Johann Sebastian Bach - Orchestral Suite No. 3

Johann Sebastian Bach
Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany.
Died July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany.

Composition History
Although the dating of Bach's four orchestral suites is uncertain, the third was probably written in 1731. The score calls for two oboes, three trumpets, and timpani, with strings and continuo. Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

Performance History
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Bach's Third Orchestral Suite were given at the Auditorium Theatre on October 23 and 24, 1891, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on June 16, 17, and 18, 2005, with Ton Koopman conducting. The Orchestra first performed Air and Gavotte from this suite at the Ravinia Festival on June 29, 1941, with Frederick Stock conducting; the complete suite was first performed at Ravinia on August 5, 1948, with Pierre Monteux conducting, and most recently on August 28, 2000, with Vladimir Feltsman conducting.

Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major, BWV 1068
When the young Mendelssohn played the first movement of Bach's Third Orchestral Suite on the piano for Goethe, the poet said he could see "a procession of elegantly dressed people proceeding down a great staircase." Bach's music was nearly forgotten in 1830, and Goethe, never having heard this suite before, can be forgiven for wanting to attach a visual image to such stately and sweeping music.

Today it's hard to imagine a time when Bach's name meant little to music lovers and when these four orchestral suites weren't considered landmarks. But in the years immediately following Bach's death in 1750, public knowledge of his music was nil, even though other, more cosmopolitan composers, such as Handel, who died only nine years later, remained popular. It's Mendelssohn who gets the credit for the rediscovery of Bach's music, launched in 1829 by his revival of the Saint Matthew Passion in Berlin.
A very large portion of Bach's orchestral music is lost; the existing twenty-some solo concertos, six *Brandenburg* Concertos, and four orchestral suites no doubt represent just the tip of the iceberg. We're probably lucky to have these four suites at all, in fact, since they aren't mentioned—even in passing—either in the extensive obituary prepared by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the composer's son, or in J. N. Forkel's pioneering biography published in 1802. And so when Mendelssohn tried to interest Goethe in the magnificent unfolding of the opening of Bach's third suite, this was recently discovered music, unknown to all but the most serious musicians.

The numbering of Bach's four suites, like that of Dvořák's symphonies, is a convention that has little to do with their order of composition. The first suite *is*, apparently, the earliest, dating from before 1725, but the second is the last and the fourth suite was probably written around the time of the first. The third suite can be dated, with some certainty, from 1731. None of Bach's original manuscripts for the suites has survived, which makes dating them unusually difficult. But for the third suite we have a set of parts written in three hands: by Bach himself (the last two movements of the first violin and continuo parts); by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who served as his father's copyist beginning in 1729; and by Johann Ludwig Krebs, who often worked for the composer around 1730. (The collaborative nature of the writing out of the parts suggests that Bach was unusually pressed for time.) And we know that this suite was written for performance by the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig, which Bach took over in 1729, for concerts given at Gottfried Zimmermann's coffeehouse every Friday night from 8 to 10.

Bach didn't call these works suites—he used the conventional term of the day, overture, after their grand opening movements. But they are unmistakably suites—that is to say, sets of varied popular dances. For the idea of starting each one off with a large-scale overture, Bach was indebted to Jean-Baptiste Lully, the seventeenth-century French composer who perfected what we now call the French overture: a solemn, striding introduction kept in motion by the brittle snap of dotted rhythms, followed by a quick, lively, imitative main section. Bach borrows Lully's boilerplate but makes his overtures into magnificent, expansive pieces that tower over the dances that follow. (In fact, Bach's overtures are nearly as long as the remainder of the suites they introduce.) Mendelssohn picked wisely when he played one of these overtures for Goethe, for they are among the most impressive and exciting of Bach's instrumental pieces—and he knew from previous experience that Goethe didn't easily fall under music's spell. (Mendelssohn finally admitted, to his surprise and frustration, that the great poet wasn't particularly sophisticated in his musical tastes.)

For the remaining movements, Bach used many of the most popular forms of his day. (Each of the suites includes a different, hand-picked selection.) The third suite includes the gavotte, a gracious dance in duple meter that, despite it origins as a French peasant dance, was regularly performed in court circles in the sixteenth century; the bourrée, a lively French folk dance in duple meter that was often danced at the court of Louis XIV, who reigned from 1643 to 1715; and the gigue, a fast dance that originated in Ireland and England, where it was known as the jig (Shakespeare calls it "hot and hasty").
No single movement is as famous as the Italianate aria of the third suite. This is one of Bach's most magnificent creations, the limpid beauty of its melody overshadowing an accompaniment of unusual contrapuntal richness. (The familiar title, Air on the G String, refers not to Bach's original, but to an arrangement for solo violin made by August Wilhelmj in 1871 that transposed the melody more than an octave lower so that it could be played on the violin's lowest string, the one tuned to G.) Perhaps Mendelssohn miscalculated in not picking this movement to play for Goethe, for it has rarely failed to move listeners since.

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