



# J.S. BACH

## The English Suites

Alexandra Papastefanou



## CD1

### English Suite No. 1 in A major, BWV 806

- [1] Prélude
- [2] Allemande
- [3] Courante I
- [4] Courante II and Double I
- [5] Double II
- [6] Sarabande
- [7] Bourrée I and Bourrée II
- [8] Gigue

### English Suite No. 2 in A minor, BWV 807

- [9] Prélude
- [10] Allemande
- [11] Courante
- [12] Sarabande
- [13] Bourrée I and Bourrée II
- [14] Gigue

[25:28]

[2:22]

[5:40]

[1:40]

[2:08]

[2:06]

[4:51]

[4:18]

[2:24]

[21:46]

[4:25]

[4:14]

[1:44]

[3:54]

[4:05]

[3:23]

### English Suite No. 3 in G minor, BWV 808

- [15] Prélude
- [16] Allemande
- [17] Courante
- [18] Sarabande
- [19] Gavotte I and Gavotte II
- [20] Gigue

**Total Timing:**

[19:05]

[3:11]

[4:30]

[2:12]

[3:40]

[2:45]

[2:47]

**[66:27]**

## CD2

### English Suite No. 4 in F major, BWV 809

- 1 Prélude
- 2 Allemande
- 3 Courante
- 4 Sarabande
- 5 Menuet I and Menuet II
- 6 Gigue

### English Suite No. 5 in E minor, BWV 810

- 7 Prélude
- 8 Allemande
- 9 Courante
- 10 Sarabande
- 11 Passepied I and Passepied II
- 12 Gigue

[21:28]

[4:45]

[4:30]

[1:38]

[3:32]

[3:41]

[3:21]

[20:45]

[4:53]

[4:29]

[2:18]

[3:30]

[2:38]

[2:57]

### English Suite No. 6 in D minor, BWV 811

- 13 Prélude
- 14 Allemande
- 15 Courante
- 16 Sarabande
- 17 Gavotte I and Gavotte II
- 18 Gigue

[27:22]

[8:13]

[4:55]

[2:35]

[3:56]

[4:14]

[3:29]

### Total Timing:

[69:44]

## Johann Sebastian BACH: The English Suites

Bach wrote both his *English Suites* and *French Suites* around the same time, somewhere between 1716 and 1723. While the great set of *Partitas*, BWV 825–830 were published, and probably written after this (1725–1731), both the *English* and *French Suites* were not published during Bach's lifetime. Indeed, it was not until 1830 that the complete score of the *English Suites* was published, with parts of it previously made available in 1805 in Leipzig. One reason for this may be the lack of a manuscript in Bach's hand. What has come down to us is a copy made by one of Bach's pupils, Johann Nathanael Bammler (1722–1784) and an early manuscript copy of the first suite made by Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748) probably written somewhere between 1714 and 1717. It is thought that Bach wrote this first suite, which in the Walther manuscript has various differences and lacks two of the movements, then later added the other five to make a set of six.

In his 1873 biography of Bach, German musicologist Philipp Spitta (1841–1894) claims that another of Bach's pupils, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber (1702–1775), copied four of the suites between 1724 and 1727 when Gerber was studying with Bach in Leipzig and performed them there in 1725 under the composer's direction. Much ink has been spilt over the title 'English' for these suites. The smaller *French Suites* were

thus titled for their style and size and thought to be specifically for the more intimate clavichord while the *English Suites*, and certainly the *Partitas*, were composed with the harpsichord in mind. There is nothing particularly 'English' about these larger scale suites, but the name first appears in Johann Nikolaus Forkel's book on Bach's life and works published in 1802, some 50 years after the composer's death. In preparation for his book, Forkel (1749–1818) received information from two of Bach's sons – Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philip Emanuel – writing in his book that they were known as *English Suites* because Bach composed them for an Englishman of rank.

'They all have great worth as works of art, but some single pieces among them, for example, the giges of the *Fifth* and *Sixth Suites*, are to be considered as perfect masterpieces of original harmony and melody.'

Who this Englishman may have been is unknown and various theories put forward are all based on circumstantial information with no concrete evidence. The Bammler manuscript has 'Fait pour les Anglois' in another hand written on the first suite, so this and Forkel's assertion is all we currently have concerning the title.

Another notion was put forward by Charles Sanford Terry



(1864–1936) and Karl Geiringer (1899–1989). They believed that it may have been that these suites were inspired by Bach's study of the *6 Harpsichord Suites* of Charles Dieupart (1676–1751), a French composer who worked in London at the time. Bach apparently copied out one of those six suites sometime between 1709 and 1714, and he used Dieupart's *Gigue in A major* as the model for the *Prélude* of the *English Suite No. 1*. The similarities are slight and only occur in the first four bars of the Dieupart work. It seems unlikely that a musician with the genius that Bach possessed would need to use a lesser composer's work for inspiration, with Dieupart being the epigone, rather than Bach himself.

Each of the *Suites* begins with a *Prélude*, the first of which is more extended in the earlier copy. However, these are not 'free' *préludes* – a form of extemporisation on provided harmony – but thoroughly composed and notated pieces. Terry thinks the *Préludes* 'a distinctly English form' based on Purcell, but Bach's are larger scale compositions. The first has a freestyle two bar introduction to establish the key while the *Préludes* to the other suites are often in the style of a concerto with contrasting *ripieno* sections as in the first movement of the *Italian Concerto*, BWV 971. All are rhythmically vigorous with a continuous forward propulsion and each is more extended than the previous *Prélude*. The last suite in D minor actually begins with a slower *Prélude* which sounds like an improvisation, with written out sustained harmony which is

then followed by a lively *allegro*, being the longest movement in the set of suites. So while the *French Suites* have no *prélude*, the *English Suites* all have *préludes* that increase in scale. When Bach came to write his *Partitas* for keyboard, the first movements were also *préludes*, but he gave them all different titles – *Prélude*, *Sinfonia*, *Fantasia*, *Overture*, *Preambulum* and *Toccata*.

Thereafter, the suites follow a regular pattern of movements – *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, a pair of dances and a *Gigue*. This is the structure Bach used for the *French Suites* where none has a *prélude* and all begin with the *Allemande*. There are stylistic points such as the repeated note at the beginning of each *Allemande* and *Courante*, but these dance movements are not written for actual dancing. The pair of dances (*Bourrées*, *Gavottes*, *Menuets* and *Passepieds*) are in the minor and major key of the respective suite (Nos. 2, 3, 5 & 6) and the major and relative minor of the *Suite No. 4 in F major*. However, as another indication of its earlier composition, the first suite has a second *Courante*, which is then followed by two 'doubles'. These are variants on the *Courante*, similar in outline of melody, retaining the original harmony, yet really a written out embellishment of the movement. The two suites that are heard most often in performance are the A minor and G minor, Nos. 2 and 3. In Bach's day performers would have known how to use embellishment to provide variety to a repeated section.



5<sup>me</sup> Vite avec Prelude.

Prelude

The musical score is written on ten staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The music is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The first staff is labeled 'Prelude'. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.



For the *Sarabandes* of these two suites and perhaps for those who were not capable of embellishment in an artistic fashion, Bach wrote out (or perhaps only the copyist did) 'Les Agréments de la même Sarabande'. For the A minor, only the treble staff appears in the score, but the G minor has a complete realisation of what is expected from the performer.

As Forkel says, the *Gigues* of the *Suites Nos. 5 and 6* stand out; the chromatic harmony of *No. 5* being notable. The *Préludes*

are also all works of great interest and equal in quality to the respective movements of the *Partitas* and it is a wonder that these *English Suites* are not more popular with pianists. While the A minor and G minor suites were played by Ivo Pogorelich and the A minor by Martha Argerich, few front rank pianists have played any of the other suites. Even the great Bach player Tatiana Nikolayeva only recorded two of the *Suites*, the lesser played A major and F major.

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## Alexandra Papastefanou

Born into a musical family, Alexandra Papastefanou graduated from Athens Conservatoire, where she studied piano under Alikí Vatikioti. She continued her studies with Olga Zhukova at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, with Peter Solymos, at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest and, on a scholarship from the Alexander Onassis Foundation, at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, with György Sebók. She has also taken lessons from Alfred Brendel who praised her playing as well as her edition of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (Ph. Nakas Music Publications).

Papastefanou was a finalist at the 1985 Clara Haskil Competition in Switzerland and was awarded the Liebstoekl and Fazioli Prizes at the 1986 International Geneva Competition, as well as the Spyros Motsenigos Prize from the Academy of Athens in 1988.

Whilst pursuing her piano studies, Papastefanou took up music theory and composition, first with I. A. Papaioannou, and then, in the United States, with Frederic Fox.

Along with her activity as a performer, Papastefanou has pursued her in-depth study of J.S. Bach's music. Her book *J.S. Bach, the musician of the Infinite*, on the aesthetics and performance of Bach's music was published in Greek in February 2022 (Papagrigoriou-Nakas publications). Her latest book, *Short Letters to Young Musicians* (Papagrigoriou-Nakas publications), published in January 2024, is an approach to

musical performance addressed to anyone with a very keen interest in music.

She has performed all of Bach's keyboard works and, in a series of recitals, has presented his complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*, *Goldberg Variations*, *The Art of Fugue*, and *The Musical Offering* as well as his keyboard concertos. She has also performed the works of Robert Schumann.

In 2018, Papastefanou recorded J.S. Bach's complete *Well-Tempered Clavier* for FHR [FHR65] to much critical acclaim. She was awarded the 'Best Recording of 2018' for the album by The Union of Greek Theatre and Music Critics. Her 2019 release of J.S. Bach's *French Suites*, also for FHR [FHR 70], is ranked by international critics among the best recordings. In 2020 she recorded the complete piano works of Schumann written in 1839, his 'Year of Piano' [FHR112] and in July 2021 FHR released her recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* [FHR110], followed in 2023 by *Tears of Babylon*, her piano transcriptions on several Bach' Cantatas and organ works.

Papastefanou's diverse repertoire extends from composers of the baroque era to more recent composers such as George Crumb, György Ligeti, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Toru Takemitsu. She has also performed and recorded the piano works of major Greek composers Dimitris Mitropoulos, Nikos Skalkottas, George Koumendakis, I.A. Papaioannou and Vangelis Katsoulis. Her music career extends to





lecture-recitals, featuring innovative thematic cycles. Papastefanou has appeared, always to enthusiastic acclaim, with symphony orchestras, in solo recitals and with chamber music groups across Europe, notably Germany, France, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain, the Czech Republic, Russia, Finland, Hungary, the United States and Canada.

Papastefanou has also recently released an album of her own compositions called *Pasiphae*, a collection of songs on lyrics of the Greek surrealist poet Miltos Sachtouris (Polyphoniki Records). Her composition cycle *12 Minerals* for solo piano was released digitally by Subways Music.

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Manuscripts:

Page 7 manuscript: *English Suite No. 5, BWV 810: Prélude*,

copy made by Bernhard Christian Kayser (1705–1758) © bpk / Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

Page 5: J.S. Bach holding his *Riddle Canon, BWV 1076*, portrait by **Elias Gottlob Haussmann**, 1746

Special thanks to the artistic director of the Greek National Opera, composer  
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