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by Derek Katz

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Overture in the French Style, BWV 831 [Clavier-Übung, Part II, Partita in B minor] (pub. 1735)

Johann Sebastian Bach was hired as the Kantor of the Thomasschule of Leipzig in May of 1723, the last and longest of his professional positions. In terms of his compositional output, the most significant consequence of this new position was the staggering amount of music that Bach produced for Leipzig's churches, including over 500 cantatas for Sunday services (most now lost), the St. Matthew and St. John Passions, and the Christmas Oratorio. In addition to his duties as a composer of sacred music and as a teacher for the students of the Thomasschule, Bach was also the civic music director for the city of Leipzig, and was involved in public and commercial enterprises. The Overture in the French Style offers a glimpse into a surprisingly modern Johann Sebastian Bach, getting in on the ground floor of the German music publishing business, and presenting himself as a virtuoso performer in public concerts outside of the church or court settings that were the usual outlets of the time.

Leipzig was a free city, administered by a City Council rather than an aristocratic court, and the dominant institutions were the University (the second-oldest in Germany, founded in 1409) and the triannual trade fairs. The University provided Bach with student players for his Collegium Musicum, with whom Bach presented weekly public concerts at Zimmermann's Coffee House, and the trade fairs brought in audiences for those concerts. Bach was apparently one of the great keyboard players of his time, especially known as an organist. These concerts also allowed him to present himself as a brilliant harpsichordist in public spaces. The exact programs of these weekly concerts are not known, but it seems almost certain that Bach played as soloist for his harpsichord concertos in Leipzig, as well as playing solo works like the Overture in the French Style.

Although Leipzig was a center of the German book trade, and became the most important location for German music publishing in the nineteenth century, the German music publication business lagged far behind London, Paris and Amsterdam in Bach's day. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Bach should have taken it upon himself to publish four collections of keyboard music between 1731 and 1741. Bach did this at his own financial risk, arranging for the printing and distribution of the volumes. The Overture in the French Style is from the second of these collections, published in 1735, where it was paired with the Concerto After the Italian Manner (BWV 971). These two works presented the amateur players who would have been Bach's market with specimens of the two main national styles of the time, as well as with examples of popular orchestral genres, made accessible to a single player at a domestic instrument.

The Overture in the French Style comprises an Overture (from which the composition takes its name), followed by ten movements based on aristocratic dances. This type of suite has its origins at the court of Louis XIV at the end of the seventeenth century. The operas presented at that court began with a grand overture and dancers would appear periodically to perform the same dances that Louis XIV and his court would have known as social dances. The overtures and dance music were both collected and imitated as orchestral suites by musicians at German courts emulating the model of Louis XIV on a smaller scale. These suites would now be instrumental music to be appreciated for its own sake and abstracted from functional dance music, rather than music for dancing. Bach's own orchestral suites (also known as "Overtures") are examples of this practice, and the Overture in the French Style is essentially the keyboard equivalent of one of these orchestral suites.

The movement that begins the Overture in the French Style is entirely typical of the overtures that preceded French operas in the late seventeenth century. The overture falls into two halves, each of which is repeated (although in modern practice, the second repeat is often omitted in performance). The first section is slow and stately, in duple meter and filled with dotted rhythms. It is easy to imagine this portion being played by a larger ensemble to accompany a royal procession. The second section is in a faster tempo, moves in groups of three beats, and is fugal. Here, one can imagine each new line from the keyboard as the entrance of a different string section. The stately processional music returns at the end of the overture.

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This "French" overture is one of the elements that marks this piece as being "in the French Style." Another element is the selection of dances that follow.

Almost all Bach suites contain a predictable set of dance types, combined with some optional additions. This suite has a Courante, Sarabande and Gigue from the obligatory dances. Of these, the Courante is a French dance, and the particular form of Gigue is based on a rhythm from the Canary Islands that had long been popular in France. The other additional dances are all distinctively French and come in pairs: the two Gavottes, Passepieds and Bourrées. The most unusual of these are the Passepieds, which originate in Brittany. Finally, the musical style itself would have been considered very French at the time. Purchasers of the original publication would have been presented with a stark contrast. The "Italian Concerto" looks very clean on the page, mostly proceeding in even note values, and almost completely lacking in ornamentation. The Overture in the French Style, however, especially in its slower sections, moves in dramatic fits and starts, filled with dotted rhythms. Its textures are ornate, verging on the fussy, filled with embellishments that bring attention to individual notes.

Each of the published Bach keyboard collections was intended for a different and specific keyboard instrument. This volume was composed for a double-manual harpsichord. This kind of harpsichord has two keyboards (one on top of the other), with the possibility of having each keyboard pluck a different set of strings. In particular, this allows a player to have a louder keyboard and a softer keyboard, with the louder keyboard either plucking more strings tuned to the same pitch, or plucking strings tuned in octaves. Bach takes great advantage of this possibility in the Overture in the French Style, building in contrasts between loud and soft both within movements and between them. The fast section of the opening Overture movement drops to a quiet dynamic in the middle, suggesting a passage for solo players in the midst of a fuller orchestral texture. The Gavotte pair contains a quiet second Gavotte that is lower in range as well as in volume, and is in a simpler two-voice texture. The most striking use of the two keyboards comes in the final movement, an Echo, which, as the name suggests, is filled with sudden jumps between loud and soft. These contrasts of dynamics and tone colors are something that we can take for granted on the modern piano, but would have been striking special effects on the harpsichord.

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Georg Frideric Handel (1685-1759) - Johan Halvorsen (1864-1935)
Passacaglia for Violin and Viola (1894), arr. for Violin and Cello
Handel source: Suite in G minor, HWV 432 (pub. 1720)

When Bach moved to Leipzig as a professional church musician in 1723, his exact contemporary and fellow German Georg Frideric Handel was already established in London with a life centering on Italian opera. Despite their very different locations and career paths, both published suites for harpsichord. Handel's Suite in G minor was one of eight suites that Handel published in 1720. Like Bach, Handel was aiming his publication at amateur keyboard players, but London provided both a much larger pool of potential purchasers and a much better-established music publication industry. The Handel Suite as a whole is superficially similar to the Bach Overture in the French Style, opening with a French Overture, and containing a Sarabande and a Gigue, but the movement that will be heard on this concert is neither a dance nor in a French style. Instead, it is a substantial Passacaglia, consisting of fifteen variations on a simple four-bar series of chords. This sequence of chords is repeated (with some slight alterations near the end of the movement) as the basis for increasingly vigorous elaborations of the harmonies.

We will hear the Passacaglia in a version for string duet by the Norwegian violin virtuoso Johan Halvorsen. Although mostly remembered today for this very duet, Halvorsen was a very prominent figure in the musical life of Norway, not only as the leading violinist of his day, but also as a violin teacher and as a conductor at the National Theater. Not surprisingly, his compositional output was first dominated by works that feature the violin and later by incidental music for plays presented at the National Theater. The Passacagalia arrangement is one of his earliest works, and is more a re-composition than a mere transcription. While the Handel original mostly consists of block chords in one hand accompanying figuration in the other, Halvorsen enlivens the chords by elaborating them with idiomatic string techniques like strummed pizzicato triple-stops. A certain amount of dialogue between the two hands is already built into the Handel version, but Halvorsen increases the amount and frequency of interplay between the two string instruments. There is also an enormous variety of tone color in the Halvorsen duet. Handel's harpsichord didn't support changes of dynamics or articulation, but Halvorsen uses a broad palette of string sounds, including plucking, harmonics, off-the-string bowings and double-stops. The Passacaglia serves both as a dramatic musical sweep, and as a compendium of virtuoso string techniques. By the end of the Passacaglia, Halvorsen freely combines Handel's variations and adds new ones of his own, building to a bravura conclusion. Halvorsen's version was for violin and viola, but the Passacaglia is frequently heard in an arrangement for violin and cello made by the Russian violinist Mikhail Press to play with his cellist brother Joseph.

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Robert Schumann (1810-1856), *Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47 (1842)*

Robert Schumann famously concentrated on composing one type of music at a time. This tendency was especially marked in the early 1840s, which he seems to have spent systematically exploring different media and genres. 1840 was his year of song, in which he composed nearly 150 songs and duets. The next year was primarily devoted to orchestral music, including the First Symphony, and 1842 was the year of chamber music. In a mere six months, Schumann composed five substantial chamber works. The year started badly, as Robert returned home early from travels with Clara, resentful of her success as a pianist. Robert sulked at home in Leipzig until Clara's return, composing nothing, but immersing himself in a study of string quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Soon after Clara's return from her concerts, Robert produced three string quartets in quick succession. Another creative burst in the fall produced the Piano Quintet and Piano Quartet. The chamber works with and without piano are in significantly different styles. For the string quartets, Schumann was concerned with finding a "true quartet style," that would be dependent on classical models without slavishly imitating them, and that would function as an egalitarian conversation rather than tending towards orchestral textures. The inclusion of the piano, however, freed Schumann from the historical weight of the string quartet tradition and allowed him to draw on his own experience both as an aspiring keyboard virtuoso and as participant in domestic music-making.

Schumann was intimately familiar with the literature for piano and strings. While studying law in his late teens, he had formed a piano quartet that met informally for sight-reading, debate and drinking ("much Bavarian beer"). The skillful scoring of the Piano Quartet bears witness both to Schumann's knowledge of the genre and to his facility as a pianist. The Piano Quintet is the grander and more ambitious work, and the first to be performed regularly (Clara Schumann immediately adopted the Quintet into her repertoire, but took seven years to begin presenting the Quartet in public), but the Quartet is the most immediately attractive of Schumann's chamber works, and the one that has most consistently appealed both to professional performers and to devotees of amateur Hausmusik.

The first movement opens with a slow introduction, which, contrary to expectations, will return twice later in the movement, serving as a structural device to mark the arrival of the development and of the coda. Although the introduction is slow enough to sound more like a series of chords than like a theme, in fact the first phrase played by the violin will turn out to generate most of the movement's melodic material. The following Allegro ma non troppo begins with rolled chords in the piano, repeating exactly the same figures just heard from the violin. This is followed by an impassioned cello melody over throbbing repeated chords from the piano that begin with the very same four-note motive. This type of procedure, in which music in three very different characters, and producing different emotional effects, is tightly linked through a shared musical material is very characteristic of this piece, and of Schumann in general. Whether or not we are consciously aware of the motivic connections, there is a satisfying balance between contrast and continuity.

The scherzo is inevitably described as "elfin," and does seem similar to many pieces by Felix Mendelssohn, some with explicit supernatural connections. Schumann and Mendelssohn, only a year apart in age, had been close friends and musical associates during the time that both were in Leipzig, starting in 1835, and the three string quartets that Schumann composed in 1842 were dedicated to Mendelssohn. The scherzo, quiet and staccato throughout, alternates with two trios, each providing a contrast in texture, but eventually the boundaries between sections break down, and the second trio is soon infiltrated with material from the scherzo (the Smetana Piano Trio heard on the Camerata Pacifica programs last October seemed influenced by this movement).

The slow movement contains one of the most luscious of Schumann's melodies. Some commentators seem troubled by its potential sentimentally, a concern that this writer does not share. Schumann, the experienced chamber player, is very generous in sharing this melody. The cello gets the initial star turn, and is quickly answered by the violin. Even the viola gets a moment in the spotlight in the second half of the movement, now accompanied by filigree from the violin.

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Only Schumann's own instrument, the piano, fails to have a statement of the big tune. There is an interesting bit of technical trivia in this movement. The very end calls for a long held low B-flat from the cello. This is a whole step below the lowest string on the cello, and requires that string to be tuned down. Schumann rather optimistically requests that the cellist retune during the viola solo, but this is a high-stakes maneuver that most cellists would prefer to avoid. There are a number of possible solutions – keep an eye and ear out to try and figure out which one will be used for this performance.

The end of the slow movement finds the strings quietly trading a new figure over that low B-flat pedal from the cello. This turns out to be an anticipation of the main theme of the finale. In a manner very similar to that of the first movement, something that we have heard presented slowly and quietly is immediately repeated in assertive and vigorous chords. The opening gesture is then used as the basis for a fugal exposition. We are now neither in the sound world of Mendelssohn, nor of the classical string quartet, but in that of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Schumann had also been studying Bach's fugues in early 1842, at the same time that he had been steeping himself in classical quartets. These fugal aspirations do not last for long, and the remainder of the movement is largely concerned with combining reminiscences from the previous movement with fragments of the fugue subject and with new material. The movement culminates in another fugal section, now even fuller and grander than the first one. It is only a slight stretch to suggest that the concert ends more-or-less where it began, with counterpoint either by Bach, or written in tribute to it.