

Sunday, December 1, 2013, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Davitt Moroney, *harpsichord*

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) Partita No. 1, in B-flat major, BWV 825 (1726)

Præludium
Allemande
Corrente
Sarabande
Menuets 1 & 2
Giga

Bach Partita No. 5, in G major, BWV 829 (1730)

Præambulum
Allemande
Corrente
Sarabande
Tempo di Minuetta
Passepied
Gigue

INTERMISSION

Bach Partita No. 6, in E minor, BWV 830 (1731)

Toccatà
Allemande
Corrente
Air
Sarabande
Tempo di Gavotta
Gigue

*Harpsichord by John Phillips (Berkeley, 2010),
based on an instrument by Johann Heinrich Gräbner (Dresden, 1722)*

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BACH'S PARTITAS

BY THE TIME HE WROTE the harpsichord works now known as the six Partitas, Bach was already an experienced composer of keyboard suites. Although the chronology of some of his youthful works remains unclear, it is generally thought that the six suites known today as the English Suites were completed, at least in their first version, by about 1715; the slightly shorter works contained in the next set, the French Suites, were mostly written by 1722. There are also some early little suites that seem not to belong to either of these sets, and date from somewhere in the years 1710–1720. He therefore already had under his belt at least 15 such suites.

The Partitas are the longest and most complex of Bach's keyboard suites, and the most technically challenging. They also clearly held a different position in his own view of all these works, since he published them—unlike the English and French suites, which survive only in manuscript copies. He issued the Partitas separately, at the rate of one a year from 1726 onwards, reissuing them all together as a set in 1731. Another work originally planned as the “seventh partita” followed in 1735 (although it had originally been composed in about 1720), but was finally issued with the title “Overture in the French Style,” or *Ouverture nach französischer Art* (BWV 831).

Bach was always something of an overachiever. When writing music in various styles, he seems to have been driven by a determination to match the best works by other composers in each particular style, and then outdo them, in terms of richness of invention, complexity of working out the musical ideas, and sheer length. With the Partitas he achieve this absolute domination over the keyboard-suite form, squashing everyone else in the field and making it virtually impossible for anyone to write a good suite afterwards (at least until Schoenberg's Op. 25, in 1921–1923). He then seems to have lost interest in suites, having conquered that particular stylistic mountain. These great works therefore crown his activity as a composer of keyboard suites.

When Bach published them as a set in 1731, he was 46 and at the height of his powers. He had already written about 800 works—including more than 200 organ pieces, over 200 cantatas, two or three Passions, sets of sonatas, partitas, and suites for solo violin and solo cello, a large number of instrumental sonatas, the six “Brandenburg” Concertos and over a dozen other solo concertos, and so on—yet the Partitas were published as his “Opus 1.” This charming oddity relates simply to the fact that they were virtually his first published work. (In 1708, the town council in Mühlhausen, where he then worked, had published his municipal cantata *Gott ist mein König*, BWV 71.) In the history of Western music very few works that are identified as “Opus 1” are as magnificent as these Partitas.

Seventeen thirty-one also seems to have been a watershed year for Bach, the end of an extraordinarily productive decade. His output considerably dropped off after this year and never recovered the same sustained rhythm of intense productivity. He had been employed as Cantor at Leipzig since 1723 and was fed up with the job. We know he was trying to find another post elsewhere. And how right he was: the 1730s would be a very difficult decade for him, full of conflict with some of his colleagues and former students. He may have lost interest in his teaching job and become a difficult colleague because he was unhappy; or perhaps he was simply exhausted, and having a kind of “midlife crisis” as he approached the age of 50. The main bright spot in these years was his activities directing the student musicians at Leipzig University in their *Collegium Musicum* (a kind of “University Baroque Ensemble” of the day). His own sons had become students at the university, and he wrote some superbly playful music in more popular styles for them to perform with their friends.

Bach's intention in publishing his “Opus 1” may have been partly to spread his reputation as a brilliant keyboard player. The Partitas were published under the self-effacing title of *Clavier-Übung* (“Keyboard Exercise”). He followed up with a second volume with the same title in 1735, containing the Italian Concerto and the “seventh partita.” A third volume appeared in

1739, comprising the most important volume of organ music ever published. A fourth volume came out late in 1741, with the “Goldberg” Variations. He had thus covered several different stylistic bases: (1) Suites (Partitas); (2) Overture and Concerto; (3) Preludes and Fugues, for organ; and (4) Variations. When he planned *The Art of Fugue*, it was probably as the fifth volume in this cycle, but he died in 1750, a year before it was published, and so he was not responsible for the wording on the title page, which makes no mention of it being in the series of “keyboard exercises.”

Bach's full title for the Partitas gives a clear idea of what the volume contains, and what his aim was in publishing the pieces: *Keyboard Exercise: Consisting of Preludes, Allemandes, Courantes, Sarabandes, Giges, Minuets, and other Galanteries, Composed for the Pleasurable Diversion of Music Lovers*. The idea of “exercise” does not imply simple works for beginning students. Domenico Scarlatti took the same approach with his famous 1739 volume of 30 sonatas, called *Essercizi*, which are among the hardest he ever wrote. In choosing the title, Bach was paying homage to his predecessor at Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), who had published two volumes of suites in 1689 and 1692, under the title *Neue Clavier-Übung*. The composer Johann Krieger (1652–1735) had also issued an *Anmuthige Clavier-Übung* in 1698; and Vincent Lübeck (1654–1740) had, at more or less the same time as Bach, published a volume with the same title in 1728.

Some of Bach's admirers also used the same title, partly in homage to him. Georg Andreas Sorge (1703–1778) published five volumes with the same title between 1738 and 1745; one of them is dedicated to Bach, who is called “the Prince of the Keyboard.” Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713–1780) had studied with Bach in the years 1726–1734; when he published his own volumes of keyboard music, he three times used the title *Clavier-Übung*. (These volumes are all undated, but were probably printed in the 1750s.)

Bach's choice of the Italian word “partita” rather than the French word “suite” is probably also a direct homage to Kuhnau, who had

called each of his suites *Partie*. But Bach knew that these great suites were not entirely French. Telemann, who loved French music, once disarmingly criticized his own concertos—and concerto is by definition an Italian form—by saying that they “smelled too much of Paris”; Bach's keyboard partitas smell rather a lot of Rome's musical practices.

This can be seen in the language Bach chooses for the title of each movement. Normally in a French suite, the movements are called *Prélude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Menuet, Gavotte, Gigue*, and so on. In the three Partitas played today, although some core French names are found—*Allemande, Sarabande, Menuets, Air*—the Italian (and Latin) influence is nevertheless strongly present, with a *Preludium* and *Preambulum*, an *Allemanda*, three *Correntes*, a *Tempo di Minuetta* and *Tempo di Gavotta*, and a *Giga*. These movements are all in a more clearly Italianate style. As for Bach's peculiar spelling of *Gigue*, with a “q” (*Gique*), it is not unique, and apparently not an error. Several German composers spelled the word this way in the 17th century (including Biber); it may refer to a specifically German form of the French *Gigue* and probably reflects German pronunciation of the word. (Similarly, the 18th-century English *Jig* relates musically to the Italian *Giga*.) In Bach's *Giges*, the musical treatment is derived from Froberger's practices, marrying the dance form to fugal techniques in which the theme is usually turned upside down in the second half.

The language of Bach's titles, then, tells us something important about style. This in turn can tell us important things about the expected tempo for each movement, and perhaps also the style of playing that Bach might have considered to be appropriate to that movement. It is an essential clue for players, containing much information, and ignoring these indications (through simple lack of knowledge or lack of curiosity) makes the interpretative job much harder. (Modern editions often inexcusably alter the language of Bach's titles, tampering with the evidence.)

Understanding the larger stylistic context of each individual piece brings the particular character of each movement to light much more

quickly, makes clear the appropriate tempo at which the music can more easily express its secrets, and helps reveal the parameters of liberty that modern players are often too shy to claim but 18th-century players were allowed (especially in the area of improvising florid and elaborate ornaments, in certain circumstances). Paradoxically, the more we understand these stylistic “constraints,” the more we are liberated. Some ways of playing a piece can do such stylistic violence to it that, put simply, the piece is no longer what Bach says it is; its existential essence has been broken and it has been (rightly or wrongly) transformed into something else; yet there are many ways of playing it without breaking its essential nature, and understanding what each title means indicates this breadth of possibilities.

A classic example is the beautiful *Allemande* of the first Partita, the second piece on today’s concert. This, like almost all harpsichord *Allemandes*, is written in continuous 16th notes, and to the uncurious eye can look like a fast piece, but it isn’t one. This impression is confirmed, unfortunately, by some recordings by famous pianists. These recordings can mostly trace their roots to the legendary one made by Dinu Lipatti (1917–1950) very shortly before his untimely death. The circumstances of the recording having been made during his last illness made that version an instant sensation—and indeed, it is a special sort of eloquent pianism. However, Lipatti performs the B-flat major *Allemande* at such a fast tempo that it is not an *Allemande* at all but is transformed into a piano étude. If that was what Bach had wanted, it would have been impossible for him to give the title “Allemande” to the movement.

Does this matter? Bach is dead, so can’t we do anything we want with his music, in our search for ways to “express ourselves”? Yes, of course we can. But, also, yes, it does matter. If we try and understand specifically what the title “Allemande” meant to someone of Bach’s generation, we can find another kind of beauty in the work (an older kind), a quality for which Lipatti’s nimble pianism (so faithfully followed by generations of pianists ever since) simply leaves no room; that pianism is pursuing something quite

different, revealing in the process much about the piano and about Lipatti. But I believe that Bach’s *Allemande*, when perceived with what we can recover of the stylistic understanding someone of Bach’s generation might have had of the word “Allemande,” can reveal something quite different, and in the process reveal much about the harpsichord for which it was so carefully written (and perhaps about Bach). In the process, of course, such choices always also reveal much about the player, so we still end up fully expressing ourselves in our own way. Lipatti was searching for, and achieving, a beautiful pianistic style. A different approach can seek out a quite different musical style, with results that are often very surprising and revealing of emotions in the music that are quite absent from the Lipatti version.

Yet here, too, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. There is no question that Bach expected his students to learn the French style, and that the French style included the art of adding personal ornaments. That approach is appropriate for works like the English Suites and the French Suites that are essentially in the French style, and survive only in manuscript copies made by his pupils. The Partitas are in a different category for two reasons: Their style is less French, and Bach had them printed, meticulously writing in all the ornaments that he wanted. This caused his works to be criticized at the time for being “confusing” and “turgid.” It is true that the player must sometimes read between the densely florid lines to find the simple melodic contour that needs to be projected, helped by the lightest of touch in the ornamental notes, without clouding the line. But, as one of Bach’s contemporaries said in his defense, a composer has the right to protect his “children” (his compositions) in this way when they are being sent out into the world without protection, to be published. If he were to publish them “naked,” people might play them wrongly; but by clothing them with the appropriate ornamentation, he made sure they at least stood a chance of being played more in a way that was not a stylistic travesty.

Musics of the past are just as much musics of foreign cultures as the musics of the many

different world cultures that we can enjoy today. Much subtlety is needed to penetrate the cultural world of Bach, to understand its nuances and references, its social inflections, to perceive the place and importance of music in its society, or the social standing of musicians and their interactions with people in power. In many ways, the past cultures of our own national identities are more distant and foreign to us than the modern cultures of different lands that we can visit today, where we can talk to people who can try to explain those cultures to us. And as always in cases where there is a meeting between two different cultures, there needs to be humility; it is when we assume we understand something that we are most likely to make the mistake of missing something important. If we are always open to the hints that show us we have not understood something, we can come to a deeper understanding of the culture.

This is why the modern trends in performing “early music” have been so important. A “historically informed” approach to studying music of the past can allow us to approach it as a product of a different culture, one about which we know little but want to learn. The result has nothing to do with playing “correctly” (a concept that is both impossible and undesirable), but rather with being able to understand something about a quite different society in which music expressed deep human emotions in culturally specific ways.

François Couperin (1668–1733), Bach’s slightly older contemporary, noted in 1724 that, “The Italian style and the French style have for a long time divided up the Republic of Music (in France); for my part, I have always appreciated things according to their merit, without considering who wrote them or their nationality” (“*Le goût Italien et le goût François, ont partagé depuis longtemps (en France) la République de la Musique; à mon égard, J’ay toujours estimé les choses qui le méritoient, sans acception d’Auteurs, ny de Nation.*”) These words correspond clearly to Bach’s attitude (and Telemann’s and Handel’s), although since Couperin was French he only had to open his mind to Italian music. Since Bach, Telemann, and Handel were German,

they studied seriously, and were immensely influenced by, both French and Italian styles, and they all integrated them into their own Germanic styles.

The generally established international style for writing keyboard suites at that time was a French one. Even Handel, a German trained in Italy who had settled in London, published his first book of harpsichord suites in 1720 in a way that announced their French style: his London publisher had the title page printed in French. Bach deliberately combined the French style he had learned in his youth with the Italian style he had later thoroughly adopted. Bach’s style is a multilayered one, with strong German and Italian elements in it, but the foundational layer in these suites remains French. In his youth, with the exemplary seriousness typical of someone who was essentially self-taught, he taught himself a great deal about the various French musical styles; by the time he was 25, he had mastered them all. He then moved on to Italian styles, starting in about 1713, and digested the music of Vivaldi in a comparably serious and thorough manner. His youthful exposure to, and fascination with, French music had been intense, partly under the sympathetic guidance of his first important organ teacher, Georg Böhm (1661–1733). The young Bach copied out music by Jean Henry d’Anglebert (whose elaborate and complex system of ornamentation he adopted wholeheartedly) and François Couperin (with whom he was said to have corresponded, but the letters are lost), as well as Dieupart, Nicolas de Grigny, André Raison, and several other eminent French composers of the previous generation.

By the time he was writing the Partitas, the heavy influence of Italian compositional styles had left indelible marks on his musical language. But what about his style of playing the harpsichord? The scant evidence we have suggests that this remained essentially within the French tradition, amplified only by his own personal discoveries about how to make the instrument expressive (such as a particular and very personal way of curving his fingers). He had learned much about performance directly from French musicians when he was young.

When he was 18 and finishing his schooling in Lüneburg, he had professional contacts with the nearby French-speaking German court of Celle, where the princess, Eléonore d’Olbreuse, was French—as were most of the musicians. His admiration for French music and players can be seen in works composed at all periods of his life. In September 1717, during a visit to the Dresden Court, he personally met the great Louis Marchand, organist to Louis XIV’s court at Versailles and one of the finest of French harpsichord masters. Bach played Marchand’s highly intricate harpsichord music to his students and held them up as models. According to his second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Bach always expressed the greatest respect for the Frenchman and “very willingly gave Marchand credit for a very beautiful and very correct style of playing.” This beautiful style of French playing was something that Bach apparently taught his students; and that teaching centered around beautiful ornamentation and expressive touch. Teaching how to play suites was an important part of his didactic method.

The style at the heart of French music depended on what François Couperin in 1716 called *L’Art de toucher le Clavecin* (“The Art of Playing the Harpsichord”), a style as dependent on the player’s way of playing as on the composer’s way of composing. Couperin referred to it more than once as the art of “giving a soul” to the otherwise relatively inexpressive harpsichord. The variety of nuance possible on a harpsichord when the French technique is used can be extraordinary, resulting in a distinct impression of dynamic phrasing and expressive tension. (By contrast, its absence can easily turn music played on the instrument into a series of dreary, mechanical plinks and plunks.) In other words, just as pianos can play piano music in expressive ways that are not available on a harpsichord, the harpsichord can play harpsichord music in expressive ways that are simply not available on a piano. Only part of this is technical; the other part is stylistic, and style is culturally specific. The overarching style of a given culture is always greater than any individual genius. Bach’s *Allemandes* are certainly more “Bachian” and

richly imaginative than anyone else’s; but, for all their originality, they retain their fundamental kinship with all other typical 18th-century harpsichord *Allemandes*.

All his life, Bach used the harpsichord as a means of communicating musical thoughts of the utmost depth of expression. He therefore found the instrument capable of expressing such profound thoughts, since he would otherwise have reworked those same musical ideas and presented them for violin, cello, flute, oboe, or voice. The range of emotional expression that he puts into his keyboard music must be a range that is suited to, and best expressed by, the instrument itself. He wrote a great deal of music for harpsichord and organ, two instruments whose playing techniques, if misunderstood or misapplied, can kill musical expression. Writers of the period (such as Rameau) insist that the best harpsichord technique is identical to the best way to play organs. This technique is entirely possible on organs like the new organ in Hertz Hall, where the keyboard action is fully mechanical and highly responsive to the fingers (unlike organs using modern electrical connections), or on harpsichords like the one played today, where the strings are plucked by genuine bird quill (rather than the ubiquitous and nasty modern plastic substitute). Electricity and plastic are inimical to expressive organs and harpsichords.

Bach seems to have shared Couperin’s perception of the “soul” of the instrument, and many modern players and builders spend a great deal of time talking and thinking about it. Audiences have also now become more aware of it, especially in the Bay Area, to the extent of being able to recognize and hear the differences (even if they don’t always quite understand the technique behind it). Players are learning to exert minute finger control over the speed of attack for each and every note, to allow it to have its own color (and even its own volume) relative to its neighbors. And the best builders have rediscovered how to cut and trim with great precision the small segments of bird quill that actually pluck the strings. Together, these factors have enabled modern audiences to experience a variety of nuances on the finer instruments and to rediscover

the expressive range of the harpsichord. It is, of course, a relatively narrow range, but it can be highly effective, in the way a black-and-white photograph can be as expressive as a color photograph: Colors can be suggested through varied shades of gray, without ever using a red, a blue, a green, or a yellow. If, however, the harpsichord quills are not well cut, even the fingers of a Bach or a Couperin would be incapable of “giving a soul” to the harpsichord. Not surprisingly, Bach never allowed anyone else to quill, maintain, or tune his own instruments.

Davitt Moroney
October 2013

DAVITT MORONEY was born in England in 1950. He studied organ, clavichord, and harpsichord with Susi Jeans, Kenneth Gilbert, and Gustav Leonhardt. After studies in musicology with Thurston Dart and Howard M. Brown at King's College (University of London), he entered the doctoral program at Berkeley in 1975. Five years later, he completed his Ph.D. with a thesis under the guidance of Joseph Kerman, Philip Brett, and Donald Friedman, on the music of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd for the Anglican Reformation. In August 2001, he returned to Berkeley as a faculty member and is a Professor of Music as well as University Organist. He directs the University Baroque Ensemble.

For 21 years he was based in Paris, working primarily as a freelance recitalist in many countries. He has made nearly 70 CDs, especially of music by Bach, Byrd, and Couperin. Many of these recordings feature historic 17th- and 18th-century harpsichords and organs. They include Bach's *French Suites* (two CDs, for Virgin Classics, shortlisted for the Gramophone Award), *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (four CDs), the *Musical Offering*, the complete sonatas for flute and harpsichord, and for violin and harpsichord, as well as *The Art of Fugue* (a work he has recorded twice; the first recording (1985) for Harmonia Mundi France, received a Gramophone Award; the second recording (2000) accompanies the edition of *The Art of Fugue* published by ABRSM Publishing, London). He has also recorded Byrd's complete keyboard works (127 pieces, on seven CDs, using six instruments), and the complete harpsichord and organ music of Louis Couperin (seven CDs, using four instruments). His recordings have been awarded the French *Grand Prix du Disque* (1996), the German *Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik* (2000), and three British Gramophone Awards (1986, 1991, 2000). He is currently in the middle of recording all of François Couperin's harpsichord music (ten CDs). For his services to music, he was named *Chevalier dans l'Ordre du mérite culturel* by Prince Rainier of Monaco (1987) and *Officier des arts et des lettres* by the French government (2000).

In 2000, Davitt Moroney also published *Bach: An Extraordinary Life*, a monograph that



Scott Hewitt

has since been translated into five languages. In spring 2009 he was visiting director of a research seminar in Paris at the Sorbonne's *École pratique des hautes études*. His recently published research articles have been studies of the music of Alessandro Striggio (in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*), of François Couperin, of Parisian women composers under the Ancien Régime, a more personal article on the art of collecting old music books, and two articles on Gustav Leonhardt.

In 2005, after tracking it down for 18 years, Davitt Moroney identified one of the lost masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, Alessandro Striggio's *Mass in 40 and 60 Parts*, dating from 1565–1566, the source for which had been lost since 1724. He conducted the first modern performance of this massive work at London's Royal Albert Hall in July 2007 (to an audience of 7,500 people, and a live radio audience of many millions of listeners) and conducted two performances at the Berkeley Festival & Exhibition in June 2008. Two further Berkeley performances took place in February 2012, for Cal Performances ("The Polychoral Splendors of Renaissance Florence"), and included first performances since the 16th century of other newly restored "mega-works" by Striggio's contemporaries.