

J.S. Bach
Partitas Nos. 2, 3 & 4

NILS ANDERS MORTENSEN
— PIANO

Bach composed ten works with the title *partita* – three for solo violin, one for solo flute and six for keyboard. The word *partita* is defined as, to quote from the *Oxford Composer Companion to Bach*, either “a suite of dances or a set of variations”. Thus it is no more precise than “overture” – which can indicate the opening movement of a baroque suite or the prelude to an opera – along with several other musical terms. In the 16th century, “*partita*” indicated one of a sequence of variations, but this meaning evolved, coming to signify a collection of movements and later – by the time Bach wrote his keyboard *partitas* – a suite of dances.

Bach’s six *partitas* for keyboard, BWV 825–830, were published individually from 1726, then, in 1731, as a group entitled *Clavier-Übung I* (Übung may be translated as practice or exercise). Among what may be described as Bach’s various sets of dance-suites – also including the English Suites and the French Suites – the *partitas*, composed slightly later, are technically the most demanding. Johann Kuhnau, Bach’s predecessor as cantor of St. Thomas’s Church in Leipzig, had published a collection of *partitas* under the title *Clavier-Übung* – two volumes (1689 and 1692) each comprising seven works. These two collections by Kuhnau, together with two other volumes that he published during his time at Leipzig, proved to be an important influence on German keyboard music. Equally influential were Händel’s marvellous keyboard suites of 1720, with their synthesis of diverse styles and genres. Bach’s keyboard *Partitas* in general mark a further advance on his French Suites – even more adventurous in terms of new handling of the dance-forms, more favouring of galant-style melody-with-harmony rather than imitative counterpoint, and new types of texture. With regard to the dance-movements in particular, Bach exercises phenomenal creative freedom and diversity while departing from the traditional models.

The opening movement of **Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826**, has a grand, dramatic first section (*Sinfonia*) initially marked *Grave adagio* and featuring the dotted rhythm typical of the French overture. After only seven bars this gives way to an *Andante* characterised by a wonderfully florid melodic line. This in turn leads to a 3-part fugal section in 3/4, clearly defined and dance-like. Usually in a French overture movement the first section would return, but here only the final cadence offers a reminder of the earlier dotted rhythm. This *sinfonia* is a relatively rare example of Bach’s use of tempo indications, the *Grave* being followed by *Andante* and *Allegro*. The following *Allemande* and *Courante* are the traditional dance-types for the second and third movements in a suite or *partita*, but we should remember that Bach’s successive examples in these works are utterly diverse in character. Here the melodic line of the *Allemande* initially follows a downward contour, but the piece becomes more complex melodically and rhythmically, with a little syncopation. The *Courante* includes even more varied rhythmic diversity and there are copious ornaments. With its almost constant flow of semiquavers the *Sarabande* is rather untypical of this dance-form, the stately character of which is usually conveyed with longer note-values and chords rather than the predominantly two-part writing we find here. The following *Rondeaux* – a title found in relatively few works by Bach – has a lively theme in 3/8 with a succession of falling sevenths. Just as in rondo-form in Mozart and later periods, this theme always returns, after contrasting episodes, in the tonic key. Finally, where we would expect a *gigue*, Bach writes a robust *Capriccio* – another term he rarely used – of special difficulty on account of its complex part-writing. A bold figure in the bass, with its successive leaps of a tenth, is derived from bar 3 of the melody, and there is some particularly delightful syncopation in the right hand from bar 11 onwards.

Partita No. 3 in A minor BWV 827, one of the more idiosyncratic of the set, opens with a *Fantasia* which is in effect a two-part invention. Bach used the term *fantasia* in different contexts but here it is merely an alternative to the more common title of prelude. The following *Allemande* is elegant and leisurely, whereas the *Corrente* (Bach used either this Italian version or the French *courante*) is unusually highly strung, characterised by wide melodic leaps – often octaves in the left hand – and dotted rhythms. This is one of the most obviously danceable of all Bach’s *courantes*. In the tender *Sarabande* Bach exploits the triplet figure in bar 1 with much obsessive imitation. Unique in character, this is also very untypical of his *sarabandes* in general, but then, it is impossible to sum up these various movements, many grave and statuesque while a much smaller number are, like this example, lighter. It is easy to imagine this particular *sarabande* as a trio for two oboes and bassoon.

Burlesca, a bizarrely unexpected heading, is a rare, if not unique title in Bach’s music. In an earlier version of this *partita* he called this movement *Menuet*, while the following *scherzo* was omitted. Here they make a vigorous pair. The alteration from *Menuet* to *Burlesca* emphasises that this is more of a character-piece than a straightforward dance-movement. In keeping with the historical definition of burlesque as a piece (or performance) intended to cause laughter, by choosing this title Bach indicates his intention to amuse. He is at his most playful here – especially towards the end of the first part, where he mischievously writes a descending scale in octave unison (in the rules of counterpoint octave unisons were forbidden). For all the sparkle of the equally playful *Scherzo*, there is also a steeliness. The concluding *gigue* is in *moto perpetuo* style and relentlessly contrapuntal. After the first half has ended with a brief but brilliant flourish, the remaining half begins with a simple inversion of the opening subject. Another flourish ends the movement.

Partita No. 4 in D major, BWV 828, begins with an *Ouverture*, i.e. a French overture inherited from the type which Lully used to preface his ballets at the court of Louis IV in the 1650s. This example by Bach has tremendous grandeur and is as close as one comes to realising a Baroque orchestral sound with merely a keyboard. The opening section gives way to a faster 3-part fugal section in 9/8, of dancelike character and with a buoyancy enhanced by some syncopation. Sublimely beautiful, the *Allemande* exudes a calm serenity, in spite of its increasingly elaborate rhythm, while Bach’s melodic invention seems inexhaustible. The treble part takes wing, while the bass line ranges across wide intervals. After a *Courante* which includes a rhythmic feature suggesting galloping horses, the following *Aria* has an uncomplicated syncopated melody above an equally simple left-hand part, though this bass-line has prominent moments in the second half. The term *aria* in the context of Bach’s instrumental works is more likely to bring to mind the *Air* (so-called “on the G string”) from the *Orchestral Suite No. 3* or the *Air* upon which the *Goldberg Variations* are based. These are more obviously song-like, but the term *aria* was quite commonly used for a Baroque instrumental movement of generally vocal character. The *Sarabande* that follows has the typical intimacy and tranquillity we most often associate with this dance-movement. Believed to originate in Spain as a colourful, even volatile dance, it was transformed at Louis XIV’s court into a more restrained piece – serious, expressive and usually tender. Here Bach takes the ornamentation to an even higher level in the second half – an elaboration typical of most of his *sarabandes*. A brief *Menuet* precedes the final *Gigue*, a fugal movement of terrific energy and exuberance. Bach introduces a new theme at the half-way point, then immediately combines his two subjects. Although his contrapuntal skill is supreme, this purely compositional craft does not detract from the sheer joy of this music.

Nils Anders Mortensen – *piano*

Nils Anders Mortensen is a Norwegian pianist renowned for his versatility and expressive performances. Born in Flekkefjord in 1971, he began playing the piano at the age of three. He won the Norwegian Young Pianist Competition in 1986 and pursued his studies at the Norwegian Academy of Music, École Normale in Paris, and Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hannover.

In 1996, Mortensen was named “Debutant of the Year” by Concerts Norway, leading to an extensive national tour. He has since performed internationally, including in the United States, Germany, Russia, Hungary, and the Baltic states. Notably, he was a soloist with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra at the Bergen International Festival in 1998.

Residing in Alta since 1998, Mortensen has embraced a diverse musical career, engaging in classical and contemporary music, jazz, folk and crossover. He has collaborated extensively with mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland, violinist Arvid Engegård and double bassist Knut Erik Sundquist, producing several acclaimed recordings. The album *Veslemøy synsk*, on which he collaborated with Marianne Beate Kielland, was nominated for a Grammy Award. His solo discography includes works by Grieg, Brahms, Debussy and Bach, and his earlier album on LAWO featuring Bach’s Partitas Nos. 1, 5 & 6 received critical acclaim.

Mortensen’s contributions to music have been recognized with the Robert Levin Memorial Prize in 2004 and the Nordlys Prize in 2013.



Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685–1750)

Partita No. 4 in D major, BWV 828

1	I. Ouverture	07:36
2	II. Allemande	07:49
3	III. Courante	03:35
4	IV. Aria	02:13
5	V. Sarabande	06:01
6	VI. Menuet	01:20
7	VII. Gigue	03:57

Partita No. 3 in A minor, BWV 827

8	I. Fantasia	02:19
9	II. Allemande	03:13
10	III. Corrente	03:06
11	IV. Sarabande	04:03
12	V. Burlesca	02:16
13	VI. Scherzo	01:06
14	VII. Gigue	03:39

Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826

15	I. Sinfonia – Grave adagio	01:09
16	I. Sinfonia – Andante	01:48
17	I. Sinfonia – Allegro	01:44
18	II. Allemande	04:56
19	III. Courante	02:40
20	IV. Sarabande	05:00
21	V. Rondeaux	01:34
22	VI. Capriccio	04:06

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