

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 24 February 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Bach Partitas

Jeremy Denk piano

- Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) Partita No. 1 in B flat BWV825 (by 1726)
I. Praeludium • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Sarabande • V. Menuet I • VI. Menuet II • VII. Gigue
- Partita No. 2 in C minor BWV826 (by 1727)
I. Sinfonia • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Sarabande • V. Rondeau • VI. Capriccio
- Partita No. 4 in D BWV828 (by 1728)
I. Ouverture • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Aria • V. Sarabande • VI. Menuet • VII. Gigue
- Interval*
- Partita No. 3 in A minor BWV827 (1725-7)
I. Fantasia • II. Allemande • III. Corrente • IV. Sarabande • V. Burlesca • VI. Scherzo • VII. Gigue
- Partita No. 5 in G BWV829 (pub. 1731)
I. Praeambulum • II. Allemande • III. Corrente • IV. Sarabande • V. Tempo di Minuetto • VI. Passepied • VII. Gigue
- Partita No. 6 in E minor BWV830 (pub. 1731)
I. Toccata • II. Allemande • III. Corrente • IV. Air • V. Sarabande • VI. Tempo di Gavotta • VII. Gigue



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In the early 18th Century, as now, the city of Leipzig was famous for its publishing and book trade, especially the huge book fairs that were held every spring and autumn. It was at the 1726 Michaelmas Fair that the *Thomaskantor* Johann Sebastian Bach announced the first in a new series of Partitas for keyboard, which he had self-published (at considerable financial risk). Sales of this trial publication were good enough that the second and third Partitas were issued the next year, with three others following. Finally, in 1731, Bach published all six together as a set (BWV825–830), designating it his Opus 1. He called the collection *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice'), a title that had been used by his Leipzig predecessor, Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722) for two volumes of keyboard partitas 40 years earlier.

The word 'Partita' refers to an ordered suite of dance movements, in the manner of Bach's so-called English and French Suites (BWV806-817). The Partitas, however, are far grander and more innovative than these earlier collections. They mix fashionable Italian and French styles, and although they all conform to the basic pattern of a suite (Allemande-Courante-Sarabande-Gigue), each begins with its own distinctive opening movement, and features different optional ('gallantry') pieces. Bach addressed his target audience on the original title page as 'denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths-Ergötzung' ('for music lovers, to refresh their spirits'). These dance suites - the most important genre of keyboard music in the early 18th Century - were therefore intended not only for professional musicians, but amateur players, too.

Bach originally planned the Partitas as a set of seven. He adopted an ingenious ordering scheme using expanding stepwise intervals, alternating upwards and downwards. The first Partita is in B flat major; for the second, he moved up by the interval of a second to reach the key of C minor. He then moved down a third to A minor, up a fourth to D major, down a fifth to G major, and up a sixth to E minor. We can therefore deduce that the final seventh Partita would have been in F major (down a seventh from E), but, for whatever reason, it was never composed.

As the first in the collection, the **Partita in B flat** was designed to be both impressive and accessible. It opens with an elegant *Praeludium*, and continues with a sequence of dances (*Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and two *Menuets*) largely built around a broken B flat major chord. The finale, an Italian *Gigue*, is a brilliant study in hand-crossing, and the technical acrobatics demanded of the player make it exciting to watch and listen to. In fact, several of the Partitas end with virtuosic showpieces: the **second, in C minor**, closes with a thrilling but very difficult *Capriccio*. It is preceded once again by an array of diverse movements, including a dramatic opening *Sinfonia* in three contrasting sections (a *grave adagio*, a lyrical *andante* and a two-part fugue), and a carefree *Rondeau*.

The **Partita in A minor, No. 3**, survives (along with the sixth) in an earlier version in the famous 1725 Notebook

for Anna Magdalena Bach. For the final version, Bach changed the title of a movement designed 'Menuet' to *Burlesca*, underscoring its very un-menuet-like character, with displays of imitation and syncopation throughout. He also added a witty *Scherzo*, providing a more energetic lead-in to the concluding three-voice *Gigue*. In contrast to the third Partita, which begins with an unassuming, flowing *Fantasia* (recalling the *Two-Part Inventions*), **the fourth, in D major**, opens with a grand French overture, featuring stately dotted rhythms and a faster concerto-like section. This is followed by a beautiful, intimate *Allemande* with long singing phrases, a characteristic shared by the *Sarabande*. In between are found a jaunty *Courante*, full of rhythmic vitality, and a charming little *Aria*. Finally, after a short *Menuet*, in which duple and triple rhythms are combined, a lively, joyful spirit returns in the closing *Gigue*.

Joy and grace characterise the **Partita in G, No. 5**, which is reminiscent of other pieces by Bach in this key (including the fifth French Suite and the *Goldberg Variations*). Its opening *Praeambulum* features running passages and exciting displays of hand-crossing, followed by an *Allemande* based around a short motif in triplets. A *Corrente* precedes an elegant three-voice *Sarabande* filled with ornamentation. The cheeky hemiola rhythms in the following minuet, pitting two beats against three, are atypical of this dance; by contrast, the rustic, swinging character of the *Passepied* is more conventional. The *Gigue* is an exuberant piece featuring two themes that are at first heard separately, and then combined in dialogue.

Bach saves his best until last with the final Partita, **No. 6 in E minor**, surely one of his greatest keyboard works. It begins with a *Toccatà*, in which improvisatory outer sections frame a lengthy fugue. A poignant, chromatic *Allemande* precedes the *Corrente*, where delicate, swinging syncopation is combined with brilliant passagework. Following a short *Air* (with a surprise ending), we reach the extraordinary *Sarabande*, a movement of great emotional power and darkness. Emerging from its depths, Bach brings us back into the light with a dance: although marked *Tempo di Gavotta*, it is really a little *giga*. The *Gigue* finale, meanwhile, is a magnificent, almost wild fugue built around an angular subject, and demands supreme intellectual and technical virtuosity from the player.

With the *Clavier-Übung*, Bach sought not only to 'refresh the spirits', but push the boundaries of musical composition and performance in unprecedented ways. As his first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote: 'This work made...a great noise in the musical world. Such excellent compositions for the clavier had not been seen or heard before...they are brilliant, well-sounding, expressive and always new'. They remain so, nearly 300 years later.

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