

Friday, November 14, 2025, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Jeremy Denk, *piano*
Bach's Six Partitas for Solo Keyboard

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Partita No.1 in B-flat major, BWV 825 (1726)

Praeludium
Allemande
Corrente
Sarabande
Menuet I
Menuet II
Gigue

Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826 (1726)

Sinfonia
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Rondeau
Capriccio

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

Praeambulum
Allemande
Corrente
Sarabande
Tempo di Minuetto
Passepied
Gigue

INTERMISSION



Partita No. 3 in A minor, BWV 827 (1727)

Fantasia
Allemande
Corrente
Sarabande
Burlesca
Scherzo
Gigue

Partita No. 4 in D major, BWV 828 (1728)

Ouverture
Allemande
Courante
Aria
Sarabande
Menuet
Gigue

Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830 (1730)

Toccata
Allemande
Corrente
Air
Sarabande
Tempo di Gavotta
Gigue

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SIX PARTITAS FOR CLAVIER, BWV 825–830

Johann Sebastian Bach

After establishing himself as Cantor of Leipzig's Thomaskirche, in 1731 the ever-industrious Bach went into the publishing business: engraving and distributing a set of six recently composed partitas for keyboard. He published the complete set under the title of *Clavier-Übung* or "keyboard exercises" in tribute to his predecessor at the Thomaskirche, Johann Kuhnau, who had brought out a similar work in 1689. This was a risky venture for the composer since he assumed all the production expenses. Fortunately, his enterprise paid off handsomely, for the works were enthusiastically purchased by professionals and amateurs throughout Germany and beyond. Though he had, of course, composed many works before—including the English and French Suites for keyboard—Bach labeled the set "Op. 1," for these were the first works to be published under his direction.

"Keyboard exercises" is a rather modest title for these wondrous works, which are the culmination of Bach's creations of dance suites (in German known as *Partiten*) for clavichord or harpsichord. (Bach himself preferred the small, intimate-toned clavichord.) They were immediately recognized as the ultimate technical challenge for a Baroque keyboard player. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer in 1802, proclaimed: "This work made in its time a great noise in the musical world. Such excellent compositions for the clavier had never been seen or heard before. Anyone who had learnt to perform well some pieces out of them could make his fortune in the world thereby." And fortunately, for all but the most hard-core purists, they have proved to be equally successful on the modern pianoforte.

Dating back to the 16th century, dance suites were already a venerable form in Bach's day. Originating as folk and court

dances, by the late 17th century, they had become highly stylized: music for listening, not dancing. Even their international components and order had become codified. After an introductory prelude, the Baroque suite proceeded with a stately, duple-meter *allemande* of German origins; a lively triple-meter French *courante* or Italian *corrente*; a slow and soulful 3/4-time *sarabande* from Spain; and a vivacious final *gigue* or jig from the British Isles. Between the *sarabande* and the *gigue*, the composer could insert his choice of optional dances known as *galantieren*, such as the French minuet or gavotte.

An important aspect of the superiority of these six partitas is the freedom with which Bach worked out these standard dance forms and the distinct personality he created for each suite. They comprise three suites in major modes—B-flat, D, and G—and three in the minor—C, A, and E. These keys, in keeping with Baroque tradition, mesh with the moods of their respective partitas.

Highlights of the Six Partitas

In B-flat major, the **First Partita** is a bright-colored suite that favors quicker tempos. Throughout the set, Bach establishes the basic mood and style of each partita with his choice of its opening, non-dance movement; these vary the most from one partita to another. Rather than opening with an imposing overture, here he chooses a brief prelude that sets a lyrical mood with a graceful, beautifully decorated melody. His flowing *Allemande* is quicker than most and animated by syncope. And the *Corrente*, following the faster Italian style, is very playful, bouncing with triplets. The richly ornamented *Sarabande* is aristocratic in style and gently pensive rather than sad. The highlight of this partita is the closing *Gigue*, and a very unorthodox jig it is, notably because it eschews the customary bouncing

compound meter used for this dance. Sparkling with staccato attacks, it is a vigorous game between the two hands requiring hand crossing.

The **Second Partita** is the first in the minor mode, C minor. Suiting its key, it is slower and more nuanced than the First. To open it, Bach chooses a sinfonia form in three contrasting sections. First, we hear a dramatic Adagio, almost orchestral in its fullness and emphasizing emphatic dotted rhythms and complex harmonies that yearn toward other keys. It is followed by a faster Andante, in which the right hand spins a charming melody over a steady walking bass in the left. This in turn accelerates to *Allegro moderato* and a brilliant flow of imitative counterpoint in 3/4 time. No. 2's other most striking movement is the last one; here Bach omits the conventional guige for a more erudite Capriccio, a brilliant display of three-voice counterpoint.

To round out the program's first half, Jeremy Denk has chosen to move to **Partita No. 5** in G Major, a key associated by Baroque composers with outdoors freshness. The lightest and shortest of the partitas, it contains no slow movement; even the Sarabande is marked *Andante con moto*. The highlight is the closing Gigue, which is a lively fugue with a propulsive, spinning theme. In its second section, a new fugal theme is introduced, which suggests the original theme in retrograde. This soon cedes to the first theme, which carries this rollicking contrapuntal dance to the finish line.

Though it's in A minor, **Partita No. 3** is another lighter and faster work with an emphasis on rhythmic playfulness. Its quick opening Fantasia—a lively race between the two hands with frequent rhythmic conflicts—establishes its overall personality. Its Corrente, in the faster Italian style, sparkles with dotted rhythms striving against sixteenth-note runs. The



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Sarabande is fleet and charming without a hint of melancholy. The speed of the three final movements accelerate successively from *Allegro* to *Presto*, and all have the mood of musical games, with the final Gigue again incorporating fugal counterpoint. *Burlesca* mean “comedy” in Italian.

Denk closes his program with the two greatest partitas of the set. In seven movements, the **Fourth Partita** in D major is the longest of the six and boasts several movements of exceptional richness and depth. One of the finest is the opening *Ouverture* in the grand French Overture style of contrasting slow and fast sections. Its first section is in a stately slow tempo, with the traditional emphasis on dotted rhythms and lavish ornamentation in both the right- and left-hand parts. A Bachian specialty here is the tension produced by the juxtaposition of diatonic and chromatically altered notes. This music then flows into the livelier second part of the Overture, with its dancing 9/8 meter. Unusually for the French Overture style, this is not a fugue, but instead freely contrapuntal music emphasizing fleet scales, many of them rippling smoothly from one hand to the other.

In his subtle Courante in the slower French version of this dance, Bach makes much of the tension between the basic triple meter and rhythmic figures that imply a duple meter. Despite its title, the brief, playful Aria has nothing to do with song, but is instead an Italian character dance in 2/4 time that makes delightful use of syncopated rhythms.

The Fourth Partita’s Sarabande is one of Bach’s finest expressions of this Baroque slow dance in 3/4 time (which surprisingly began life two centuries earlier in Spain as a dance of lascivious character). It is a rich and introspective reverie with a beautiful right-hand part full of subtle chromatic shading over a mostly steady left-hand pulse.

The concluding Gigue follows Baroque tradition by being a fugue. But what an intricate fugue subject Bach invented here—and at a breakneck speed to challenge the pianist to the utmost! In the Gigue’s second section, Bach introduces a new fugal theme and then layers the original fugue subject on top in a superb display of contrapuntal wizardry.

“With the **Partita No. 6** in E minor, Bach gives us one of his greatest masterpieces,” writes Angela Hewitt, a distinguished interpreter of Bach’s keyboard works. “It is a stupendous work on the grandest scale—one in which we feel his incredible strength of character, security, warmth of heart, and deep faith. Here he is no longer writing for popular appeal but on the highest intellectual and emotional plane.”

At 10 minutes, the Sixth’s opening Toccata epitomizes the scope and depth of this partita. The toccata—or “touch piece”—was generally designed to be a dazzling work to show off the keyboard artist’s technical virtuosity. But this profound toccata, in a slower, weightier tempo than most, is something much more: it probes the secrets of the human heart. It was the last toccata Bach composed, and many call it his best. It opens with a theme spanning both hands that contains a prominent three-note sighing motive—a dissonant note that resolves downward. Bach will also incorporate it to launch the theme of the massive following fugue for three voices, and it will re-appear constantly in the fugue’s final sequence. The composer returns to the opening section to close out this majestic movement.

Maintaining the stately pace, the Allemanda glitters with lavish and beautifully conceived ornamentation. Likewise, the Corrente is elaborately ornamented and deliciously syncopated.

Performers and commentators alike frequently express their belief that the sublime Sarabande is the greatest and most



moving version of this slow three-beat dance Bach ever wrote. Here ornamentation goes far beyond being decorative; each broken chord, gruppetto, and trill deepens the complex emotions—some sorrowful, some hopefully striving—Bach expresses.

Hewitt describes the Gigue as “demanding the utmost in mental virtuosity of the player.” This is far from the usual jauntily leaping dance we are familiar with, but instead a return to the antiquated French version, which was more serious and erudite. It is entirely a three-voice fugue with

an oddly angular fugue subject that rhythmically conflicts with its countersubject. In its second section, Bach inverts the theme, making it go down instead of up. Nevertheless, it is in keeping with the rest of the Sixth’s movements, which prefer to ponder and explore rather than merely entertain.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2025

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jeremy Denk is one of America’s foremost pianists, praised by the *New York Times* as “a pianist you want to hear no matter what he performs.” Renowned for his vivid imagination, depth, and wit, Denk is also a *New York Times* bestselling author; a recipient of a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship and the Avery Fisher Prize; and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

During the 2025–26 season, Denk tours widely across North America, with performances in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Austin, among others. In recital he continues to explore female composers from the past to the present, as well as the complete Bach Partitas. He also returns to the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra to perform Beethoven’s Piano Concert No. 1 at the 92nd Y in New York, and reunites with his longtime collaborator, Joshua Bell, for performances at the Hollywood Bowl and the Ravinia Festival. Further afield, he embarks on a tour of South Korea with violist, Richard O’Neill, and performs at the Adam Chamber Music Festival in New Zealand in multiple concerts, including a

performance of Schubert’s *Die Schöne Müllerin* with tenor Colin Ainsworth.

Denk has performed frequently at Carnegie Hall and in recent years has worked with such orchestras as the Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony. Recent highlights also include premiering a new concerto written for him by Anna Clyne, co-commissioned by the Dallas Symphony led by Fabio Luisi, the City of Birmingham Symphony led by Kazuki Yamada, and the New Jersey Symphony led by Markus Stenz. Further highlights include performances of John Adams’ *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?* with the Cleveland Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, and Seattle Symphony.

Denk is also celebrated for his original and insightful writing on music, which Alex Ross praises for its “arresting sensitivity and wit.” His *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, was published to universal acclaim by Random House in 2022. Denk also wrote the libretto for a comic opera presented by Cal Performances, Carnegie Hall, and the Aspen Festival, and his writing has ap-

peared in the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, *Guardian*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as well as on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*.

Denk is known for his interpretations of the music of American visionary Charles Ives, and in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, Nonesuch Records released a collection of his Ives recordings in 2024. Denk's album of Mozart piano concertos, released in 2021 on Nonesuch Records, was deemed "urgent and

essential" by BBC Radio 3. His recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* for Nonesuch Records reached No. 1 on the *Billboard* classical chart and his recording of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 111 paired with Ligeti's *Études* was named one of the best discs of the year by the *New Yorker*, NPR, and the *Washington Post*, while his account of the Beethoven sonata was selected by BBC Radio 3's Building a Library as the best available version recorded on modern piano.

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