed than the delicate French ones, but present a more compact form.

It took Bach a long time to discover the way to the Suite, and once found, this form of musical expression did not captivate him long. He did not show any interest in it during his Weimar period; only when living in Cöthen, where, between 1717 and 1723 he held the position of court capellmeister as well as court composer and was therefore counted among the upper classes, was an interest for this form of elegant musical conversation awakened in him. This interest continues during his first years in Leipzig, but fades rapidly as does that of his contemporaries, when new forms of instrumental music appear on the horizon. The French and the first of the English Suites, composed in Cöthen, seem to reflect Bach's newly married bliss (he was married for the second time in December 1721, with the 21-year-old court singer, Anna Magdalena Wülkens). Thus the first English Suite in A major, the character of which is partly tender, partly solemn, has a greater affinity with the French Suites than with the following English ones. The short, happy Prélude could have been part of the *wohltemperiertes Klavier*; the subsequent dance movements Allemande-Courante I and II (the latter with 2 doubles) — Sarabande — Bourrée I and II — Gigue, remind us of spring, love and happiness. The strong emphasis on the Courante is remarkable; none of Bach's other Suites has two Courantes, yet taking into consideration the two doubles (variations) of the second Courante, there are even four in this one. It is possible that the composer did not mean them to be played successively, but wrote several for the performer to choose from. This

Suite, more than any other, shows Bach's close connection with the French composers. This is illustrated not only by passages of the Prélude, which display similarities with a Suite by Dieupart, but also by its rich ornamentation. According to Gerber, when Bach played French music before his Leipzig pupils, he did so in a "casual and artificial" way, but by no means without expression, rather with a light touch and ingenious rendering of embellishments. This, one would imagine, is the way to play this Suite, which Bach probably wrote for himself in order to perform it at a court concert in Cöthen.

The second Suite in A minor is of a totally different conception, and much more closely related to the subsequent four Suites than to the first one. The great Préludes which precede the dance movements, are of almost dominating significance in Suites Nos. 2 to 6, if for no other reason than their size, which by far exceeds that of the dance movements. The free Prélude had been introduced into the Suite by the Italians, and this innovation was copied by the Germans around 1700. It is easy to perceive that the grand form of these Préludes attracted and captivated Bach to a greater extent than the binary form of the dance movements. Most of the Préludes were fashioned after the model of the Italian Concerto grosso, but the one written for the A minor Suite comprises only three parts. Each of these three parts consists of precisely 55 measures; the main part (comparable to the tutti of a concerto for orchestra) is repeated faithfully in the third part; the middle part displays soloist characteristics with occasional interruptions by the tutti. The Sarabande shows an embellishment of its melody (called by Bach "Les agréments de la même Sarabande"); a kind of contrary, sulky humour flows through Bourrée and Gigue, gently allayed in the second Bourrée in the major key. The two Suites thus display a peculiar, effective contrast of feminine charm and manly firmness.

Hermann Keller

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