

Sunday, November 13, 2011, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Davitt Moroney, *harpsichord*

J. S. Bach: The Complete French Suites

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) The Six French Suites, BWV 812–17
(c.1722–1725)

Suite No. 1 in D minor, BWV 812

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Menuets I & II
Gigue

Suite No. 2 in C minor, BWV 813

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Air
Menuets I & II
Gigue

Suite No. 3 in B minor, BWV 814

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Anglaise
Menuets I & II
Gigue

INTERMISSION

Suite No. 4 in E-flat major, BWV 815

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Gavotte
Air
Menuet
Gigue

Suite No. 5 in G major, BWV 816

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Gavotte
Bourrée
Loure
Gigue

Suite No. 6 in E major, BWV 817

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Gavotte
Menuet polonais
Bourrée
Petit menuet
Gigue

The three harpsichords heard today were built by John Phillips (Berkeley) in 1995, 1998, and 2010. They are based on three famous antiques: (1) Andreas Ruckers (Antwerp, 1646), François-Étienne Blanchet (Paris, 1756) and Pascal Taskin (Paris, 1780); (2) Nicolas Dumont (Paris, 1707); and (3) Johann Heinrich Gräbner (Dresden, 1722).

Special thanks to Peter and Cynthia Hibbert for generously lending the harpsichord based on the 1722 instrument by Johann Heinrich Gräbner.

Cal Performances' 2011–2012 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Six French Suites, BWV 812–17

THE SIX SO-CALLED *French Suites* have always been among Bach's most popular works. They are assumed to have been composed during the years 1717 to 1723, when he was happily employed as principal composer and *Capellmeister* at the court of the music-loving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. The earliest manuscript source is the first "notebook" Bach gave to his second wife, Anna Magdalena, in 1722, shortly after their marriage. The suites are there copied out in his own handwriting. This is the only autograph manuscript for the pieces, but there are many other copies made by people in Bach's circle, notably his students and his son-in-law. Since only the first five suites are included in Bach's 1722 copy, the sixth is thought to have been composed shortly afterwards.

The traditional title *French Suites* is probably not Bach's own name for these works. During the 30 years after his death, they circulated widely in manuscripts and were referred to as "French" to distinguish them from the set of six *English Suites* (confusingly, these are written in the French style as well, but were later said to have been composed for an English gentleman). Bach also wrote another set of even more complex suites, the six harpsichord *Partitas*, the only ones he published. During his lifetime, the *French Suites* seem to have been known simply as the "Little Suites," perhaps because they do not start with long preludes, as do the *English Suites* and the *Partitas*.

The *French Suites* date from Bach's mid-30s, from the same extraordinary period when he finalized a great deal of secular chamber music, notably the *Brandenburg Concertos* (1721), the first volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722), and the two-part *Inventions* and three-part *Sinfonie* (1723). He would later refer nostalgically to his Anhalt-Cöthen years: "There I had a gracious Prince, who both loved and knew music, and in his service I intended to spend the rest of my life." However, his career took a different (and ultimately less happy) turn in 1723, when

he was appointed to an important municipal post in the old university town of Leipzig. The *French Suites* seem to reflect the serenity in his congenial musical life in Anhalt-Cöthen, before he embarked on a grueling first five years of hard labor in Leipzig, dedicated largely to composing vast quantities of sacred music (hundreds of cantatas and two great settings of the Passion).

Bach was always a voracious autodidact. In his youth, with characteristic seriousness he taught himself a great deal about the various French musical styles. By the time he was 25, he had thoroughly mastered them. (He then moved on to Italian styles, starting in about 1713, by digesting the music of Vivaldi in a comparably serious 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 less eminent French composers of the previous generation.

When Bach was 18 and finishing his school education in Lüneburg, he had direct contact with the nearby French-speaking German court of Celle, where the princess, Éléonore 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 as models of "French Suites." 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 beautiful touch.

This was what François Couperin in 1716 called *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin* ("The Art of Playing the Harpsichord"). 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.)

All his life, Bach used the harpsichord as a means of communicating musical thoughts of the utmost expressiveness, so it is logical to assume he found the instrument capable of expressing such thoughts, otherwise he would have reworked those musical ideas in terms of violin, cello, flute, oboe, or voice. Yet so much of his music was written for harpsichord and organ, two instruments whose playing techniques, if misunderstood or misapplied, can kill musical expression. Writers of the period such as Rameau, curiously, insist that the best harpsichord technique is identical to the best way to play organs. This technique is only possible on organs where the keyboard action is fully mechanical, rather than using modern electrical connections, or on harpsichords where the strings are plucked by genuine bird quill, rather than the ubiquitous modern plastic substitute. Electricity and plastic are inimical to good organs and good 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, to the extent of being able to recognize and hear the differences (even if they don't always quite understand the details 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 builders are learning to cut and trim with great precision

the small segments of bird quill that actually pluck the strings. Together, these two elements 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 nevertheless be highly effective, in the way a black and white photograph by Ansel Adams can be as expressive as a color photograph; colors are 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.

The musical styles of Couperin, Marchand and the distinguished French school of harpsichordists and organists of the late 17th century, offered Bach a strongly characterized model whose refined and elegant writing and expressive art of playing had a profound influence on him in the years 1700 to 1720. When this French musical language was wedded to his own fundamentally contrapuntal nature, the result was a keyboard language of unique force. Many people think of the French baroque style as overly ornate and somewhat mannered. Yet when Bach adopted it, the result was a limpid and direct musical language which has made the *French Suites* favorites of players and audiences for nearly 300 years.

Bach no doubt partly intended the *French Suites* to be played by members of his family: Anna Magdalena was an excellent singer as well as a good amateur keyboard player; and Wilhelm Friedemann (his eldest son by his first wife) was already a talented twelve-year old who had been playing the keyboard for nearly three years. But by this time Bach's reputation as a teacher had become very solid, and he also had a widening circle of pupils.

Several of these pupils copied out the *French Suites* during their period of study with him. One such student, after Bach moved to Leipzig in 1723, was Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber (1702–1775), who had the good fortune to study with

Bach from 1724 to 1727, while he (Gerber) was studying at Leipzig University. Gerber copied out all the *French Suites* in 1725. (Incidentally, his copy includes two extra works, so there are eight suites in all; for odd historical reasons, the two extras have never been thought of as part of the set of *French Suites*; I included these fine additional works on my recording of the *French Suites* for Virgin Classics.)

Any player who seeks to understand what limits Bach imposed on his students and what artistic freedoms he taught them to explore can learn a great deal from studying Gerber's manuscripts. They include much extra ornamentation, sometimes written in Bach's own handwriting (having no doubt been added during lessons). Studying such versions brings modern players face to face with direct evidence of some of the things that Bach covered when he was teaching. Such study is liberating. Far from limiting modern musicians by locking us into a supposedly "musicological" approach to the works, it can free us—through the musicology itself—by opening up a wide range of expressive possibilities that are rarely imagined by most modern players of Bach's music (and perhaps even more rarely taught by keyboard teachers).

When versions of works from several of Bach's students survive, each text is usually a little different. The differences bring into focus which aspects of the text Bach seems to have wanted his students to treat with strict respect, and which parts he apparently allowed them to approach with considerable liberty, allowing each student to change certain things in an individual way. Bach's whole teaching method was based on such contrasts. He had no single method that was applied to all students indiscriminately. He apparently used a different approach for each student. With some he was "hard as wood," whereas with others he was much more flexible. His first biographer, Forkel (in 1802), stressed not only his "strictness" as a teacher but also the fact that "he allowed his pupils, in other respects, great liberties."

Bach seems to have encouraged his students to embrace this artistic freedom most of all in one particular style of music: that of the French

harpsichord suite. Gerber's profusion of elaborate ornaments in the French style, notated under Bach's supervision, must surely be the direct embodiment of part of Bach's teaching.

The apparent difference between Bach's own manuscripts (unornamented) and those of his students (which are often highly ornamented) can be reconciled without difficulty. Many German and American scholars of the 20th century took the view that the "purity" of Bach's lines does not need ornamentation, and that the ornamented later copies were evidence of a more debased style, more frivolous, less noble. This is essentially a reworking of the cultural antithesis between more sober North European Protestantism and more flamboyant Latin gestural expression. Any rejection of an individual exuberance in favor of the essentialist view of a restrained, uniform "purity" is perhaps enough to give us all pause for thought. But it is a false antithesis. All musicians who adopted the French and Italian styles, which were the two predominant musical languages of the 17th century, understood that appropriate ornamentation was as much a part of music as it is of dress, of food, of picture frames and of architecture.

The cultural period when ornamentation was most repressed or rejected dates from the first half of the 20th century, not Bach's lifetime. That modern period has given us the modern standardized, black, unornamented, functional object that is the piano. It is a highly effective representation of that aesthetic. We no longer even recognize it as being typically "1930s" as an object (and quite unlike pianos from even just 30 years earlier). By contrast, the three harpsichords on stage today, each with a different approach to ornamentation, can serve as visual images of the significance of sober and appropriate ornamentation in an earlier age.

The absence of ornaments in Bach's manuscripts of the *French Suites* is not a sign that he did not want ornaments to be played, or that ornamentation would destroy the purity of his lines. Appropriate ornamentation is essential to accentuate the contours and stresses of the lines. The ornaments are not there partly because Bach was capable of inventing them on the spur

of the moment, and partly because—and this is important—he, like most other composers of the period, would not have wished them to be notated (and thereby fixed) because such an act of notation, of noting down, would inhibit the pleasure and spontaneity of freshly reinventing them each time the work was played. He knew how to improvise such ornaments; if they were not written down, he could more easily reinvent a fresh ornamental clothing for the music each time he played it.

Like his contemporaries, Bach eventually had to change his approach, as his keyboard music was being disseminated more and more through printed editions rather than hand-written copies made by students who had learned the pieces under their supervision. Once a copy is printed, it goes out unprotected into the world, and people who have not been taught how to play it could end up playing it wrongly. So Bach's printed works contain more elaborately notated ornamentation, and in the 1730s he was roundly criticized for doing this. But the *French Suites* were never printed. It is always important to understand whether we were playing works whose final texts he prepared for public consumption through publication (such as the harpsichord *Partitas*, and the *Italian Concerto*, the *Musical Offering*, *The Art of Fugue*), or works that survive only in manuscripts (such as the *French Suites*, the *English Suites*, the *Toccatas*, the *Inventions* and *Sinfonie*, or *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.)

By contrast, the students who notated the ornaments in their lessons, under his supervision, needed to do so because they were still learning the art of playing the harpsichord. Like students in classes today, they could not always remember everything and therefore "took notes." When Bach wrote down ornamentation in their manuscripts for them, it was almost like a modern professor's handout in a class; an example was being provided that the student could take away and study afterwards.

The paradoxical upshot of all this for the *French Suites* is exhilarating, both intellectually and musically. On the one hand, we have Bach's own text of the *French Suites* (without ornamentation); the authority of this naked text

was increased when it was copied, still naked, by his son-in-law Altnikol (the manuscript is in the Library of Congress, and is one of the most important Bach sources in the United States). A misplaced veneration for this unornamented version has led to Bach's and Altnikol's versions being used as the basis for most modern editions. I say "misplaced veneration" because playing Bach's text as it stands would almost certainly have been considered by him as the least satisfactory way of performing these pieces, a way that is at the least inadequate, and possibly just plain ignorant; it is no longer possible to imagine that either Bach or Altnikol would have intended players to perform from these unpublished manuscript sources without adding appropriate ornamentation. On the other hand, we also have the manuscript copies of students like Gerber. If we play Gerber's version, it is very different, but at least it is reassuring to know we are playing something closer to what Bach taught and approved. Yet ornamentation was a free, living, improvised art. Playing Gerber's notated ornaments because this is somehow better "performance practice" for such music is also a dangerous path to take. In Gustav Leonhardt's provocative phrase, "It is when we are trying to be the most authentic that we are in fact the least authentic." Studiously playing Gerber's ornaments ossifies the ornamental process by giving textual permanence to something that was just one possible manifestation of an impermanent, evanescent art.

Since Bach wrote in different ornaments in the manuscripts of different students, it follows that the ornaments themselves are not to be seen as "absolute" either in their nature or in the manner of their realization. Nevertheless, the principle that in French-style music there should be some French ornaments would have been viewed at the time as rather more absolute; a failure to observe this rule would have been an offense against taste, against decorum.

So modern performers are invited to take up the exhilarating, if dangerous, challenge. We can decide to play neither Bach's nor Altnikol's text (since they are inappropriately naked), and we can decide not to play his student's fixed

version of what should be spontaneous ornamentation. Instead, we can play something that is derived from the ornamental practice he taught, something found in no manuscripts of the period. This is akin to deciding to improvise a cadenza to a Mozart piano concerto even when a cadenza survives that was composed by Mozart himself or one of his pupils, yet we have the temerity (but also, hopefully, the skill) to put it aside. For Bach's *French Suites*, we can understand the art of French ornamentation and know how he taught it; we can therefore learn to invent new ornamental clothing for his melodies in that same spirit, and change these ornaments each time we play the *Suites*. (This practice only applies in this particular form to his French music, and would hardly apply to the fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.)

Such an approach frees players' imaginations to express themselves in a personal way. We can take certain aspects of Bach's notated text simply as a point of departure. Some modern players like to learn these works by imagining what he might have said if, like Gerber, they had had the good fortune to go to Bach's house for a lesson. Presumably we can, like Gerber, enjoy breaking free from the exact text of Bach's notes, as printed in the modern edition. We can enjoy taking liberties in those precise areas that Bach encouraged Gerber to take. But this is where the task is not easy. Freedom is not a free-for-all. We first have to learn the parameters of freedom.

If this line of argument sounds rather like old wine in new bottles, it is because I am consciously writing against the background of Plato's classic Theory of Forms, as it might apply to a musical text. Using the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of essential "substance" and particular "accidents," Bach's unornamented text of the *French Suites* in Anna Magdalena's book may thus be seen as closer to the "substance" of the work, something essentially abstract but never actually to be heard in that form, yet lying behind all practical realizations of the pieces in any performance. Performances, by contrast (like the shadows on Plato's cave wall), are "accidental," living ephemerally

through the addition of personalized ornaments that are unique to the player and to the particular performance.

The Theory of Forms can also, perhaps not surprisingly, help us appreciate the musical forms found in these works. All six *French Suites* contain a similar sequence of movements based on the rhythms of traditional French courtly dances. The sequence (which is all the word "suite" means) always contains the four essential ones, *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, and *Gigue*, but others can be interpolated before the *Gigue*. On paper, this unity of construction makes the suites look similar to each other (especially when laid out in a concert program), and the thought of hearing six such sequences of the same dances might seem daunting. Yet paradoxically, it is by hearing all the suites together that attentive listeners can more easily notice the characteristics that identify each movement's essential form, its "substance." Just as six circles can be different yet share the common identity based on *circularity*, and six rectangles can be different yet share *rectangularity*, so by listening to six different individual allemandes (the "accidental" manifestations of abstract Allemande Form), we can better perceive the unifying substance, "Allemande," that underlies them all, the Idea behind all allemandes.

At another level, hearing them all together also enables the player and the listeners to appreciate the internal differences between the six allemandes, the great variety to be found in the six courantes, and so on. Each suite does have its own inner character, and here the richness of Bach's imagination can be appreciated. Bringing out these distinct characters within the overall concept of unity is, I feel, one of the principal responsibilities of the performer.

The use of three different harpsichords (a luxury available in very few places in the world) helps with this task by enabling me to accentuate the characters by tuning the three instruments slightly differently, each one in a different "well tempered" tuning (quite distinct from the modern "equal tempered" keyboard tuning). Tonight you will hear three temperaments. For Suites 1 and 5 (in D minor and G major), the

temperament favors the more standard keys (involving few sharps or flats in the key signature). A different temperament is heard for Suites 2 and 4 (in C minor and E-flat major), and it is designed to favor keys with more flats in the key signature. Suites 3 and 6 (in B minor and E major) use a third temperament, favoring keys with several sharps in the key signature. This approach is designed to enable each suite to be more in tune than it would be in modern equal temperament, and brings out many expressive nuances in Bach's harmonies. Since such harpsichord indulgence is not possible on most occasions, this is an ephemeral pleasure to be experienced here in Berkeley and then allowed to dissolve into our memories. Concerts are always ephemeral experiments, moments, attempts to answer afresh the ever-present question: *What can this beautiful music become today, here in this room, for this audience?*

Davitt Moroney



Scott Hewitt

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 UC Berkeley in 1975. Five years later, he completed his Ph.D. with a thesis under the guidance of Joseph Kerman and Philip Brett 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.

For 21 years he was based in Paris, working primarily as a freelance recitalist in many countries. He has made nearly 60 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 received a *Gramophone* Award). 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). 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, he also published *Bach, An Extraordinary Life*, a monograph that has since been translated into five languages. 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, and of Parisian women composers under the *Ancien Régime*. In spring 2009, he was visiting director of a research seminar in Paris at the Sorbonne's *École pratique des hautes études*.

In 2005, after tracking it down for 18 years, he 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 Early Music Festival in June 2008. Two further Berkeley performances will take place on February 3 and 4, 2012, for Cal Performances, and will include some first performances since the 16th century of other newly restored "mega-works" by Striggio's contemporaries.