

BACH'S KEYBOARD SUITES, A STUDY OF BACKGROUND

by

MARGARET ANN MAHONEY

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**THIS BOOK CONTAINS
NUMEROUS PAGE
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CHAPTER I

THE CLAVIERÜBUNG

At the time that the first Partita in B-flat major was published in 1726, Bach had been cantor at Saint Thomas in Leipzig for about three years. An earlier work of Bach's had been printed before this time; the cantata, Gott ist mein König, had been engraved by his pleased employers for the annual inauguration of the city officials at Mülhausen in February 1708.¹ The B-flat major Partita was the first work that Bach himself published and as Bukofzer states, "The publication . . . confronts us with the anomaly that the opus I of a composer reveals him in his most mature phrase."²

The B-flat major Partita was the first of the Clavierübung to appear in publication. The title Clavierübung means keyboard study or exercise, a term that probably referred both to the keyboard skill of the performer and the inventive powers of the composer. Schweitzer adds, however, that "Übung" stands for more of a study for diversion rather than practice.³ Bach's Clavierübung, published over a period of sixteen

¹Philipp Spitta, Johann Sebastian Bach, trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (London: Novello and Co., 1899), I, p. 344.

²Manfred F. Bukofzer, Music in the Baroque Era (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1947), p. 297.

³Albert Schweitzer, J. S. Bach, trans. Ernest Newman (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1923), p. 321.

years, is a compendium of the art of the keyboard, for every composition is a finished, inspired masterpiece that is in a class all by itself.⁴

The Clavierübung consists of four major parts:

- I. Contains the six Partitas, published in 1731.
 - 1) B-flat major -- Praeludium, A, C, S, MI, & II, G.
 - 2) c minor -- Sinfonia, A, C, S, Rondeau, Capriccio.
 - 3) a minor -- Fantasia, A, C, S, Burlesca, Scherzo, G.
 - 4) D major -- Overture, A, C, Aria, S, M, G.
 - 5) G major -- Praeambulum, A, C, S, Tempo di Minuet, Passepied, G.
 - 6) e minor -- Toccato, A, C, Air, S, Tempo di Gavotta, G.

- II. Contains an overture and concerto (1735)
 - 1) b minor -- Overture in the French manner
 - 2) F major -- Concerto in the Italian manner

- III. Contains four Duets and Organ Chorales (1739)
 - 1) e minor
 - 2) F major
 - 3) G major
 - 4) a minor

The organ chorales start with a Prelude in E-flat and go through twenty-one movements founded upon or associated with other chorales. They end with a fugue in E-flat known as the St. Anne Fugue.

- IV. Goldberg Variations (1742)
 - Contains 30 Variations

In 1689 and 1695 Johann Kuhnau, Bach's predecessor at Leipzig, published two works with the title Clavierübung. Each of these works contained seven suites; the first volume was in the major keys (C, D, E, F, G, A, and B-flat), and the second volume was in the minor keys (c, d, e, f, g, a, and b). In both Clavierübung I and II, the suites were called Partien. The basic arrangement of Kuhnau's suites are A, C, S,

⁴Paul Henry Lang, Music in Western Civilization (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1941), p. 509.

and G, with a few replacements. It is interesting to note that in Suite II, number 7, Kuhnau used the sequence of P, A, C, S, I, G, the same order that Bach used in his English Suites and Partitas.

Spitta remarked in his book, The Life of Bach,

In choosing for a collection of clavier suites the same title which had been used by his predecessor for the works that first made him famous as a composer for the clavier, . . . it is evident that he wished to appear before the world as Kuhnau's successor.⁵

However, there may have been at least another reason why Bach chose the title Clavierübung for his collection of clavier suites. Because of his unhappy employment at Leipzig, Bach might have decided to use the title Clavierübung, a title well known from a composer who was still well remembered, in an attempt to make his name known either in order to strengthen his position at Leipzig or in hopes of obtaining another job elsewhere. But more about this is mentioned in Chapter III.

Bach's title page for the Partita in B-flat major which appears below was also similar to the title page used by Kuhnau.

Keyboard Practice
consisting in
Preludes, Allemandes, Courantes, Sarabandes, Giges,
Minuets, and other Galanteries
Composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits
by

⁵Spitta, III, 225.