



audite

BAOCH

ENGLISH SUITES

Jonathan Ferrucci

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 2 in A Minor, BWV 807

Prélude 4:23
 Allemande 4:07
 Courante 2:05
 Sarabande 3:58
 Bourrée I + II 4:20
 Gigue 3:41

Suite No. 1 in A Major, BWV 806

Prélude 2:21
 Allemande 4:03
 Courante I 1:57
 Courante II avec deux Double 6:37
 Sarabande 4:33
 Bourrée I + II 4:00
 Gigue 2:52

Suite No. 5 in E Minor, BWV 810

Prélude 4:51
 Allemande 4:15
 Courante 2:21
 Sarabande 3:27
 Passepied I en Rondeau 3:47
 Gigue 2:49

Suite No. 3 in G Minor, BWV 808

Prélude 3:22
 Allemande 3:57
 Courante 2:27
 Sarabande 4:11
 Gavotte I + II 3:31
 Gigue 2:55

Suite No. 4 in F Major, BWV 809

Prélude 4:44
 Allemande 4:23
 Courante 1:54
 Sarabande 4:17
 Menuet I + II 3:19
 Gigue 3:22

Suite No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 811

Prélude 7:30
 Allemande 4:26
 Courante 2:41
 Sarabande + Double 6:34
 Gavotte I + II 4:10
 Gigue 3:28

“A veritable universe” – Bach’s *English Suites*

In the very last movement of his *English Suites*, Johann Sebastian Bach returns once more to the Italian *giga* perfected by masters such as Arcangelo Corelli and Antonio Vivaldi. With its “straight” $12/16$ metre and whirling triplet figures, the Gigue of the D minor Suite emerges as a highly charged amalgam of rapid march and tarantella. Yet Bach goes a step further than his esteemed models: he conceives the movement as a three-part fugue, though without weaving the dense contrapuntal texture found in the Suites’ *préludes*. Instead, he propels his motifs forward through jagged single notes and chords into remote harmonic regions. Beneath this agitated music, with its restless trills, the very ground seems to shift – Jonathan Ferrucci even interprets it as a dance on the brink of the abyss: “This Gigue is really like the end of the world, it feels like some kind of apocalyptic warning to humankind.”

Ferrucci, of course, does not mistake the Baroque composer Bach for a Romantic such as Franz Liszt, who imbued his music with programmatic narratives and literary imagery, often venturing into diabolical or apocalyptic realms. Bach allowed the devil to appear, at best, in his church cantatas; in his instrumental music, by contrast, he was guided more by contemporary ideals of entertainment, pedagogy and Baroque principles of order. Yet time and again he succeeded in expanding even a traditional genre such as the suite through entirely new concepts of compositional diversity and emotional range.

Following his highly acclaimed recording of Bach’s *Toccatas* for harpsichord (aud. 97.826), Jonathan Ferrucci has now turned to the six *English Suites*, which open the succession of Bach’s great cycles for stringed keyboard instruments. “I love the idea of immersing yourself in a full cycle of works,” says the Italian-Australian pianist, “not only because Bach is addictive music to me. But I feel like the whole cycle gives me a deeper understanding of the music. Bach is like the universe, when you look from the most microscopic level to the most macroscopic level. So I wanted to appreciate on the larger scale. And there was something about the *English Suites* that is like this rhythmic energy, that is so captivating. I just felt like it made my body kind of want to dance with the music – yet at the same time there are many dark undercurrents within them.”

Rhythm and spirituality

Although no autograph manuscript survives and only several copies have come down to us, the *English Suites* were most probably composed during Bach’s years as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen (1717–1723). At the Reformed court in Köthen there was little demand for ambitious sacred vocal music, and Bach

therefore had ample opportunity to devote himself intensively to the architecture and compositional principles of instrumental music. It was here that the first part of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was written, alongside the solo works for violin and violoncello, the *Brandenburg Concertos*, and probably several solo concertos for violin and wind instruments. In all these works, a balance is maintained between awareness of tradition and a spirit of experiment – and in the *English Suites*, too, Bach summons the beneficent spirits of his French and Italian predecessors, only to reinterpret them anew from his own “Central German” perspective.

At the heart of the *Suites* are dances that were fashionable at the European courts of the time and which composers stylised and assembled into suites. Bach rigorously fixes the sequence of dance movements – which his predecessors had sometimes treated with greater freedom – into the standard order of Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue; only in the dances preceding the final Gigue (the so-called *galanteries*) does he alternate between Minuet, Passepied, Bourrée and Gavotte. A clear structural framework is thus established, from which the composer departs only occasionally: for instance, when in the First Suite he writes four Courantes – including two *Doubles* as differently ornamented variants – or provides alternative versions of the Sarabande.

In the refined contrapuntal lines of this art music, with its delicate harmonies and rich ornamentation, the courtly social dances remain only faintly discernible in the background. One may well ask whether, in music as highly sublimated as the Sarabandes of the *English Suites*, anything at all is still perceptible of their origins in physical, corporeal dance music. Jonathan Ferrucci sees here a distinctive quality of Bach’s style – one he seeks to uncover in his own playing: namely, the union of worldly and spiritual elements. “My intention from the beginning was to balance between these two aspects of the *English Suites*. The dances are by nature related to rhythm and to your body, so it’s a profane form. On the other side there is this sacred element, this very spiritual pilgrimage of the music. It was my intention to find some way where these two meet.”

Fait pour les Anglois?

The most astonishing synthesis of “profane” dance energy and “spiritual” compositional art is surely to be found in the *préludes* that Bach places before the dance movements. The First Suite – and probably the earliest – still opens with a brief warming-up piece in the manner of the *préludes* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. In the *préludes* that follow, however, Bach expands the scale considerably, interweaving his dance-like themes into extended fugues infused with elements of the Italian solo concerto. In the Third Suite, he even adopts directly the modern concerto movement type established by Antonio Vivaldi, in which full-textured “*tutti ritornellos*” alternate with elegantly worked solo episodes.

A special case, finally, is the monumental *prélude* to the Sixth Suite, which assumes almost the character of a two-part overture – though without the ceremonial dotted rhythms *à la française* in its opening section. For Jonathan Ferrucci, these *préludes* are “almost like a piece on its own. It has a very strong statement, where you can hear this rhythmic relentless drive. From beginning to end you have to sustain these long pieces with a rhythmic stamina. I said this is ‘Bach’s rave’: it’s dance music, but it keeps going.”

This magnificent music would probably never have become nearly as famous under the sober title *Suites avec Préludes*, found in some manuscript copies, as it did under the familiar designation *English Suites*. To this day, the title remains something of a mystery. Bach’s youngest son, Johann Christian, wrote the remark “Fait pour les Anglois” (“made for the English”) above the music, while the Franconian music scholar Johann Nikolaus Forkel – in his Bach biography, based largely on statements by Bach’s second eldest son, Carl Philipp Emanuel – notes that “the composer wrote them for an English nobleman”. Yet the identity of this supposed dedicatee cannot be established through either a dedication or any other surviving documents. The discussion therefore soon shifted towards possible stylistic models: at times parallels have been drawn with keyboard suites by the German-born, London-based George Frideric Handel, at others with thematic borrowings from the Frenchman Charles Dieupart, who likewise lived in London. Ultimately, however, there are scarcely any genuine stylistic connections to English keyboard music itself. The distinctive nature of the *English Suites* is therefore perhaps best understood as a particularly individual example of the *goût mêlé* – the “mixed taste” that unites French, Italian and German traditions.

It is well known that Bach used his keyboard cycles both for public performance and as pedagogical material for his pupils – employing not only the *Kielflügel* (the single- or double-manual harpsichord), but also the more delicately sounding clavichord. Jonathan Ferrucci nevertheless considers it unlikely that the six *English Suites*, with their total duration of around 140 minutes, were intended to be performed complete in a single sitting. “In Bach’s time, it would be very rare for someone to play a full suite from beginning to end for an audience, so this is quite a modern concept. I did play all six in a concert, and I think it’s a testament to Bach’s genius how well the audience was able to keep the focus throughout all six, because there is an arc. Each of these suites is in one key, and you can imagine that being a bit boring after a bit. And I think it’s amazing how much variety he finds through texture and through rhythm, counterpoint and melody.”

Michael Struck-Schloen
Translation: audite

A close-up, low-angle shot of pianist Jonathan Ferrucci. He is shown from the chest up, leaning over a piano. His face is in profile, looking down at his hands. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue light source from the left, creating a vertical beam of light and casting deep shadows. His hands are positioned on the piano keys, and the keys themselves are partially illuminated by the blue light.

Jonathan Ferrucci

“A revelation: transparent, poetic, full of life and colours.” (*Pizzicato*)

Italian-Australian pianist Jonathan Ferrucci is recognised for his luminous sound, imaginative interpretations, and profound affinity with the music of J. S. Bach. He appears internationally as a soloist and chamber musician in venues including Wigmore Hall, Barbican Hall and Kings Place (London), Carnegie Weill Hall (New York), Fazioli Concert Hall (Saclay), and major Italian theatres such as Sala dei Giganti (Padua), Teatro Comunale (Vicenza), and Villa Torlonia (Rome).

A prize winner at numerous competitions, Ferrucci was awarded Newcomer of the Year in 2025 by *BR Klassik* (Bayerischer Rundfunk) for his debut recording of Bach's *Toccatas*. He is a Kirkman Society Artist (2022/23), a Keyboard Trust Artist since 2019, and a prize winner of the International Bach Competition Leipzig (2018).

Recent seasons have included performances of the *Goldberg Variations* at Kings Place and the Wimbledon International Music Festival in London, appearances at the Brighton Festival and the Trasimeno Music Festival with the Orchestra da Camera di Perugia – both as soloist and alongside his mentor Angela Hewitt – and residencies at Yellow Barn (Vermont) and the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance (Canada), as well as a US East Coast tour.

Ferrucci made his Wigmore Hall debut in 2017, recorded live and released on CD to critical acclaim. His debut studio album, *J. S. Bach: The Toccatas*, was nominated for the Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik (German Record Critics' Award). Alongside performance, he pursues interdisciplinary work, including an audio-visual realisation of the *Goldberg Variations* with photographer Matthew Johnson, translating each variation into a distinct visual form.

Born in Florence, Ferrucci studied at the Conservatorio L. Cherubini and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. His artistic vision has been shaped by Giovanni Carmassi and Joan Havill, and deeply influenced by Angela Hewitt, his mentor since 2014, with further guidance from Robert Levin, Aldo Ciccolini, and Zhu Xiao-Mei.

Parallel to his musical life, Ferrucci is a dedicated Ashtanga Yoga practitioner since his early twenties. For him, yoga is both physical discipline and moving meditation, cultivating clarity, balance, and presence – qualities that inform his work at the piano. Alongside his performance career, he shares this experience through yoga workshops for musicians, exploring the relationship between breath, movement, awareness, and music making. He views music and yoga as parallel practices, united by focus, patience, and openness, and integrates yoga into his artistic process as a sustaining and grounding force.

A man with dark hair, wearing a black button-down shirt, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking upwards and to the right. The background is a white, textured brick wall. The lighting is soft, coming from the left, casting a gentle shadow on his face and the wall.

audite

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Figure in Yellow, 1937

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