BACH RESTOR'D | RESTORATION

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

FRENCH OVERTURE, BWV 831, C minor
reconstructed from the harpsichord solo in B minor

RESTORATION

Lucinda Moon, Bronwen Pugh – baroque violins
Alison Salmons – baroque viola
Emma Goodbehere – baroque cello
Eric Scholes – violone
Robert Petre – harpsichord



01	Overture	7:34
02	Courante	3:13
03	Gavottes I & II*	4:19
04	Passepieds I & II	3:34
05	Sarabande	3:10
06	Bourrées I & II**	3:44
07	Gigue	3:06
08	Echo	3:25

* Gavotte II: Alison Salmons (viola), Eric Scholes (violone)

**Bourrées I & II: Bronwen Pugh (violin), Emma Goodbehere (cello)

Temperament: Werckmeister III

Pitch: a415

Recording by Restoration © 2026, all rights reserved

Did Bach write another orchestral overture suite? This recording proposes that the Overture BWV 831 was originally conceived not for a solo harpsichord but for a string orchestra. The evidence for this reconstruction includes Bach's original transcription, the key, the comparison with similar works (both overture suites and solo suites of dances), and with other works known to be transcriptions. Although this reconstruction of the *French Overture* must always remain just that, a speculative endeavour, it may nevertheless go some way to filling the gaps in the legacy of Bach's genius.

TRANSCRIPTIONS FOR HARPSICHORD

There is a vast repertoire of orchestral and chamber works by composers throughout the Baroque period that were arranged for the harpsichord, often by the composers themselves, to make them more accessible to both professional musicians and music enthusiasts. For example, more than 500 orchestral pieces by Jean-Baptiste Lully are found in contemporary versions for solo harpsichord. Such pieces are easily identified as arrangements where the orchestral originals are known, as is the case with many of them. It is a less straightforward (some might say presumptuous) undertaking to reconstruct the supposed original where only the arrangement is known. Nevertheless, this is one such undertaking. The *French Overture* has been reconstructed by Robert Petre for baroque orchestra (a string ensemble in four parts with basso continuo) from the harpsichord version, with minimal alteration and arrangement.

LOST WORKS

If Bach did indeed compose the *French Overture* as an ensemble piece, it is certainly possible that the original score for it did not survive. There is a general consensus that a great many works written by Bach, particularly orchestral and chamber music, have been lost. This is in part because he is likely to have composed many more instrumental works during his early years in Köthen, and later for the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig. Only four orchestral suites or Overtures (BWV 1066-1069) have come down to us, and they were not composed and published by him as a set, as he did with many other instrumental works. They may be only the tip of an iceberg of orchestral overtures or suites by Bach that have been lost – his contemporaries such as Telemann, Graupner and Fasch each composed dozens, even hundreds of these suites, as they were frequently required for court balls and other ceremonial occasions. But there is also much surviving evidence of some of these lost originals, and signs of Bach reworking his music for different forces. These include organ works based on instrumental trios and transcriptions for harpsichord of the works for solo violin.

THE FRENCH OVERTURE

The *French Overture* is a superb model of the 17th and 18th-century overture suite, epitomising the ideal of music conceived for the intricately intertwined arts of the high baroque *danse noble* tradition. This tradition originated at the court of Louis XIV of France, and dominated the practice of these arts throughout Europe and beyond, until late in the 18th century. The *French Overture* provides examples of most of the dance types popular at the time, in beautifully proportioned traditional forms that are nevertheless extremely attractive melodically, adventurous harmonically, and rhythmically complex and diverse.

The initial Overture movement is vast and magnificent, with an over-arching symmetrical structure – a majestic processional opening and closing, framing a multi-sectional central fugue based on a bouncing triplet and running semiquaver theme, with episodes of contrasting material between the *tutti* sections. The two slow dances, the Courante (specified in the original sources as the slowest of the triple dances) and the Sarabande (a notch faster), are both extraordinarily beautiful and expressive. Gavotte I is the embodiment of Mattheson's dictum of the 'jauchzende Freude' (triumphant joy) affect for this dance. Textural variety is provided by the alto solo of Gavotte II, the *senza basso* of the musette-style Passepied II, and the two elegant solo Bourrées. The Gigue builds from a somewhat formal start through more exuberant gestures to an outburst of dramatic flourishes in the final bars. The final Echo is a joyful Italian-style dance reminiscent of the famous Badinerie from the Overture with solo flute BWV 1067, predominantly using the same dactylic rhythm.

SOURCES

The work commonly known as the *French Overture* has come down to us in two early versions, both for solo harpsichord. The earliest is a manuscript (titled *Ouverture pour le Claveçin*) dated ca.1730, written in the key of C minor, in the autograph of Anna Magdalena Bach, with some additions in the hand of JS Bach. The second dates from a few years later, when the work was transposed down to B minor and engraved for publication (named *Ouvertüre nach Französischer Art* on the title page) in the second part of JS Bach's great keyboard series, the *Clavier-Übung* of 1735. There it was the companion piece to the now much better-known *Concerto nach Italienischen Gusto* (commonly known as the *Italian Concerto*), BWV 971.

In this publication, Bach demonstrated his mastery not only of the contrasted international styles (French and Italian) but also of the two predominant **orchestral** genres of his time, the overture suite and the concerto. The *Italian Concerto* is very similar in style to orchestral concerti by Vivaldi, Marcello and other Italian composers that Bach copied and transcribed for harpsichord solo. Christoph Wolff has written that the *Italian Concerto* 'embodies the ultimate stage in the process of transcribing instrumental concertos for keyboard'. This has led in recent years to several reconstructions of a supposed orchestral original of the *Italian Concerto*. Likewise, the *French Overture* may be seen as a transcription of a lost orchestral original.

TRANSPOSITION

Downward transposition was the standard process used by Bach when he transcribed for harpsichord his concerti for violin and for other solo instruments with orchestra – all were transposed down, usually by a tone. For just one example, the D minor double violin concerto BWV 1043 became the C minor double harpsichord concerto BWV 1062. As discussed further below, the key of C minor is a more appropriate key for the *French Overture* as a string ensemble than the B minor of its later publication for harpsichord.

THE MISSING ALLEMANDE

There is no allemande in the *French Overture*. None of Bach's orchestral overture suites includes an allemande, and examples of allemandes in orchestral suites by other composers are rare in the early 18th century. There are no early 18th-century choreographies of allemandes as a dance genre, and it seems the allemande was no longer popular by this time, so music for it would not have been needed in suites composed for court balls and similar occasions.

However, the allemande certainly survived – as slow, serious, often complex and improvisatory music, particularly for a solo performer, to be listened to rather than danced to. It is one of the four core dances (allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue) that remained the standard in all of Bach's other suites for keyboard, and those for other solo instruments (violin, cello, lute), as well as the solo keyboard suites composed by most of his contemporaries. Why then does his even more ambitious and extensive harpsichord work, the *French Overture*, lack an allemande? The absence of the allemande is further evidence that it was originally conceived not as a work for solo harpsichord but as an orchestral one.

KEY, TESSITURA, AFFECT

The key of C minor works well for a string ensemble as C is the lowest note of both the cello and viola and occurs frequently at significant points in the work. In B minor, this low note would not be available. The tessitura of the whole work is generally low and dark. This is reflected in the dark colours of the strings, and likewise suits the serious, grand and noble affect of the work, the epitome of the high French style. Bach and other baroque composers typically used C minor for works of sublime, majestic or dramatic intent.



RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL

Overall, the reconstruction has chiefly entailed allocating parts among the instruments, very occasionally involving octave transpositions and other minor adjustments required for the music to be played by two hands on the harpsichord. A few decisions were required on whether certain ornaments and figurations are specifically keyboard idioms (which could be omitted, or reconstructed for a string idiom) or can be suitable for either idiom. The upper and lower parts throughout the suite are almost entirely as Bach wrote them. Treating the bass line as a part for figured bass involved specifying harmonies in some places where Bach only implied, or left ambiguous, the harmonic movement he intended. Whether the suggested solutions are the ones he had in mind remains an open question.

NUMBER OF PARTS, SOLI AND TUTTI

The work as a whole was conceived by Bach in four parts, either explicitly delineated or implied. The Sarabande is in four complete independent parts throughout. Most of the vast Overture (the duple opening and close, and the fugal central sections), as well as the Courante, Gavotte I, Passepied I and Echo, were clearly composed with four parts in mind, although for practical reasons, when transcribed for the harpsichord, the texture was reduced in places to three (or sometimes two) parts.

Certain episodes in the harpsichord version of the Overture provided colour and texture contrast not only by being written in two parts, but also by exploiting the contrasts that are possible with the two keyboards (each separately, as well as coupled) of the double-manual instrument specified by Bach in the *Clavier-Übung* part 2. This latter process is also employed in the Echo movement, where the 'echoes' are intended to be played on a single-register manual, answering the principal melody played on the double register of the manuals coupled together.

These broad colour and texture contrasts are among the idiosyncratic techniques of harpsichord performance which Bach would have exploited in his transcription from a string ensemble original. They are the most direct imitation of the contrasts between tutti and soli that commonly appear in baroque orchestral music – contrasts principally in lightening of texture, but which would be even more marked if the ensemble includes more than one instrument per part. The other keyboard techniques with which Bach was certainly familiar are the more subtle agogic rhythms and articulations that enable the harpsichord to speak and communicate the music, the equivalent of the more flexible range of dynamic and expressive effects that a string ensemble original would have provided.

INSTRUMENTATION

Of the many hundreds of baroque-era orchestral suites, most are for strings alone, including basso continuo (keyboard, lute or harp), which had become the standard instrumentation by the early 18th century. There is also clear evidence that these works were usually performed with only one instrument per part, although for special occasions or in very large venues, doubling of the parts would also have been possible. As well as Bach's Overture BWV 1067 mentioned above, the other three orchestral suites (BWV 1066, 1068, 1069) may also have been originally written without wind instruments – in BWV 1068, the brass and woodwind have almost no independent material, mainly doubling the strings, and there have been numerous performances and recordings of it for strings alone.

Gavotte II is in two parts – in both the manuscript and print of the harpsichord version, the upper part is written in the alto clef, suggesting the original was conceived as a solo for the viola with basso continuo. Although keyboard music at this time was usually written and published using various positions of C-clefs (including the alto clef), only the treble clef is used for the upper part throughout the rest of the *French Overture*. Similarly, the Bourrées are in two parts, treble and bass, and can be well imagined as violin solos with basso accompaniment. Passepied II is in three parts, two trebles and alto, implying a rustic style *alla musette e senza basso*, as these 'trio' episodes in minuets, passepieds and other dances were often treated.

A double bass (at 16-foot) or violone (either 16 or 8-foot) would often be included in a baroque string ensemble, doubling the violoncello usually at the octave, and in this reconstruction, it has been used not only to add depth to the overall sound, but to indicate by the double bass entries or tacits where textural contrasts are either specified or implied in the harpsichord version. In two of the movements (the Courante and the Bourrées), it was decided to omit the doubling of the lower voice, to emphasise the particular character of each of these dances and to add variety of texture. Conversely, the double bass or violone alone has replaced the cello as the continuo instrument, with the solo viola, adding to the somewhat quirky character of Gavotte II.

FILLING THE GAPS

Reconstruction of the two-part sections of the Overture, and of the Gigue (the harpsichord version is in two parts only, until the last few bars), has been approached in the tradition of Lully and other busy composers of operas and large-scale works. In these works, the inner voices or *parties de remplissage* were often completed by an apprentice or assistant, whose master wrote the top voice and bass lines, indicated where other voices entered, then left this less demanding work to the lower ranks. For some passages, it has been relatively easy to surmise what Bach might have written, based on similar or parallel passages elsewhere in the movement. Other passages have required more reliance on imagination and familiarity with Bach's style. There is no suggestion, however, that these additions are to be taken for Bach's own work.

Notes by Robert Petre

Historically informed performance always involves the creative interpretation of notational systems that only partially encode the music they transmit. Accordingly, the difference between the scholar attempting reconstruction … and the performer bringing to life music from [original] sources, is really one of degree rather than kind.

Alan Howard, *Early Music*, November 2019, p.454



RESTORATION

New Zealand baroque ensemble

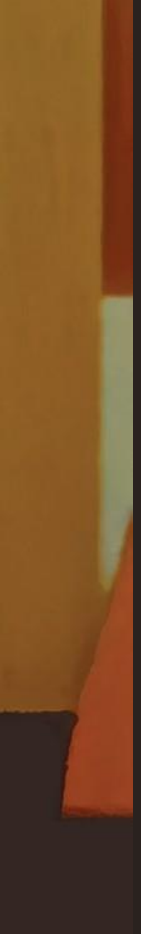
RESTORATION is one of New Zealand's most experienced and accomplished baroque ensembles. They use original instruments and historically informed playing styles and techniques to recreate the musical spirit of the baroque era, with its subtlety, flexibility, rhythmic energy and rhetorical inflections. This vivid and expressive language, so different from that of our own time, opens a window into the wonderfully foreign world of the past.

The ensemble was formed by baroque violinist Bronwen Pugh and harpsichordist Robert Petre on their return to New Zealand from post-graduate study and professional experience in Europe. Their teachers and mentors have included leading international experts, baroque violinist Sigiswald Kuijken, harpsichordists Gerhard Kastner and Colin Tilney, and baroque dancer Wendy Hilton. Restoration has worked with local baroque specialists and visiting artists from the UK, Europe, USA, and Australia, touring throughout New Zealand and appearing in festivals including the NZ International Festival of the Arts. They have made numerous recordings for Radio NZ, as well as CD releases in both New Zealand and London. They have also specialised in exploring the rich and intricate relationship between baroque dance and music, collaborating with local dancers and international experts, and giving performances and workshops. All the current members of Restoration have also been core members of NZ Barok, New Zealand's baroque orchestra based in Auckland. This includes NZ Barok founder/director Graham McPhail, long-term colleague Alison Salmons, and younger-generation leaders Emma Goodbehere and Eric Scholes. Over recent years, they have worked extensively with Lucinda Moon, one of Australia's foremost baroque violin specialists.



RESTORATION takes its name from that colourful era, the restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660 – the music of this time is central to the group's repertoire, which extends from Purcell, Bach and Handel, to Haydn and Mozart and beyond. The name also suggests the art restorer's process of revealing the original colours and dramatic impact of a treasured artwork. Their collaboration with John Drawbridge, one of New Zealand's most significant and influential artists of the 20th century, encapsulates their shared aim to acknowledge the designs and techniques of the historical past and their influence on art and culture in contemporary Aotearoa. This is seen particularly in Drawbridge's series of paintings and prints reworking images by 17th-century European masters. His abstract works also evoke how colour, pattern and structure create their ineffable effect in music, particularly in baroque music.

For more information on the members of Restoration, their past programmes and recordings, please visit www.restorationensemble.co.nz



Produced by Restoration and John Neill with assistance from Heather Gummer

Recorded in the Stella Maris chapel, Seatoun, Wellington, by John Neill, 23-25 September 2024

Edited and mixed by Restoration and John Neill

Cover artwork, *Vermeer with Malevich* (1984), by John Drawbridge, courtesy of the Massey University collection, photo by Michael Roth

Design by UnkleFranc

Printing by Studio Q

Restoration is grateful for support from the Lion Foundation, private donors, and numerous friends and colleagues.

Restoration Baroque Ensemble Trust is a Registered Charity, CC60212