



BRILLIANT  
CLASSICS



# J.S. Bach

French Suites BWV812-817

Wolfgang Rübsam *lute-harpsichord*

**Johann Sebastian Bach 1685-1750**  
**French Suites BWV 812-817**

**French Suite No.1 BWV812 in D minor**

1. I.	Allemande	4'43
2. II.	Courante	3'19
3. III.	Sarabande	2'54
4. IV.	Menuet 1 & 2	5'06
5. V.	Gigue	3'29

**French Suite No.2 BWV813 in C minor**

6. I.	Allemande	4'15
7. II.	Courante	2'54
8. III.	Sarabande	3'17
9. IV.	Air	2'21
10. V.	Menuet	1'53
11. VI.	Gigue	3'15

**French Suite No.3 BWV814 in B minor**

12. I.	Allemande	4'53
13. II.	Courante	3'18
14. III.	Sarabande	3'11
15. IV.	Menuet-Trio-Menuet	4'36
16. V.	Anglaise	2'05
17. VI.	Gigue	1'48

**Prelude, Fugue and Allegro BWV998**

in E-flat		
18.	Prelude	2'47
19.	Fugue	6'54
20.	Allegro	4'40

**French Suite No.4 BWV815 in E-flat**

21. I.	Allemande	3'31
22. II.	Courante	2'27
23. III.	Sarabande	3'15
24. IV.	Gavotte	1'55
25. V.	Air	2'46
26. VI.	Gigue	2'29

**French Suite No.5 BWV816 in G**

27. I.	Allemande	4'35
28. II.	Courante	2'34
29. III.	Sarabande	4'46
30. IV.	Gavotte	1'30
31. V.	Bourrée	2'01
32. VI.	Loure	2'46
33. VII.	Gigue	4'50

**French Suite No.6 BWV817 in E**

34. I.	Allemande	4'33
35. II.	Courante	2'51
36. III.	Sarabande	3'33
37. IV.	Gavotte	1'26
38. V.	Polonaise	1'43
39. VI.	Bourrée	1'42
40. VII.	Menuet	1'40
41. VIII.	Gigue	3'48

**Suite BWV996 in E minor**

42. I.	Passaggio	1'22
43. II.	Presto	1'35
44. III.	Allemande	3'06
45. IV.	Courante	3'05
46. V.	Sarabande	3'18
47. VI.	Bourrée	1'27
48. VII.	Gigue	3'37

Wolfgang Rübsam *lute- harpsichord*  
*Lute-Harpsichord Op.458 by Keith Hill*

**J.S. BACH** (1685-1750)

**French Suites BWV 812-817**

We are able, with the hindsight of almost 350 years, to gaze now on the entirety of Bach's compositional range in awe and wonder, at the diversity of genres, both instrumental and vocal, and the array of formal musical structures in which he excelled. His incredible compositions were, and are still, able to challenge the technical range and ability of performer and instrument alike. What continually amazes us is how Bach, seemingly without effort, absorbed stylistic influences from his contemporaries and predecessors, according to the project at hand. The works for clavier (understood as primarily harpsichord or clavichord in the Baroque period) are at once a summation and a final statement, if you will, for each genre in which Bach composed.

As far as we know, Bach's first acquaintance with French music dates from around 1700 during his grammar school years in Lüneburg. The St. Michael's school attended by Bach contained a school for the sons of the nobility where French was spoken and French customs and etiquette were taught. The neighboring court orchestra frequently gave concerts of French music there, sometimes being joined by Bach and other pupils. Around the same time the organist of Saint John's Church, Georg Böhm, introduced Bach to French harpsichord music and the appropriate manner of playing. It is safe to assume that Bach would have played the suites and perhaps the freely notated non-measured preludes of the late 17th century masters, including Louis Couperin. Thanks to Böhm's introduction, Bach, the German harpsichordist was able to perform French dance music of the era of Louis XIV at gatherings of the nobility, thus becoming familiar with the music of his French contemporaries such as François Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau and Louis Marchand.

Among the harpsichord pieces which Bach composed in the French style, besides many separate suites, are the English and French Suites (both completed as series in Cöthen and Leipzig in 1718-1725), and the Six Partitas, first published in instalments in 1726-30 and later as a series in Part I of the Clavier-Übung in 1731. Part II of

the Clavier-Übung includes another suite, the large-scale Partita in B minor entitled 'Ouverture in the French style, for a harpsichord with two manuals.' It is certain that the title French Suites does not originate from Bach's hand. They are called "Suites pour le clavessin" by the composer. All the suites except BWV 817 are found in more or less complete form in Anna Magdalena Bach's 1722 "Notenbüchlein." The first and part of the second suite reappear in her second book, begun in 1725.

As in the English Suites, Bach included in the French Suites the customary sequence of allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue, with additional short movements between the sarabande and gigue. The dances are based on French models, but do not have the 'doubles' found in the English Suites, where some movements are repeated in an ornamented version. Moreover, the French Suites have no preludes and are generally of a more modest scale, both less stylized and less demanding in technical terms. Major and minor keys are employed equally, the first three suites being in minor keys and the other three in major, in the following key pattern: D minor, C minor, B minor, E flat major, G major and E major.

The French Suites likely played a significant role in domestic music-making in Bach's home and in his teaching. We know of a considerable number of copies from the circle of Bach's pupils, indicating that these pieces were widely used in Bach's teaching. They remain among the most approachable of Bach's keyboard works for performer and listener alike.

**Suite No.1 in D minor BWV812**, opens with an Allemande which is lute-like in its transparency and arpeggiation, opening with a tonic pedal point lasting a bar. The same applies to the Courante, the Sarabande and the first Minuet. The second Minuet is a delightful trio. The concluding Gigue uses dotted rhythms.

**Suite No.2 in C minor BWV813** is notable for its melodic Allemande; the Sarabande also is in this melodic style. After the Air, and Minuet, a two-part canonic Gigue in triple time concludes the Suite.

**Suite No.3 in B minor** BWV814 is notable for the melancholy Sarabande where the listener's ear is drawn freely between the treble melody and the more elaborate bass part in the second half. The Gavotte is called an "Anglaise" in some sources, and the concluding Gigue is really like one of the two-part Inventions, in its imitative structure.

**Suite No.4 in E-flat major** BWV815 opens with an Allemande that, again, is suggestive of the lute. The Courante and Sarabande have the traditional emphasis on the second beat of the measure, followed by a Gavotte, a flowing Air, and delightful Gigue.

**Suite No.5 in G major** BWV816 is likely the most popular of these works. The famous Gavotte contains a bass octave "striding" pattern that recurs in the famous "Air" from the Third Orchestral Suite, and in the Sanctus of the Mass in B minor. All the movements here including the tumbling final Gigue, suggest that Bach was clearly intent on creating practical music for his pupils.

**Suite No.6 in E major** BWV817, dates from after 1724. The normal order of movements Allemande-Courante-Sarabande is followed by a Polonaise, Bourrée, Menuet, and a final, rambunctious Gigue.

The **Prelude Fugue and Allegro** in E-flat major BWV 998, is a work which is known in versions for both lute and clavier. It is remarkable when heard on the lute-harpsichord, to hear the arpeggiation so characteristic of the lute, sound so authentic on the keyboard! The work has an unusual three-part structure, and is thought to date from Bach's early Weimar period, roughly 1708-1712. The outer movements are perhaps reminiscent of the three-part Sinfonias.

The **Suite in E minor** BWV996 is actually inscribed by the copyist "aufs Lauten Werck" and so belongs to a small number of Bach's keyboard works that were actually intended for the particular tonal characteristics of this instrument. Bach is known to have owned two such lute-harpsichords, although no trace of them remains. The Suite, completed before 1717, has a highly improvisatory character, particularly in the opening flourishes of the first movement. The repetitions of each section of the dance movements (the "*double*" in French parlance) encourages the performer to add some additional graceful ornamentation. The Bourrée has become especially well-known in a version for guitar. The movements are Passaggio-Presto-Allemande-Courante-Sarabande-Bourrée-Gigue.

The *cantabile* style of playing heard in these marvelous performances is directly inspired by the instrument, a lute-harpsichord built for Mr. Rübsam in 2015 by the acclaimed American instrument-maker Keith Hill. It consists of one manual with one set of eight-foot gut-strings, and two sets of jacks which pluck the strings in two different places. One, positioned farther from the nut, produces a flutey sound, and the other, closer to the nut, produces a more nasal timbre. A second set of brass four foot strings gives a halo-effect by resonating with the registers that are played by the performer. It causes the rather dry sound of the gut strings to have a much more singing quality of tone.

© Dr. Jeffrey Campbell



**Wolfgang Rübsam**, upon winning the 1973 Grand Prix de Chartres in Interpretation, became professor of Church Music and Organ at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. During this 23-year tenure, he also served as university organist of the University of Chicago at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. Rübsam is internationally known through over a hundred highly acclaimed recordings of organ repertoire from the Baroque and Romantic periods including recent

Bach recordings on the lute-harpsichord. He gives frequent recitals and masterclasses in the United States and Europe and has served on the juries of the most prestigious international competitions.