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Episode 8: Bach's Circle

La Grande Bande

Michael Thomas Asmus, harpsichord

Friday 11 December 2020

Program

Suite No. 2 in D (c. 1700–1719?)

Georg Böhm (1661–1733)

- I. Overture
- II. Air
- III. Rigaudon & Trio
- IV. Rondeau
- V. Menuet
- VI. Chaconne

Harpsichord Sonata in A (1741)

Christoph Nichelmann (1717–1762)

- I. Allegro
- II. Larghetto
- III. Vivace

English Suite in A, BWV 806 (before 1720)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

- I. Prélude
- II. Allemande
- III. Courante I
- IV. Courante II avec deux doubles
- V. Sarabande
- VI. Bourée I & II
- VII. Gigue

Sonata in E, Wq 62/5 (c. 1744, pub. 1758/9)

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788)

- I. Allegro
- II. Andantino
- III. Vivace di molto

This performance was presented in partial fulfilment of the
Doctor of Musical Arts degree for Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York.

Program Notes

The vast amount of solo harpsichord repertoire written by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) forms an important part of keyboard repertoire. Like many composers of his age, both composing and performing were an expected part of their daily life. And most often, composers performed their own works before they were disseminated by them, their students, or publishers.

Like many of his day, Bach learned composition by copying the works of other composers, pieces written and owned by Georg Böhm (1661–1733), and those held by brother Christoph: works of Johann Jakob Froberger (1616–1667), Johan Caspar Kerll (1627–1693), Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706), and others.

Many composers, both past and present, have been influenced by Bach's compositions: from Mozart to Franz Liszt. This program focuses on composers who surrounded Bach—those who were influenced by him, and those who influenced him.

Georg Böhm

The organist Georg Böhm (1661–1733) has often been credited as teaching Johann Sebastian Bach while he was studying at St. Michael's School in Lüneburg. Although no written evidence of such a mentorship exists, save for C.P.E.'s reference to it for Johann Forkel's (1749–1818) biography of J.S., it would seem impossible that J.S. would have avoided Böhm tutelage.

Böhm was trained by with organists in Goldbach and Gotha who had trained with members of J.S. Bach's extended family. By 1693, Böhm moved to Hamburg. There he was influenced by the opera

composer Johann Sigismund Kusser (1660–1727), who had studied composition with Jean-Baptiste Lully, and by organist Johann Adam Reincken (1643–1722). In 1697, Böhm was unanimously chosen to fill the organist post at St. John's church in Lüneburg, which he held until his death.

In addition to works for organ, harpsichord, and choir, Böhm is credited with the development of the chorale partite: a series of variations on specified hymn tunes.

Suite No. 2 in D

Böhm's connection with Kusser is an undeniable component to the suite's development. No matter if the suite was a sketch for a large orchestral work, or a piece designed to teach students the French style, Böhm's nod and convincing use of the French style is clear.

The only extant manuscript of the *Suite* appears in an eighteenth-century collection compiled by various persons. The collection now resides in the German State library in Leipzig.

While Bach's and Böhm's suites are influenced by the French style, unlike the Bach suite, Böhm's suite contains theatrical dances. The choreography for court dances, like those performed at Concert III, was not as complicated or as intricate as theatrical dancing. Theatrical dances, created for professional dancers, were some of the most difficult dances known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The suite opens with an *ouverture* in the French style reminiscent of those written by Lully for use in his operatic works. Böhm then moves to a movement called *air*. The term "air" is French for

“song,” and this movement is similar in style to entrée dances used to introduce characters in French operas.

The *rigaudon* & *trio* bring back an energetic and dramatic character. This movement, in addition to the concluding chaconne, beg for a transcription for a full orchestra.

Böhm’s *rondeau* sandwiches two beautiful and lyrical sections between three iterations of the rather grand *rondeau* theme. The *rondeau*’s couplets are similar in character to the air.

The short and perky *menuet* features a very characteristic rhythm: that of the Poitou region of France. In contrast to other menuets, the menuet de Poitou has a distinct hemiola rhythm.

The final movement, *chaconne*, features a repeating bassline which continues throughout the movement. With each repetition of the bassline phrase—often in eight measure blocks—the writing for both hands gets progressively more virtuosic.

Christoph Nichelmann

Christoph Nichelmann (1717–1762) entered St. Thomas School in Leipzig in 1730 which was then under the direction of Johann Sebastian Bach. He studied keyboard and composition with Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784), J.S. Bach’s eldest son, and studied singing with J.S. Bach.

Bach scholar Joshua Rifkin has posited that Nichelmann was the first to sing J.S. Bach’s famous cantata *Jauchzet Gott in allen lande*, *BWV 51*, but other scholars tend to disagree with that assertion. Nichelmann left Leipzig in 1733 for Hamburg where he studied opera with Georg Philipp Telemann, Johann Mattheson, and others.

For several years he worked as a secretary and musician for various noble families. In 1739 he

moved to Berlin and in 1745 became a harpsichordist for Frederick the Great’s court musical establishment. Nichelmann once again encountered C.P.E. Bach, the other harpsichordist for Fredrick, whom he had known in Leipzig.

In 1747, Johann Sebastian and Wilhem Friedemann Bach went to Berlin to see Fredrick the Great. It is my sincere hope that C.E.P. and Nichelmann joined J.S. and W.F. in some sort of reunion event. In any case, it’s almost impossible to imagine that they did not run into each other at some point in Berlin.

Beginning sometime in 1755, Nichelmann and C.P.E. Bach began having a series of arguments which were expressed through the writings of each composer. Nichelmann criticized C.P.E.’s compositional style. In 1756 the argument had boiled over and Nichelmann left the court, probably in part because of this tension.

Nichelmann wrote several sonatas and concertos for harpsichord, along with chamber music and vocal music of varying ensembles.

Sonata in A

Nichelmann’s Sonata in A, in my opinion, can be considered an early member of the *empfindsamer Stil*—literally, sentimental or sensitive style. While Nichelmann’s Sonata is quite straight forward, and much less heart-on-the-sleeve as C.P.E.’s sonata, it is none the less an early example of this style.

The sonata exists in an autograph manuscript held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. The autograph of the “sonata per il cembalo” is signed by Nichelmann and dated “11 Nov. 1741.”

The first movement, *Allegro*, is jovial and light-

hearted. The quick scales, dotted rhythms, and an easy-going nature which open both halves of the movement create a balanced contrast with the more intimate, sentimental sections of each half. Switching between the keyboards allows these differences to be made clearer.

The second movement, *Larghetto*, is much more influenced by the *empfindsamer Stil*. Appoggiaturas, chromaticism, and a singing melody create a sense of melancholy—a striking difference from the first movement’s buoyancy.

The final movement, *Vivace di molto*, is even more exuberant than the first. Trills, leaps, and tremolo figures end the piece on a lively note.

Johann Sebastian Bach

The English Suites are comprised of a collection of six keyboard suites in the French manner with a prelude followed by a series of dances. For Bach, as you’ve encountered in Concert III: Lively Entertainments, French influences surrounded a great deal of his early life.

From French compositions owned by his mentor Georg Böhm, to a trip to hear the Duke of Celle’s largely French-musician court orchestra, to Bach’s own music library, French influences and compositional examples were abundant.

In his compositions, it is clear that these French influences are as pervasive as they are misunderstood in his larger keyboard works. Nevertheless, utilizing a French style while playing his pieces makes musicological and historical sense.

Why are the suites called “English” if they’re really French? Bach’s youngest son, Johan Christian, wrote “Fait pour les anglois (“Made for the Englishmen”) on an early manuscript. This reference is likely due to Bach’s inspiration for the

collection—Charles Dieupart. Dieupart was working in London at the time Bach copied Dieupart’s 1701 collection of six suites and began composing the so-called English suites.

English Suite in A

Many of Bach’s large-scale keyboard works, like the English Suites, can be dated to his Weimar period (1708–1717). Bach was hired to be the court organist and chamber musician. Among his duties were playing for the twice-weekly services and any chamber music activities.

However, between December 1712 and May 1714, the organ in the palace chapel underwent substantial repairs. Thus, his organ playing duties were unneeded for over 16 months. This break in the usual day-to-day work likely allowed him time to compose his English Suites, his *Orgelbüchlein*, and other notable pieces.

The English Suite in A is heavily influenced by the French style, and the suite itself contains many of the most notable French court dances. Of note, thought is the suite’s opening *prélude* which bears more resemblance to the Italian style than the French.

In composing some of the dances for the suite, Bach utilizes his own characteristic “over written” style which can easily hide the French qualities of his composition. The *Allemande*, for example, is full of moving inner voices which beautifully aid in carrying the melody. However, if one is not careful, the printed score can hamper the ability to bring out the Frenchness of the movement.

The *Courantes* are clearly French, with the first *courante* being even more so than the second. For the second *courante*, Bach includes two ornamented versions. The first ornamented version is played in alteration with the “plain”

version. The second ornamented version is played alone.

The Sarabande is a grand and evocative movement. It's large chords and sweeping gestures seem to be intended for a large orchestral ensemble.

The Bourées are the liveliest of the suite and were often the quickest of the courtly dances. Bach's setting of these dances is quite challenging because of the sparseness of voicing.

The Gigue Bach writes for this suite is quite difficult. Nevertheless, the gigue is still reminiscent of its rustic origins. Any Baroque-era rural resident would have surely jumped at the chance to have it for the music at their next gathering.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

Born at the end of J.S. Bach's Weimar period, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1717–1788) Johann Sebastian's second surviving son. C.P.E. received musical training from his father and began attending the St. Thomas School where his father worked in 1723. C.P.E. attended Leipzig University, to study law, and later moved on to the university in Frankfurt. His earliest compositions date from 1730.

While in Frankfurt C.P.E. taught keyboard and also played in a collegium musicum. He came into Frederick the Great's service as early as 1740, when Frederick succeeded to the throne. It is possible, however, the C.P.E. began working for Frederick, then Crown Prince, as early as 1738.

Sonata in E

The sonata, for unspecified keyboard instrument, was composed in 1744. The sonata was published in 1767/8 a collection compiled by Johann Ulrich

Haffner and printed in Nuremberg.

C.P.E.'s sonata is crawling with drastic shifts in mood and chromaticism, a hallmark feature of the *empfindsamer Stil*. Comparing Nichelmann's and C.P.E.'s sonatas, composed only a few years apart, one can easily see the stark differences between the two composer's approach: Nichelmann is much more subdued while C.P.E. can be a bit over-the-top.

In my performance of the sonata, I've tried to differentiate the sections which are marked forte and piano. In the first movement (allegro), for example, a slightly quicker tempo and a more separate articulation is used in the forte sections; a slightly slower, more legato articulation is used in the piano sections.

The middle movement is a bit more complicated in terms of its timbre differences. It begins with each hand playing on separate manuals: the melody on the lower manual ("back 8") and the accompaniment on the upper manual ("front 8") with the buff stop ("lute stop") on. In several instances throughout the movement, the buff stop is tuned off and the manuals are coupled together. This shift occurs for the two instances when CPE includes the fortissimo ("very loud") marking.

Program notes by MTA.

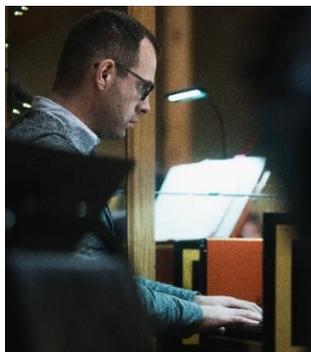
About La Grande Bande

With performances called “warm and sensitive” by the Minneapolis Star Tribune, La Grande Bande strives to present innovative, unique, and inspiring musical programs played on the instruments that premiere audiences might have heard. LGB is composed of musicians from across the United States and from around the world who are specialists in the field of Early Music—music written between c. 1600-1800—and who play on historical instruments and sing in an historical manner.

We aim to present “masterworks” alongside lesser-known compositions, illustrating the extensive musical production during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Education is crucial to our mission, be it through program notes, through directed-educational events, open rehearsal sessions, or another method. We see incredible value in resurrecting the music written by the great masters of our past; it's a historical, cultural, and musical lesson rolled into one.

To learn more about our musicians, or about our programming, visit www.lagrandebande.org/about.

About the Musicians



Harpichordist & Conductor, **Michael Thomas Asmus**, is currently studying at Stony Brook University for a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Harpsichord Performance with Arthur Haas. As a conductor, he has been praised as a “conscientious [conductor]” with “a natural talent” and “a bright future” by audiences and ensembles alike. He has been lauded as a “versatile” continuo player (CNVC.org) with “judicious, rhythmically supple harpsichord playing” (Star Tribune). He is consistently lauded by his colleagues as a great musical collaborator.

Since June 2011, Michael has acted as the Music and Artistic Director of La Grande Bande, a non-profit, period instrument orchestra and chorus he founded in the same year. La Grande Bande will produce its first full concert series for the 2019–2020 season.

Acknowledgements

The *season@HOME* would not be possible without the help and support of our volunteers, including Brian & Diana Asmus, Adam Asmus, and the musicians who helped with venue set-up and clean-up as we made these recordings. We also need to thank Big A Productions for graciously donating your time for preparing, recording, and editing all of the videos in this series. If you want to become a volunteer, fill out the questionnaire at www.lagrandebande.org/volunteer.

Lastly, we want to thank all of you for tuning in! Producing a series like this has not been without challenges. Regardless, we passionately believe that our programming is something which our communities should have access to for years to come. Tell your friends! Tell your family! Tell your neighbors! We cannot thank you all enough for the support that you have shown us. We hope you will continue to support us in the years to come.

We look forward to seeing you, once again in-person whenever it is safe enough to do so.

Warmest wishes,

La Grande Bande

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Episode 2: Valentini's *Sinfonia for Violins and continuo*

Friday | 18 September

Episode 3: Handel's *Violin Trio Sonata*

Friday | 2 October 2020

Episode 4: William Boyce *Concerto Grosso*

Friday | 16 October 2020

Episode 5: Michel Lambert's *Airs de cour*

Friday | 30 October 2020

Episode 6: Rare French Cantatas

Friday | 13 November 2020

Episode 7: Locatelli *Concerto Grosso*

Friday | 27 November 2020

Episode 8: Bach's Circle

Friday | 11 December 2020