Program Notes

By Phillip Huscher

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

Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major, BWV 1066

The dating of Bach’s four orchestral suites is uncertain. The first and fourth are the earliest, both composed around 1725. Suite no. 1 calls for two oboes and bassoon, with strings and continuo. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Bach’s First Orchestral Suite were given at Orchestra Hall on February 22 and 23, 1951, with Rafael Kubelik conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on May 15, 16, and 17, 2003, with Daniel Barenboim conducting.

Today it’s hard to imagine a time when Bach’s name meant little to music lovers, and when his 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 great deal of Bach’s music survives, but incredibly, there’s much more that didn’t. Christoph Wolff, today’s finest Bach biographer, speculates that over two hundred compositions from the Weimar years are lost, and that just 15 to 20 percent of Bach’s output from his subsequent time in Cöthen has survived. Two-fifths of the cantatas he wrote in Leipzig have never been found. The familiar Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis, a catalog that attaches a BWV number to each of Bach’s compositions, lists 1,087 works nonetheless, and the tally continues to grow as new scores are uncovered. (Recently in Kiev, Ukraine, Wolff discovered the long-lost musical estate of Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel, which contains unpublished scores by J.S. Bach, two of his sons, and his predecessors.)

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 the four suites at all, in fact, since they aren’t mentioned—even in passing—either in the extensive obituary prepared by Carl Philipp Emanuel or in J. N. Forkel’s pioneering biography published in 1802.

The numbering of Bach’s four suites, like that of Dvorák’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, with its winning flute solo, is the last: composed in 1738 or 1739, it may well be Bach’s final orchestral work. The fourth suite was probably written around the time of the first; the third 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.

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.)

Each of the suites, written at different times and for different players Bach knew, has its own personality—its own design, individual sonority, distinctive stylistic mixture, and overall sensibility. And each presents a different, hand-picked selection of dances. The First, which is the earliest of the four, is the most consistent in following the old-fashioned practice of featuring individual dances in pairs. Bach used many of the most popular forms of his day, including the courante, a dance in triple meter that originated in the sixteenth century, became popular in both France and Italy, and then quickly fell out of favor; the gracious gavotte, originally a French peasant dance and later performed in court circles; a forlane, a lively folk dance from the northern Italian province of Friulia that developed into a French courtly dance; the elegant minuet, which was particularly fashionable at the court of Louis XIV (himself an avid minuet dancer) and became the only baroque dance that didn’t go out of style during the classical period; and the bourrée, a lively French folk dance in duple meter that was popular at the court of Louis XIV. Bach ends with a double passepied, a spirited dance in triple meter that’s a quick variant of the minuet. The second passepied is even related to the first, taking its original melody as the foundation for a new oboe theme.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.