



Johann Bernhard Bach: Orchestral Suites

aud 97.770

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Few musical dynasties of the baroque period were so many-branched as the Bachs. For about two centuries they took leading positions in Saxonia and Thuringia, mostly as organists or as Kapelmeister. Johann Sebastian and his sons are among the most famous members of that dynasty, and some representatives of the previous generation are also rather well-known, such as Johann Christoph and Johann Michael. The present disc includes four overtures or orchestral suites by Johann Bernhard Bach. He is one of the lesser-known members of the Bach family, and of the same generation as Johann Sebastian, his second cousin.

Johann Bernhard was born in Erfurt as the son of Johann Aegidius, who from 1682 onwards was director of the town music there, and also occupied the post of organist in two churches. One of his pupils was Johann Gottfried Walther. Johann Bernhard was also taught by his father, and may have been a pupil of Johann Pachelbel as well. His organ works show the latter's influence. Those are an important part of his rather small extant oeuvre. The four overtures recorded by the Thüringer Bach Collegium are his only instrumental compositions. They may date from the 1720s, and were written for the court orchestra of Duke Wilhelm of Sachsen-Eisenach. In this ensemble Johann Bernhard acted as keyboard player from 1703 until his death.

Three of the overtures have been preserved thanks to Johann Sebastian, who copied the parts for performances of the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig. The fourth overture (the one in E minor) has come down to us in a copy by a certain S. Hering, who belonged to the environment of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Johann Sebastian and Johann Bernhard were apparently in pretty close contact, as the Leipzig Thomaskantor was the godfather of Johann Bernhard's son Johann Ernst, who was later to become a pupil at the St Thomas School.

The overture was basically a French-inspired genre, modelled after the suites from operas by Jean-Baptiste Lully in Paris. The splendour of the French monarchy exerted a strong attraction on rulers across Germany. Some required their composers to write music in the French style; they were called 'Lullistes'. Georg Philipp Telemann also became acquainted with the French style, and when he worked at the court in Eisenach from 1708 to 1712, he composed many orchestral overtures. There can be little doubt that he influenced his colleague Johann Bernhard Bach. However, Telemann's overtures were not purely French. As the German conductor Reinhard Goebel once observed, French composers would not have recognized the overtures of the likes of Telemann and Bach as French. German composers mixed the French style with Italian influences, for instance by giving



particular instruments an obligato role in an entire suite or in some of its movements. Examples are the second overture by Johann Sebastian Bach (BWV 1067, with a solo part for the transverse flute) and Telemann's overtures with solo parts for recorder and for viola da gamba. Such an overture also appears in Johann Bernhard's oeuvre: the Overture No. 1 has an obligato part for the violin.

All four suites open with an overture in ABA form. It is followed by a sequence of dances: in addition to the traditional dance forms, such as allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue, Johann Bernhard included modern dances which were part of the galant idiom, such as rondeau, passepied and polonaise. Many of Telemann's overtures include character pieces. In Johann Bernhard's suites we also find a few. The third movement of the Overture No. 3 is called *Les plaisirs*, the penultimate movement from the Overture No. 4 bears the title *La joye*. The latter suite includes three movements called *caprice* as well as a *marche*.

In this recording there is something notable in the Suite No. 2. It ends with a movement called *La tempete*. This is not from Johann Bernhard's pen, but was added by Johann Sebastian for a performance in Leipzig. Originally it was the overture to the opera *Il Zelo di Leonato* by Agostino Steffani, first performed in Hanover in 1691. Whereas the four overtures by Johann Bernhard have been recorded before, the present recording is the first where this piece is included.

That brings us to the performance. Apparently the material copied by Johann Sebastian was the starting point for these performances. From that perspective the line-up raises questions. Michael Maul, in his liner-notes, mentions that Johann Sebastian "had duplicates made of the two violin parts for the D major and G minor suites - with his Collegium Musicum, he clearly performed these works using a relatively large ensemble." It is a little inconsistent that the performers decided to record these overtures with one instrument per part. Maul does not inform us, what is known about the size of the court orchestra in Eisenach. The overtures are scored for strings and basso continuo, but here woodwinds are added in some movements, playing *colla parte* with the strings. This may well be justified, considering the French orientation of these works, as in France oboes and bassoon often participated in such music without being specified. Here we hear not only oboes and bassoon, but also recorder and transverse flute, which is rather questionable. The participation of the winds seems also arbitrary.

Another issue is the performance of the opening overtures. Performers take different decisions with regard to the repeats. Some only repeat the first section once, resulting in an ABA texture, whereas others repeat it twice and also repeat the B section: ABABA. It seems rather odd that the performers here chose the former option in the first two suites, and the latter in the remaining two. I can't figure out any reason for this difference.

One should not conclude from these critical remarks that this recording is disappointing. Far from it. In some cases I found the tempo a bit too slow, but overall I have quite enjoyed these performances. When I first heard these suites, I was hooked, and they belong to my favourite orchestral pieces of the German Baroque. I heard them first in a recording by the Freiburger Barockorchester (Virgin Classics), which may still be available and is well worth having. To my surprise, the present recording includes a pair of menuets in the Overture No. 3 which are missing from the Virgin Classics recording. I have not found any explanation for that. Anyway, this and the addition of *La tempete* mentioned above makes this a worthwhile addition to the catalogue anyway. The playing is excellent and so is the recording, which has some intimacy without being too direct.

Johann Bernhard BACH (1676-1749)

Orchestral Suites

Overture No. 1 in g minor [21:44]

Overture No. 2 in G [17:25]

Overture No. 3 in e minor [21:10]

Overture No. 4 in D [21:35]

Thüringer Bach Collegium

rec. 2019, Georgenkirche, Eisenach, Germany

AUDITE 97.770 [82:22]

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Johan van Veen

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