

Alice Baldwin's DM Harpsichord Recital #1

Johann Sebastian Bach

This [toccata](#) (BWV 916) and all of the [English Suites](#) (BWV 806-811) fall into the category of early keyboard works by Bach, both coming from the pre-Leipzig era. Neither work was published during Bach's lifetime (not unusual for works by JSB) and there is no extant manuscript in Bach's hand for either (with the [possible exception](#) of a copy of the toccata, labeled as "Partita," in the Fétis 2960 [MS II 4093] manuscript in the Brussels Royal Library); both works are known to us through copies made by others, which often differ greatly from each other. The date of composition is unknown for both, though based on various evidence the toccata is placed around 1714 and the English Suites, thought to be the earliest of Bach's collections of suites (the French Suites and the Partitas being the other sets), are placed ca. 1715.

The English Suites

The reason for the use of the word "English" in the title of this set of suites is unknown, though it is possible that they were written for an English dedicatee or that at some point there was an autograph copy with the words *fait pour les Anglais* ("made for the English") written on it. There is nothing particularly "English" about them and in fact they have more French features, especially (in addition to the French history of the dance suite itself) because they each begin with a prelude, though the preludes are all of a measured variety instead of being the unmeasured type frequently found in earlier French dance suites for both harpsichord and lute. (It should also be noted that, ironically, none of the so called "[French Suites](#)" by Bach contain preludes.) The [suite on my program](#) (BWV 810) is somewhat unusual among the English Suites in that not only is its Gigue written as a fugue (which *is* normal), but so too is its prelude, being actually a fugue in Da Capo form, the sole example of this combination in all of Bach's harpsichord music.

The Manualiter Toccatas

The toccatas (BWV 910-916), unlike the English Suites and many other of Bach's keyboard works, were not composed as a set nor later organized by Bach into one. In fact, no manuscript by any copyist contains more than three of them, and most are found individually in a variety of manuscripts.

They are also referred to as the “manualiter” toccatas (i.e., toccatas without pedal) to distinguish them from Bach’s toccatas written strictly for the organ. The [toccata on my program](#) (BWV 916) may be the latest composed, though all seven likely date from when Bach lived and worked in Weimar (1708-1717).

Jean-Philippe Rameau

The suite on my program is from Rameau’s third and final book of solo harpsichord pieces, the [Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin](#) (the first two books being his [Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin](#) [1706] and [Pièces de Clavessin](#) [1724]). The [original edition](#) of the *Nouvelles suites* was undated and the exact date of publication is unknown; the year 1728 had long been accepted, but that date has been called into question, with 1730 being proposed by Bruce Gustafson in *A Catalogue of French Harpsichord Music 1699-1780*, and, in the other direction, an earlier date of 1726 or 1727 being suggested due to Rameau’s place of residence as listed on the frontispiece. Regardless of the precise date, the *Nouvelles suites* did predate the use of one of the movements from the G Major suite – “Les Sauvages” – in Rameau’s 1735 opera, [Les Indes galantes](#). In an interesting twist in the history of this movement, “Les Sauvages” also exists in a second, slightly different, solo harpsichord version in Rameau’s own [transcription](#) for harpsichord of *Les Indes galantes* (1735/6).

Though the later keyboard works of Rameau still take on the form of the dance suite, his use of descriptive pieces rather than traditional dance movements increases. This suite is no exception, with all movements other than the two minuets bearing titles of description rather than of traditional dance types. These movements are as follows:

Les Tricotets – literally “The Knitting Needles “

L’Indifferante – just like it sounds, “The Indifferent”

Menuet – a standard French dance movement

La Poule – “The Hen”; supposedly meant to sound like a mother hen’s call for her chicks

2ème Menuet – the second in the pair of minuets; I have chosen to split them up in performance because of their order in the facsimile, but they were originally intended to be performed back to back (both before La Poule)

Les Triolets – “The Triplets”

Les Sauvages – “The Savages”; likely inspired by a 1725 performance at the Théâtre italien de Paris by two Native Americans from Louisiana (which was at that time a French colony)

L’Enharmonique – “The Enharmonic”; this title refers to the rather astonishing harmonic language of the piece rather than to anything extramusical

L’Egipienne – “The Egyptian”; this piece most likely refers to an actual person or performer, much like “Les Sauvages.” An interesting side note about this movement is its spelling with an “i” rather than with a “y” (i.e., “Egipienne” rather than “Egyptienne”). This is the spelling that appears in the original publication, which is why I have used it on my program, but it is not actually a word in French, neither now nor in the 18th century! It is most likely a simple spelling error – identical in errant nature to Rameau’s spelling of his opera *Pigmalion*. Rameau was evidently notoriously carelessness with spelling, so much so that one of the women he was courting made the remark that she was annoyed with the many spelling errors in his love letters to her!