

Peter Watchorn's Fully-Prepared Bach *French Suites*

By [Marvin J. Ward](#)

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J.S. Bach: [6] French Suites: Nos. 1 in D minor, S.812, 2 in C minor, S.813, 3 in B minor, S.814, 4 in E-flat, S.815, 5 in G, S.816, and 6 in E, S.817, preceded by Preludes Nos. 1, S.875a, 2, S.999, 3, S.923, 5, S.902a, & 6, S.855/i; and 20 *Little Preludes*, S.924-43; Peter Watchorn, harpsichord (Zuckermann, 2009, after Christian Vater, 1728); [Musica Omnia](#) mo 0402, © 2011, TT 161:34 (63:01 + 68:18 + 30:15), \$23.99.

These six suites were never published during Bach's lifetime. They were first edited by Bach's biographer Johann Forkel in 1802; Carl Czerny edited them again in 1840. Five were in the notebook that Bach prepared for his second wife Anna Magdalena in 1722, where they were each entitled simply "Suite pour le Clavessin." Some are recopied in a second notebook of 1725. Several of Bach's admirers, friends, and students made copies, all of which contain variants. There were two other suites, in A minor, S.818a, and in E-flat, S.819, that also appear with these in some collections. Over 50 manuscript sources total exist for these eight works. The name "French Suites" was first given to them by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg in 1762, and popularized by Forkel, who said they generally follow the French style, although they are in fact closer to the Italian style.

Real "French" suites generally begin with a Prelude. The keyboard ones evolved from Renaissance suites for the lute, which had un-measured preludes, allowing for some rhythmic improvisation by the performer. Of these by Bach, only No. 4 seems ever to have had a prelude associated with it in one or another manuscript version, which explains the anomaly of the above listing. Watchorn has researched these works extensively and has put the prelude for Suite No. 4 back in place and discovered others among the unpublished works that go appropriately with the other suites, which he also plays in versions he has assembled involving *da capo* repeats of the Menuet I's after the Menuet II's in the first three suites and of the Gavotte I after the Gavotte II in the fourth that were not indicated in the manuscript notebooks but that represent standard practice of the period. They do indeed sound normal and seamless as performed here in this traversal of them on a fairly new instrument, a replica of one from Bach's time, which has a very nice sound. The *Little Preludes* come from the *Clavierbüchlein* for Wilhelm Friedemann, written to help develop the playing skills of Bach's children. (W.F. was the eldest.) All of this suggests that the suites were initially written for the instruction of family members and subsequently took on a professional pedagogical usage by JSB, and that he either never desired or never got around to preparing them for publication.

The performance and the recorded sound are excellent. The recording venue is the Milton, MA, church St. Mary of the Hills; the CD is issued in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of its 1931 founding. It is quite reverberant, but pleasing. Australian-born, Cambridge, MA-based, and DMA-holding Watchorn is a scholar of harpsichord music and its performance as well as of the instruments themselves. I reviewed his biography of Isolde Ahlgrimm in [these pages](#). His playing is sterling, golden even. This set offers an immensely satisfying listening experience.

The accompanying booklet carries a color photo of a pastel painting of C.P.E. Bach by an unknown 18th century German-school artist rather than a portrait of the composer of the works recorded. The program notes are written in an interesting manner, "cast as an imaginary interview, designed to allow us to penetrate further into Bach's inner world." This is a clever and effective concept and entertaining reading.

This set deserves a place on your shelves alongside those of musicians with greater name recognition because of its extraordinarily high quality. The concept of creating more complete and polished works of what were composed as pedagogical exercises to offer a wide variety of dance rhythms by using related similar pieces by the same composer is perhaps not unique, but most recordings don't begin to offer this. There are some sets, like Christopher Hogwood's, that include the other two aforementioned suites, but that is a different perspective: its goal is completeness rather than completion. Watchorn chose to include the 20 *Little Preludes* rather than performing the same operation for those two suites.