



J. S. Bach
Partitas Nos. 1, 5 & 6

NILS ANDERS MORTENSEN
— PIANO

Bach composed ten partitas – three for solo violin, one for solo flute and six for keyboard. As the term partita may mean, to quote from the Oxford Composer Companion to Bach, “a suite of dances or a set of variations” – it is no more precise than many other musical terms. If there is no obvious difference between the partita and the suite, there seems to be no justification for two separate terms. In the sixteenth century partita indicated one of a sequence of variations, but this meaning evolved, coming to signify a collection of movements and later – by the time of Bach’s keyboard partitas – a suite of dances.

Bach’s six partitas for keyboard, BWV 825-830, were published individually beginning in 1726, then, in 1731, as a group entitled *Clavier-Übung 1* (Übung may be translated as practice or exercise). Among what may be described as Bach’s various sets of dance-suites – also including the English Suites and the French Suites – the partitas are the most technically demanding. Johann Kuhnau, Bach’s predecessor as cantor of St. Thomas’s Church in Leipzig, had published a collection of partitas under the title *Clavier-Übung* – two volumes (1689 and 1692), each containing seven works. These two collections by Kuhnau, together with two other volumes which he published during his time at Leipzig, proved to be an important influence on German keyboard music. Bach’s keyboard partitas in general mark a further advance on his French Suites – even more adventurous in terms of new handling of the dance-forms, more

favouring of galant melody-with-harmony rather than imitative counterpoint, and new types of texture. With regard to the dance-movements in particular, Bach shows remarkable creative freedom and diversity while departing from the traditional models.

Bach’s **Partita No 1 in B flat major** begins with a Praeludium of gentle, elegant character, not at all virtuosic in the manner of the Toccata which opens the Sixth Partita or as sparkling as the opening Fantasia (a 2-part invention) of Partita No 3. The melodic line of the first two bars is gradually expanded, rising to the upper octave B flat. The left hand takes up the theme in bar 4 – suggesting fugal treatment – and continues to play an equal role throughout. At the end Bach harmonises this theme more fully, concluding with octave doubling in the left hand. Such doubling in the bass, very rarely found in Bach’s previous keyboard works, exemplifies his bolder, more imaginative approach in these partitas. The buoyant Allemande has the character of a moto perpetuo, with an unbroken chain of semiquavers, based on arpeggios, throughout. Joyful and infectiously dance-like, the Courante (here given its Italian title, corrente) is written in a skipping 9/8 and has a two-part texture almost throughout. About half-way through the second section (bar 43), the repeated leaps of a seventh in the bass, D – C sharp, are ungainly enough for scholar David Schulenberg to suggest that Bach was being “deliberately humorous”. In the following Sarabande, dignified and serene,

Bach writes out the characteristic ornamentation of the melody line. Because the two minuets are remarkably simple, it has been suggested that they were composed separately from the rest of the partita – very probably as part of an earlier collection of pieces for beginners.

The brilliant Gigue is the only one of Bach’s many examples of this dance-form to feature hand-crossing in every bar. The striking virtuosity required imparts an extrovert, “showy” character uncommon within the context of Bach’s keyboard music.

Partita No 5 in G major begins with one of Bach’s most genial preludes, here entitled praeambulum, though the term fantasia would equally suit its improvisatory character. Based on downward scale-figures, the opening idea, which might readily mislead us into thinking of the Classical period, is followed by three bars of upward scales then arpeggio-based figuration. Ending with a longer downward scale passage, this wittily playful movement represents the less commonly acknowledged aspects of Bach’s multi-faceted musical persona – the light-hearted and charming. The Allemande has some elements in common with the parallel movement in Bach’s Fourth English Suite, such as the chains of triplets. Here Bach inverts his material, elegant and lyrical, in the second section. The essentially light, buoyant character of these first two movements is continued in the Corrente.

Again the Sarabande, including many written-out embellishments, has unusual characteristics – delicacy and airy grace, and an untypically light texture. The effect is a little reminiscent of some of the slower dances in Rameau’s operas. For the following movement Bach uses the title Tempo di Menuetto, rather than simply Menuetto. The implication, supported by the grouping of notes within each bar, is that this is far from the traditional minuet. The 6/8 feeling is contradicted only in the 3/4 phrase-endings. Towards the end Bach combines the 6/8 in the right hand with a 3-crotchet rhythm in the bass. Passepied is a term indicating a movement similar to the minuet but faster and more playful. The example included here is one of only seven in all of Bach’s output. The partita ends with a gigue in the form of a double fugue, the second section beginning with a new subject which starts with the sixth, seventh and eighth notes of the opening theme, now rhythmically displaced.

Partita No 6 in E minor begins with a Toccata, one of the longest movements in all six partitas and certainly the grandest. To compare this with the Praeludium of the First Partita, taking just one example, is to realise the vast expressive range which Bach commands within these six works. Even within a single partita there are often widely contrasting movements. This opening Toccata of what is the most magnificent and profound work in the set comprises a prelude, an extended fugue and a postlude. Both the opening phrase and the fugue subject include the characteristic

sighing figure – a descending semitone or tone – commonly used in Baroque music. In the opening prelude the theme of the majestic initial bars freely alternates with passage-work in either rapid swirling figures or more measured semiquavers. Following the fugue for three voices, the opening music returns. The Allemande – rather akin to the aria “Komm, süßes Kreuz” from the *St. Matthew Passion* – is regularly characterised by chains of dotted rhythm, but nevertheless Bach creates elaborate rhythmic variety overall. Each section ends with an arpeggio spanning three octaves ascending and descending, strangely reflective yet casual.

The Corrente, at first strongly syncopated then subsequently driven by brilliant figuration, is structured in rudimentary sonata form. This is by no means an isolated example in Bach’s music generally – including, more specifically, some movements in his keyboard works. It is Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel who is regarded as one of the most progressive composers in anticipating the Classical style, and especially what we now call sonata form. However, both Bach senior and Domenico Scarlatti (in his hundreds of keyboard sonatas) had already employed, in its simplest construction, what would become a widespread and tremendously influential form, a natural development from binary form.

The following Air, faster and lighter than many movements of this type, begins with the rhythmic character of a gavotte. In the second section there is again syncopation, but the most interesting feature is the way the descending bass line of bars 1 and 2 (sometimes varied) permeates much of what follows. The profound Sarabande (again recognisably a sonata-form structure) is among Bach’s most elaborately embellished examples, increasingly so in the second section. Rhythmically the Gavotte suggests a 12/8 gigue. Bach’s audacious freedom in his approach to standard dance-forms may be compared to Beethoven’s similar “law-unto-himself” treatment of the traditional sonata-form structure in his symphonies, quartets and sonatas. The Gigue is uniquely severe and uncompromising among Bach’s many examples of this dance-form. It is in the form of a fugue, its angular theme inverted for the second half. The recurrence of the interval of a seventh contributes to the tough, uningratiating character of this gigue, a strangely forbidding conclusion to what is surely the most extraordinary of Bach’s keyboard suites.

– Philip Borg-Wheeler

Nils Anders Mortensen – *piano*

Nils Anders Mortensen was born in Flekkefjord in 1971. He began playing piano at age three, and in 1986 he won the Norwegian Young Pianist Competition. He studied at the Norwegian Academy of Music, École Normale in Paris, and Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hannover with Einar Steen-Nøkleberg. Other important teachers have been Tatjana Nikolajeva and Hans Leygraf.

Mortensen was the recipient of the prestigious Concerts Norway 'Debutant of the Year' award in 1996. He has won international prizes and grants. In 1998 he won the Mozarteum Prize in Salzburg. In 2004 Mortensen received the Robert Levin Memorial Prize.

Mortensen has appeared as soloist with Norway's leading orchestras. He recorded piano concertos of Geirr Tveitt with Stavanger Symphony Orchestra. His first solo album *Im Freien* (LWC1032), featuring music of Debussy, Grieg, and Bartok, was released in 2012 to glowing reviews. Mortensen has also released eleven recordings with mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland on the LAWO Classics label: *Früh* (LWC1033), *Sæle jolekveld* (LWC1040), *Grieg* (LWC1059), *Young Elling* (LWC1072), *The New Song* (LWC1097), *Whispering Mozart* (LWC1111), *Songs: Kielland/Dørums-*

gaard (LWC1145), *Einsamkeit – Songs by Mahler* (LWC1157) *Eivind Groven Songs* (LWC1178), *Schumann Lieder* (LWC1197) with baritone Johannes Weisser, and *Så kort ein sommar menneska har – Songs by Gisle Kverndokk* (LWC1220). In 2015 he released the solo recording *In finstrer Mitternacht* (LWC1084), featuring music of Brahms, and *Tundra* (LWC1092), a recording of solely Russian music, with double-bassist Knut Erik Sundquist. In 2016 he released *Schumann: Violin Sonatas Op. 105 & Op. 121* (LWC1110) with violinist Arvid Engegård. In 2019 he released his third solo recording on the LAWO Classics label, *Bach: Ouverture nach Französischer Art, BWV 831 / Sarabande con Partite, BWV 990 / Englische Suite Nr. 6 d-Moll, BWV 811* (LWC1174), and in 2020 he released *Schumann: Piano Quintet, Op. 44 / Piano Quartet, Op. 47* (LWC1189) with the Engegård Quartet.



Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685–1750)

Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830

1	I.	Toccata	08:31
2	II.	Allemande	03:58
3	III.	Corrente	04:16
4	IV.	Air	01:42
5	V.	Sarabande	06:35
6	VI.	Tempo di Gavotta	02:09
7	VII.	Gigue	06:23

Partita No. 5 in G major, BWV 829

8	I.	Preambulum	02:05
9	II.	Allemande	05:16
10	III.	Corrente	01:50
11	IV.	Sarabande	04:19
12	V.	Tempo di Minuetto	01:36
13	VI.	Passepied	01:48
14	VII.	Gigue	04:25

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

15	I.	Prelude	02:27
16	II.	Allemande	03:56
17	III.	Courante	02:51
18	IV.	Sarabande	05:07
19	V.	Menuett I	01:17
20	VI.	Menuett II	01:23
21	VII.	Gigue	02:29

RECORDED IN SOFIENBERG CHURCH, OSLO,
31 NOVEMBER AND 1 DECEMBER 2021

PRODUCER: **VEGARD LANDAAS**

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ARTIST PHOTO: **DÁNIL RØKKE**

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