JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685 - 1750)
FOUR DUETS, BWV 802-805
The Four Duets are curiously included in the third volume of Clavierübung, published by Bach himself in 1739. This is otherwise a collection of works for organ, and certainly their two voices (hence 'Duets') sound just as well on that instrument as on any other. They resemble the two-part Inventions, but are much more characteristic of Bach's later style. Written in ascending keys, the first in E minor opens with a scale but then tacks on an awkward figure that can be very clumsy to play. It reminds me of the A minor Prelude from Book II of The Well-Tempered Clavier, with its chromaticisms and invertible counterpoint. The second in F major starts out happily enough, but then proceeds to a middle section almost entirely written in canon and with quite a wild subject. The third in G major is perhaps the most immediately attractive with its lovely pastoral rhythm in 12/8 time. Finishing in the key of A minor, the fourth duet is rather rugged and angular, with two chromatic sequences bringing some startling harmonic progressions. To the usual dedication 'for music lovers to refresh their spirits' Bach adds 'and especially for connoisseurs of such work'. These four duets are definitely 'musicians' music' which, despite their beauty, makes them relatively obscure.

EIGHTEEN LITTLE PRELUDES
BWV 924-928, 930, 933-938, 939-943, 999
The eighteen Little Preludes are among the most valuable pieces ever written for beginners. They form a bridge between the easiest pieces of the Anna Magdalena Notebook (1725) and the Two-part Inventions, giving the player a wonderful introduction to voice imitation, pedal points, cadenza-like passages, and basic ornamentation. They cover many different moods, from the affirmative (all three preludes in C major), to the tender (the C minor minuet, BWV 924), the improvisatory (BWV 940), the joyful (BWV 927 and 937), and the very grand (BWV 928). The C minor prelude, BWV 999, was originally written for the lute. Many of them are far from easy (the A minor, BWV 942, for instance), and require quite complicated fingering (BWV 943). Even in these little pieces, big decisions have to be made concerning tempo, phrasing, articulation, dynamics, and timing, and this challenges the teacher as much as the student. Bach wrote them for his son Wilhelm Friedemann and other pupils, but never grouped them into any particular arrangement. Like the French Suites, many of them survive only in copies made by another hand. There are several traditional groupings of which I have chosen one, changing the order of the first six to make a more pleasing progression in performance. For me they recall fond childhood memories, and are as fascinating now as they were then.

FANTASIA AND FUGUE IN A MINOR, BWV 944
Here we really have a case of a free fantasia and a brilliant, virtuoso fugue. It appears in the so-called Andreas Bach Book – a collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century keyboard works by many composers, including J S Bach, put together by Bach's oldest brother and former keyboard teacher, Johann Christoph Bach. Andreas Bach (1713–1779) was the latter's youngest son. Many later sources only give the fugue without the fantasia. Mind you, it is hardly a fantasia, simply ten bars of chords marked 'arpeggio' with no indication given as to how they should be played. Bach used this notation in the first versions of the Preludes in C major (Book I) and C sharp major (Book II) of The Well-Tempered Clavier.
With both he ultimately did something quite magical. Taking the C sharp major Prelude as my inspiration (but without Bach's genius, for sure!), I have concocted a figuration that at least stays faithful to the harmonies he outlined. This is, however, only a brief warming-up for what is to come: the whirlwind, moto perpetuo fugue gives us no time to dally. It is long so it needs to move if we aren't to lose interest. Two pedal points help to build up the excitement, along with stabbing crotchets. The end comes so suddenly that we are almost taken aback; but that must have been what Bach wanted as the last chord is written as a crotchet followed by rests. No long drawn-out ending here.

**FRENCH OVERTURE IN B MINOR, BWV 831**

**ITALIAN CONCERTO IN F MAJOR, BWV 971**

It wasn't until 1731, the year he turned forty-six, that Johann Sebastian Bach published his Opus 1, the six Partitas for solo keyboard that make up the first volume of his Clavierübung (Keyboard Practice). It proved to be such a success (we know of at least two printings) that four years later a second volume appeared bearing the title page:

Second part of the Keyboard Practice, consisting of a Concerto after the Italian Taste and an Overture after the French Manner, for a harpsichord with two manuals. Composed for music lovers, to refresh their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, Capellmeister to His Highness the Prince of Saxe-Weissenfels and Directore Chori Musici Lipsiensis.

Published by Christoph Weigel, Junior.

By choosing to write both an Italian Concerto and a French Overture, Bach not only demonstrated his skill in translating to the keyboard two of the most popular orchestral genres of the time, but also showed how marvellously he had assimilated the prevalent national styles of composition and performance, yet always sounding unmistakably like himself. The musical battle between the French and Italians goes as far back as Charlemagne, who returned from Rome with a group of Italian musicians, much to the displeasure of their French colleagues. Quarrels were still raging when Italian musicians were brought to Paris to sing in operatic productions in the early 1700s. Mattheson, the German composer and theorist, wrote in 1713: ‘The Italians may well boast as they please of their voices and of their arts, but let them try to write a real French overture, and in its true character at that ... This means that French instrumental music has something particular to itself; although the Italians make the greatest efforts to excel in their sinfonias and in their concerts, which, truly enough, do not lack beauty, one has to prefer, however, a lively French overture.’ Not everybody stood up for the French. In 1753 Rousseau made the provocative remark: ‘The French have no music and cannot have any, but if they ever do, it will be all the worse for them.’ He also stated that ‘French singing is like an uninterrupted and unbearable barking’.

In the midst of these rivalries, German music was neglected. Le Cerf de la Viéville wrote that Germany ‘was not great in music, their compositions being as harsh and heavy as their genius’. Handel was no doubt the first German composer to be presented in France, but not until 1736. Bach was ignored. The latter faced criticism closer to home when Johann Adolf Scheibe wrote in his journal Der Critische Musicus (1737): ‘The great man would be the object of admiration if he possessed more pleasantness and made his compositions less turgid and sophisticated, more simple and natural in character.’ Bach was very hurt by this attack, and asked a friend, J A Birnbaum, professor of rhetoric at the University in Leipzig, to reply. The battle went on for months and ended in a stalemate. Yet in 1739 Scheibe published a review of Bach’s Italian Concerto that seemed to reverse his earlier decision: ‘... pre-eminent among works known through published prints is a clavier concerto of which the author is the famous Bach in Leipzig ... Since this piece is arranged in the best fashion for this kind of work, I believe that it will doubtless be familiar to all composers and experienced clavier players, as well as to amateurs of the clavier and music in general. Who is there who will not admit at once that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a welldesigned solo concerto? But at the present time we shall be able to name as yet very few or practically no concertos of such excellent qualities and such well-designed execution. It would take as great a master of music as Mr Bach, who has almost alone taken possession of the clavier.’

The opening bars of the Italian Concerto, which could not be more affirmative, are immediately repeated in the dominant key, and separated by rests that are too often cut short by the anxious student. In the solo passages, the right hand generally takes the role of soloist, with the left accompanying and occasionally adding some more melodic material. The jewel of the piece is the slow movement, marked Andante (so not too slow). A rhapsodical melody of great beauty soars freely over a highly organized and at times sequential bass which, except for the two cadential bars, constantly repeats the same rhythmic figure. This movement is perhaps the closest to its Italian models, although its florid embellishments are completely written out by Bach rather than left to the performer’s fancy. To conclude the work, Bach writes a high-spirited Presto, combining all his brilliance at the keyboard with a sense of fun. In the episodes the melodic material jumps from one hand to the other, allowing no let-up whatsoever. Pianists especially tend to let this movement run away completely, forgetting that even in a Presto Bach is agile enough to dance!

The one area in which French supremacy went undisputed was the dance. Its ideals of order, balance, grace, discipline, the beauty of body and spirit combined, and a certain majesty were mirrored in the music of Lully and Couperin. French court dancing was very popular in Germany in Bach’s time, and necessary for anyone moving in aristocratic circles. The young Bach no doubt had his first experience with French music and dance when he attended St Michael’s School in Lüneburg (1700–2). Adjoining his school was...
a residential academy for young noblemen, the Ritter-Academie ("Knight’s Academy") where French language, etiquette and dancing were taught as part of the curriculum. The dancing master, Thomas de la Selle, was also employed by the Duke of Celle who had a secondary residence in Lüneburg. The latter was well-known for his orchestra consisting mainly of French musicians who no doubt performed frequently in the castle. Bach made sure he was able to hear them, and thus became acquainted with their compositions and manner of performance. He also got to know the organist of the largest church in Lüneburg, Georg Böhm, who introduced him to the music of Lebègue and Dieupart. If the Italians were first in singing, the French were ranked above them as instrumentalists. Quantz wrote: ‘Because they execute their pieces with such infinite neatness and clarity one is sure that, at least, they will not alter the composer’s ideas ... therefore it is advisable for all instrumentalists and especially for harpsichordists to begin their studies in the French manner.’

The French Overture, BWV 831 (or Partita in B minor as it is often called), exists in an earlier version in the key of C minor, written in the hand of Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena. The transposition down a semitone was no doubt to provide more dynamic contrast with the Italian Concerto in F major. The only other real difference between the two versions is in the opening movement, also marked Ouverture. In the later version, Bach is much more precise in his notation of the dotted rhythms and ‘tirades’ (upbeat flourishes) that open the piece, shortening them in accordance with the performance practices of the time. These jerky rhythms (‘saccadé’ was the word used in French) give the French Overture its essential character of grandeur and pomposity. As was customary, there is a second section in a faster tempo which is fugal in nature and especially for harpsichordists to begin their studies in the French manner.

The core of the suite is occupied by a beautiful Sarabande. This dance, besides being noted for its noble character, is also intense, passionate, and meant to disturb the tranquillity of the mind. A certain ‘nonchalance’ was required to dance it: impeccable carriage of the head and body, but at the same time being alert and ready to execute any movement. A description dating from 1671 gives us some idea of the effect it made: ‘Now and then he [the dancer] would express anger and spite with an impetuous and turbulent rhythmic unit; and then, evoking a sweeter passion by more moderate motions, he would sigh, swoon, let his eyes wander languidly; and certain sinuous movements of the arms and body, nonchalant, disjointed and passionate, made him appear so admirable and so charming that throughout this enchanting dance he won as many hearts as he attracted spectators.’

In this particular Sarabande, Bach clearly adopts the French tradition of accenting the second beat of the bar, making it the high point of the phrase. It is also very contrapuntal, with unusual dissonances and swift modulations. A perfect legato without the use of the pedal is needed to do it justice.

Bourrées are often played far too quickly. Although energetic and joyful (lustig), they still need to be danceable. While the first of another pair in this suite uses the characteristic two-note upbeat and syncopation in bar 4, the second is unorthodox in using three notes as an upbeat. Again the range is considerably lower than its partner. The French Gigue that follows is a perfect example of what it should be: lightly skipping, sprightly, with the constant use of the ‘sautillant’ figure. It should not be anxious or frenzied. The phrases can be clearly marked to make it more intelligible to the listener. Only towards the end does the left hand become more involved, rather than just accompanying, with extra ‘tirades’ adding to the excitement.

The work could end here, but it doesn’t. Instead Bach gives us his pièce de résistance, the Echo, to top it all off. Though obviously orchestral (we think of the famous Badinerie concluding the B minor Orchestral Suite), Bach makes dramatic use of the two keyboards by writing in echoes that require a rapid change of manual. On the piano, of course, this is a bit less dramatic, but the effect must still be there. The actual echoes do not always simply repeat what has gone before but often ornament it, adding that extra stroke of genius.

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