

Program notes by Andrew Willis

This recital is played on a replica of an early eighteenth-century piano in the tradition of Bartolomeo Cristofori, the inventor of the first successful hammered action. Made by David Sutherland of Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2005, it is very similar to pianos with which Johann Sebastian Bach was familiar from the 1730s onward. The unfortunate skepticism that used to prevent scholars and performers from investigating such instruments has recently—happily!—begun to yield to an appreciation of their lively expression and charm in the performance of music by Bach and other early 18<sup>th</sup>-century masters.

### **Partita in A minor, BWV 827**

Mattheson describes the key of A minor as honorable and calm, and Rousseau as serious. Whatever Bach may have thought of these notions, much—though not all—of this *partita* is imbued with a certain melancholy that is consistent with them.

#### *Fantasia*

In later eras the term “*fantasia*” came to imply freedom from constraints of form, but Bach’s conception seems more in keeping with the preface he wrote for his inventions and sinfonias, in which he links the notion of a clear, *cantabile* style of playing with that of discovering good ideas and developing them well. This *fantasia* precisely fits that agenda. Lodged within an unwavering texture of two dialoguing voices, the fantasy element resides in the mental adroitness with which Bach perceives and manages the options available at any given moment.

#### *Allemande*

Bach opens this *allemande* with a provocation. By placing the preparatory upbeat on a quarter note, he risks tricking the listener into hearing it as a strong downbeat, a misdirection the performer must take pains to avoid. The rhythmic texture substitutes for the usual flowing motion of the *allemande* a dactylic pattern of a sixteenth and two thirty-second notes, imparting an unusual restlessness.

#### *Corrente*

Scalar runs and dotted rhythms animate this brilliant, alert episode.

#### *Sarabande*

One can imagine Bach musing, “What might be done with a *sarabande* that’s never been done before?” His radical answer: transform the stateliest, heaviest member of the suite into a graceful, *galant* one. He achieves this alchemy with light three-voiced textures, abundant trills and mordents, euphonious melodic thirds and sixths, sensitive “sighs,” an upbeat-based rhythm that shifts weight *away* from the second beat, and garlands of triplets.

#### *Burlesca*

Indulging a penchant for novelty, Bach “invents” a movement type whose title telegraphs satiric intent. Lurking not far below the surface is a polonaise.

### *Scherzo*

Bach's antic humor continues in this "jest." What's the joke? Simply that the grossly overweighted chords easily fool the listener into mistaking the weak beats for strong ones and vice versa.

### *Gigue*

As if to compensate for the frivolities of the previous movements, Bach settles down to complete the first set of three Partitas with a serious effort, marking it as conclusive with the inscription "*Il Fine.*" His customary fugal treatment of the *gigue* appears for the first time in the *Partitas*, but he experienced indecision about how best to invert the subject in the second half, ultimately transmitting two authentic versions. The stricter inversion heard in this performance follows the text of the engraved score in the Library of Congress.



Customary text of the second-half *gigue* subject followed by the variant in the Library of Congress exemplar

## **Partita in G major, BWV 829**

An unpretentious playfulness infuses this Partita, less imposing than the C minor but more elaborate than the B flat major.

### *Præambulum*

Bach ushers us into his G-major world with a profusion of scales, chords, and arpeggios. Tactile and aural pleasure abounds throughout the range of the instrument. We land firmly at the bottom of the keyboard (on a low G octave), a destination that will recur three times in this partita.

### *Allemande*

Ever alert to ways of refreshing received forms, Bach investigates how an allemande cast in triplets might work, concocting a hybrid that melds gigue liveliness with allemande suavity.

### *Corrente*

Suggesting a hyperactive minuet, the Corrente scampers about in every register. After the double bar the left hand assumes the quick notes, freeing the right to sketch out an independent line.

### *Sarabande*

*Galant* idioms abound here, lifted by the dotted rhythm into a refined elegance. Many notes are “graced” with delicately applied ornaments, and subtle rhythmic groupings lend a pleasing sophistication to the phrasing.

#### *Tempo di Minuetta*

Bach devises a clever puzzle, minimizing the density while complicating the rhythm. During most of this piece one hears only one note at a time, but they are distributed in such a way – one right-hand note for every two in the left hand – that the three-beat pattern of the minuet is disguised as two triplets. The unwary listener who falls into this trap will be brought up short at every cadence, each of which reconfirms an unequivocal 3/4 pulse – the “tempo di minuetta.”

#### *Passepied*

This sole *passepied* in the partitas deploys a measure-to-measure phrase structure of 3 : 3 : 2 that is uniquely its own.

#### *Gigue*

By casting his *gigue* subject in a varied rhythm, Bach invests the closing dance with a lilting rather than a propulsive character. The second half introduces a new subject that combines contrapuntally with the first and is made devilishly tricky by the trill embedded in it.

### **Partita in E minor, BWV 830**

Bach reserves his most earnest and elevated manner for the culminating Partita, attesting his faith that dedicated service and religious devotion lead to profound joy.

#### *Toccata*

With the final introductory movement in the Partitas, Bach awakens devotional thoughts, turning to a genre associated with the organ, the quintessential liturgical instrument. At its heart lies a broad three-voiced fugue whose subject matter references lamentation (sigh figures) and the cross (interlaced intervallic designs). Opening and closing improvisations frame this solemn material, deploying chordal harmony, forceful dotted rhythms, and arched figures in a rare septuplet grouping that suggests transcendence of worldly limitations. At the close, this arched figure mounts through all twelve chromatic steps to achieve universal resolution.

#### *Allemanda*

The etymology of the term *allemanda* is enigmatic. Could it be an engraver’s error, or a veiled reference to Italian violin virtuosity (wouldn’t “tedesca” then be more apt)? The elaborate surface texture links a chain of falling thirds with the dactylic rhythm earlier introduced in the third Partita’s *allemande*. The cross is referenced again, in conjunction with an angular dotted rhythm.

#### *Corrente*

At 116 measures, this movement easily claims pride of place among Bach’s correntes. Despite constant opposition from syncopations, rests, and suspensions, its resolute bass

motion never flags. In each half, an area of prolonged dominant harmony gives the hand a chance to delight in pure digital agility.

### *Sarabande*

A sense of profound melancholy infuses this sarabande, which has passed beyond any semblance of dancing. The intrinsic rhythmic relationship traditional to a sarabande (a heavy downbeat paired with a prolonged and heavy second beat) remains intact but is shifted one beat earlier, aligning the most expressive harmonies with the strongest beats. This movement shares a close affinity with the initial Toccata's harmonies, dotted rhythms, and full chordal sonorities.

### *Air*

As with the *Aria* of the fourth *partita*, vocal style has little bearing on this purely instrumental piece, which belongs here despite its earlier placement in the score. Its salient characteristics are a propulsive drive and a predilection for leaps that suggests a tip of the hat to Scarlatti. Constantly running eighth notes divert attention from the gavotte-like rhythm.

### *Tempo di Gavotta*

As with the G-major *Tempo di Minuetta*, Bach stops just short of claiming that this piece actually *is* a gavotte. The requisite double upbeat rhythm is manifest, but so is a gigue-like triplet motion. The Bachian laboratory has begun to generate hybrids that resist classification.

### *Gigue*

Unsurprisingly, Bach reserves a heightened significance for the concluding movement of the entire series. For those who recognize the symbol of the cross that is triply embedded in the fugal subject, there can be no mistaking the underlying message. There is, in addition, a notational conundrum to ponder. The invariable defining feature of *gigue* rhythm is the triplet: whether in 12/8, 6/8, 9/16, or 4/4 with three eighths to the beat (all of which have appeared in preceding *Partitas*), the pulse of a *gigue* is always divisible into three parts. On this occasion, however, the scope of Bach's conception requires the largest canvas capable of containing four beats per measure. Were Bach to employ a triplet notation using eighth notes as the measuring unit, he would need to accommodate four sets of sextuplet eighth-notes in each measure, producing an unwieldy time signature of 24/8. Instead, he resorts to *duple* notation comprising two whole notes in the bar, a sort of magnified cut time, designating this unusual framework with the time signature of a circle crossed by a vertical line. At face value, a fugue proceeding in duple meter fails to meet the essential definition of *gigue* rhythm, its triplet motion. Many have taken the notation at face value and played "as written" in solid duple time, and as a matter of curiosity I experimented with this approach. The musical result was excellent, for the unshakable internal cohesion of Bach's music renders it effective under the most diverse conditions. However, as others have discovered, it is not particularly difficult to "tripletize" the text in playing. To the listener goes the decision: each half of the *gigue* is played "straight" the first time and "gigued" on the repeats. I like to imagine that this comparison encapsulates Bach's ultimate message: through the serious pursuit of virtue, the spirit can be freed to rejoice.