

J. S. Bach's English and French Suites with an emphasis on the Courante

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Introduction

Religious conflicts brought about the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), which devastated Germany. Reconstruction took at least one hundred years,¹ encompassing the entire lifetime of Bach. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which ended the war, gave each sovereign of the over 300 principalities, which make up modern Germany, the right to determine the religion of the area under his (yes, they were all male) control. This resulted in a cultural competition among the numerous sovereigns, and it also led to the importing of French culture and its imitation (recall that Louis XIV, the “Sun King,” reigned from 1643 to 1715). Bach encountered French language, music, dance, and theater throughout his formative years. In the cities where Bach lived, he would have heard frequent performances of minuets, gavottes, courantes, sarabandes, etc.²

Christoph Wolff has provided additional evidence for Bach's acquaintance with French music and French customs. In connection with the famous competition between J. S. Bach and Louis Marchand, scheduled to take place in Dresden in 1717, Wolff wrote that Bach would most likely have won the contest.³ Bach knew thoroughly the stylistic idioms of the French keyboard repertoire; and his own keyboard suites integrated genuine French elements from the very beginning. He consistently applied French terminology, but he also blended in Italian concerto elements (example: the prelude to BWV 808). Further, he incorporated polyphonic writing and fugal textures, especially for the concluding gavottes. As we know, this highly anticipated contest with Marchand never took place, since Marchand unexpectedly and secretly left Dresden.

J. S. Bach's life—a short version⁴

The towns where Johann Sebastian Bach lived and his key roles there can be summarized as follows. The context provided by this list is important, because Bach wrote the English and French suites fairly early in his career.

Eisenach: born March 21, 1685

Ohrdruf: 1695–1700, stayed with older brother

Lüneburg: 1700–1702, Choral Scholar

Arnstadt: 1703–1707, Organist (New Church)

Mühlhausen: 1707–1708, Organist and Town Musician (St. Blasius)

Weimar: 1708–1717, Ducal Court Organist and chamber musician, then Concertmaster

Cöthen: 1717–1723, Capellmeister for Prince Leopold

Leipzig: 1723–1750, Cantor and Director Musices (the dual title reflects the split in the town council of Leipzig)

Leipzig: died July 28, 1750

The keyboard music (other than organ music) by J. S. Bach

Bach wrote most of his music for keyboard (clavichord and harpsichord) during his years in Cöthen (1717–1723).⁵ He served the court as Capellmeister and director of chamber music (the highest

Figure 1. The Courante from French Suite #1, BWV 812



social standing during his entire career!). An elite group of professional musicians stood at his disposal,⁶ and his duties focused on secular chamber music. Since the court belonged to the reformed church, Bach's employer expected neither liturgical music nor organ music. It is clear from the prefaces that Bach wrote his keyboard works for didactic purposes—for members of his family and for his students. Additional evidence for this is that the *Clavierbüchlein* for Friedemann (1720) and the *Clavierbüchlein* for Anna Magdalena (1722) include material from the suites, but in rudimentary form and not in a systematic order.⁷

Howard Schott also noted that the *French Suites* (BWV 812–817) and the *English Suites* (BWV 806–811) belonged to the domestic musical repertoire of the Bach family.⁸ He continued with the assertion that the English suites are more Gallic in style and feeling than their French brethren. To mix things up a bit more, the preludes in the English suites are in Italian concerto-grosso style.⁹

On December 3, 1721, shortly after her wedding as Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach started a notebook of keyboard compositions.¹⁰ She recorded the title page and a few headings, but Bach himself wrote the musical entries. They included five short but sophisticated harpsichord suites, which would later become the *French Suites*, BWV 812–816.

The undisputed surviving harpsichord and clavichord works written during the Cöthen years are:¹¹

- Clavier Book for Wilhelm Friedemann*
- Clavier Book for Anna Magdalena*
- The Well-Tempered Clavier*
- 15 Inventions
- 15 Sinfonias.

Further evidence that Bach wrote the keyboard pieces listed above, as well as the French and English suites, as pedagogical pieces for his family and his students (and not to gain favor with particular members of the royalty) was provided by one of Bach's students, H. N. Gerber. Gerber studied with Bach in Leipzig and left an account of Bach as a keyboard teacher. According to Gerber, keyboard students started with the Inventions and the French and English suites, and they concluded with the 48 preludes and fugues in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.¹²

Current scholarship indicates that the *English Suites* were composed in Bach's Weimar years (1708–1717), and the *French Suites* were composed later, during his years in Cöthen.¹³

French Suites and English Suites

In the Baroque era, a suite consisted of a collection of dance tunes linked by the same key and often with some common thematic material. Concerning the origin of the suite, Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer believed that the dance suite was created by wandering musicians in the early 17th century who strung together music from different countries. Town pipers adopted this music and played sets with at least four movements: the allemande (German origin), courante (French origin), sarabande (Spanish origin), and gigue (English origin). Keyboard players adopted these dance suites from the pipers and developed the suites further.¹⁴

Bach brought the suite to its peak by giving each movement a musical identity and personality.¹⁵ Each of the six English suites and six French suites includes the expected allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. (Details on the courante are discussed later in this article.) Each English suite begins with a prelude, which is followed by an allemande. Each French suite begins with an allemande. Each suite, English and French, ends with a gigue. Some movements in some of the English suites have *doubles* written out—these are the ornamented versions that a Baroque performer would have played on the repeats.

It is interesting to observe how our knowledge about Bach's suites has increased in recent years by comparing what has been written about them at different times. The following comments, listed in chronological order, start with wild guesses and uncertainty and end with reasonable certainty about what we must currently regard as the truth.

(1) Writing in 1950, Alfred Kreutz, the editor of the *English Suites* for C. F. Peters Corporation, followed Forkel in asserting that the *English Suites* were written for a noble Englishman. But he also conceded that if the *English Suites* had been commissioned, we should be able to find some trace of this. He then mused that the *English Suites* might vaguely follow some musical work published in England, and he listed works by Purcell, Händel, and Dieupart as candidates.¹⁶

(2) Writing in 1954, Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer stated that both the English and the French suites were composed during Bach's years in Cöthen.¹⁷

(3) In 1957, Rudolf Steglich, in his preface to the Henle edition of the *English Suites*, wrote that Bach referred to these suites as “suites avec préludes.”¹⁸ The notation, “faites pour les Anglois,” first appeared in a copy of these suites belonging to Johann Christian Bach, the “London Bach.”¹⁹ In the same preface, Steglich stated that the *English Suites* are more in the style of the young Bach than the “more elegant” *French Suites*.²⁰ No autographs have survived.

(4) In 1972, the same Rudolf Steglich claimed in his preface to the Henle edition of the *French Suites* that these suites were written in Cöthen,²¹ and that the name “French Suites” was attached later. Many copies of the suites (but no autograph) have survived, attesting to

the importance of these suites in students' progress from the Inventions to the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

(5) Writing in 2000, Christoph Wolff stated as a fact that the “so-called” *English Suites* originated in Bach's later Weimar years,²² and that Bach himself used the perhaps more accurate name “suites avec préludes.” Wolff also asserts that the *French Suites* were written during Bach's years in Cöthen.²³

So by the 1970s, we appear to have figured out the background of Bach's English and French suites, in spite of Fuller's comment that discussion about why twelve of Bach's suites are called English and French suites will continue for as long as these suites themselves are discussed.²⁴

In total, Bach composed about 45 suites.²⁵ Neither the six *French Suites* nor the six *English Suites* were published during Bach's lifetime, but they were copied by hand by students and music lovers. Generally, only compositions likely to increase Bach's stature as a virtuoso were published²⁶ due to the high cost of publication. Handwritten copies of both the *French Suites* and the *English Suites* go back to Bach's early years in Leipzig.²⁷

Manfred Bukofzer devoted an entire chapter in his book, *Music in the Baroque Era*, to develop the thesis that Bach fused national styles.²⁸ He noted that the titles “English” suites and “French” suites are misleading (as well as not authentic);²⁹ the suites were no longer tied to dance music, and only a skeleton of rhythmic patterns had survived. They had become abstract art music. (By the way, Bukofzer claimed that both sets of suites belong to the Cöthen period, and that on stylistic grounds, the *English Suites* were composed first.³⁰)

Bukofzer stated that “in the French suites Italian, French, and German styles no longer stand side by side but wholly merge with Bach's personal style.”³¹ He also observed that the melodic character of the dances in the *French Suites* leans toward the Italian style.

A surprise about the courante

Anthony Newman's book on Bach and the Baroque includes a chapter entitled *Dance Music*, which incorporates a section on the courante.³² He explains that there are two types of courante in Baroque instrumental music: the corrente of Italian origin and the courante of French origin. The corrente is a quick dance in triple meter, usually 3/8; the courante is a slower dance, described as solemn and majestic, often in 3/2 meter. As a ballroom dance, the minuet replaced the courante by 1660.³³ But because of its “rhythmic grace and complexity,” the courante remained popular in instrumental music throughout the Baroque period. Newman considered the courante as the most subtle and complex member of the dance suite. He also pointed out that both the courante and the corrente are often labeled as courante. [See Figures 1 and 2.]

Philipp Spitta also commented on the two styles of courante. He counted Bach's *French Suites* and *English Suites*

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Figure 2. The Courante from French Suite #5, BWV 816. This courante has the characteristics of a corrente.



among Bach's most important works.³⁴ According to Spitta, the Italian form of the courante (i.e., the corrente) would normally have been replaced by the French form, except that it was too firmly settled to be driven out—"thus there existed side by side two utterly different types [of courante]. It would be well to distinguish once and for all between the corrente and the courante."³⁵

Webster's New World Dictionary of Music defines the courante as a stately and courtly old French dance in triple meter, of moderate tempo and with much melodic ornamentation.³⁶ The corrente is defined as an Italian variant of the French courante, with a faster tempo and less florid ornamentation.³⁷ Typically, a courante is notated in 3/2 meter with a tendency to hemiolas that combine 6/4 and 3/2 accent patterns. It also tends toward polyphony. In contrast, a corrente uses a fast triple meter (3/4 or 3/8) and is generally homophonic.³⁸

Four of Bach's *French Suites* include courantes (labeled as courantes). They are small masterpieces with more balance and a more obvious sense of continuity than the correntes in the suites for solo violin or solo cello.³⁹ Most have a slow harmonic movement, implying a fast tempo. All of Bach's *English Suites* include French courantes.⁴⁰ All of Bach's French courantes possess a time signature of 3/2, except for the one in BWV 814 (French Suite III), where the time signature is 6/4.⁴¹

In Grove, Little and Cusick state flatly that "many of Bach's 'courante' movements are actually correntes."⁴² The mix-up between courantes and correntes may have been caused by early editors. It is interesting that Bach did not use the courante as a basis for works outside the realm of suites: we know of no courante arias or choruses in his other compositions.⁴³

How much our knowledge of performance practices and the history of our music has increased in recent years is made evident in Frederick Dorian's section on the courante.⁴⁴ His book was published in 1942 and includes a preface by Eugene Ormandy. In the book, Dorian cited the conflicting descriptions for the courante. For example, Shakespeare called it "swift" and Quantz called it "pompous." But Dorian ascribed the different descriptions to the development of the courante over time. He gave no hint that there might have been two national styles (Italian and French) that co-existed. Instead, he merely attributed the two different time signatures for courantes/correntes to lighter or heavier accents and considered 80 beats per minute as an appropriate tempo for both types.

Performance considerations

Anthony Newman wrote⁴⁵ that with only notes on a page, it is almost impossible for a performer to "give the proper energy to the music." Performers who played under composers who insisted that their music should be played exactly as written report that in actuality the composers did not follow their own instructions (Newman cites Stravinsky as an example).

In the space of less than half a page and without a comment, Fritz Rothschild quoted conflicting sources, which stated that the courante should be played quickly and that it should be played "seriously" [Der Couranten-Tact ist der allerernsthafte [sic] den man finden kann].⁴⁶ In addition, he gave several musical examples where he marked the locations of the beats in the score⁴⁷ and clearly did not distinguish a corrente from a courante, indicating a slow tempo for the corrente!

Robert Donington⁴⁸ observed that while normally in suites the title of a

piece is a good indication of how the music should be played, this is not the case with the courante, since the Italian form (quick and "running" character) often is found with the French (solemn character) name.

Little concrete information is available about the tempo at which a courante should be played. All we know for sure is that some courantes are faster than others.⁴⁹ François Couperin wrote courantes with the tempo notations "noblement," "un peu plus viste," "un peu plus gayement;" Nicholas-Antoine Lebègue wrote a "courante grave" followed by a "courante gaye"—all in the French style.

In the courante, *notes inégales*, when appropriate, are on the 8th-note level.⁵⁰ According to Little and Jenne, *notes inégales* may be appropriate in Courante I in the *English Suite in A Major* (BWV 806).⁵¹ [However, I have never heard anyone perform a courante using *notes inégales*.]

Concerning performance of the courante, Rudolf Steglich, the editor of the Henle edition of the *French Suites*, paraphrased Mattheson (Bach's contemporary in Hamburg) and J. G. Walther (Bach's cousin and author of a musical encyclopedia). Steglich stated that the courante was originally a French ballroom dance "but now (under Italian influence) is a dance tune either in graceful, lightly flowing 3/4 time, or in an equally lifting yet 'extremely serious' rhythm. . . . There is always something pleasing and delightful about it." He did not mention the fact that the *French Suites* include both courantes and correntes, which require rather different interpretation!

Questions about ornamentation impact the interpretation of music. Unfortunately, there is no consistency in the surviving copies of the French and English suites, since at Bach's time the notation for ornaments was not systematized in detail.⁵²

Rudolf Steglich wrote about the courantes in the last three *English Suites* that they are to be played in flowing movements of three half-notes (not six quarter-notes), and that the change of rhythm to two-part time at the close of the sections is to be observed.⁵³

Alfred Kreutz, editor of the *English Suites* for Peters Verlag, wrote that he deliberately gave no indications of tempo or dynamics, since this could only be done subjectively due to a lack of sources.⁵⁴

It appears that the best we can do is to learn as much as we can about Bach's suites, and the courantes in particular, but then rely on our musical taste, the particular instrument, and the acoustics of the room to do justice to the compositions.

Conclusion

We can accept as a fact that Baroque movements labeled as *courante* fall into two different categories: the swift corrente of Italian origin with running figuration and slow harmonic motion, and the complex and slower courante of French origin. Exactly how each is performed depends on the knowledge and good taste of the performer.

Notes

- Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (expanded edition) (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.
- Ibid., 4.
- Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 182.
- Ibid., ix-x.
- Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era: from Monteverdi to Bach* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1947), 282.

sic with special emphasis on the music of J. S. Bach (New York: Pendragon Press, 1985), 142.

33. Ibid.

34. Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach: His work and influence on the music of Germany, 1685–1750* (translated from the German by Clara Bell and J. S. Fuller-Maitland) (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), Vol. II, 84.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Nicolas Slonimsky, *Webster's New World Dictionary of Music*, ed. Richard Kassel (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 1998), 106.

37. Ibid., 103.

38. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (fourth edition, ed. Don Michael Randel) (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 221.

39. Little and Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 140.

40. Ibid., 124.

41. Ibid., 123.

42. Meredith Ellis Little and Suzanne G. Cusick, "Courante," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (2nd ed. rev.) (London: Macmillan; New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 2001), Vol. 6, 604.

43. Little and Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 123.

44. Frederick Dorian, *The History of Music in Performance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1942), 116–117.

45. Newman, *Bach and the Baroque*, 203.

46. Fritz Rothschild, *Vergessene Tradition in der Musik* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1964), 170.

47. Ibid., 174.

48. Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), 103.

49. Little and Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 115.

50. Ibid., 121.

51. Ibid., 124.

52. Bach, *Englische Suiten 4–6*, Preface.

53. Ibid.

54. Bach, *Englische Suiten 1–3*, III.

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