
Bach
THE SIX FRENCH SUITES
CHROMATIC FANTASIA AND FUGUE
FANTASIA AND FUGUE IN A MINOR
SERGEY SCHEPKIN, PIANO
STEINWAY & SONS

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

SERGEY SCHEPKIN, PIANO

DISC 1

French Suite I in D minor, BWV 812

1	I. ALLEMANDE	3:01
2	II. COURANTE	2:13
3	III. SARABANDE	2:41
4	IV. MENUET I	1:00
5	V. MENUET II / MENUET I DA CAPO	1:43
6	VI. GIGUE	3:26

French Suite II in C minor, BWV 813

7	I. ALLEMANDE	2:43
8	II. COURANTE	1:38
9	III. SARABANDE	2:50
10	IV. AIR	1:08
11	V. MENUET I	1:19
12	VI. MENUET II / MENUET I DA CAPO	1:39
13	VII. GIGUE	2:02

French Suite III in B minor, BWV 814

14	I. ALLEMANDE	2:34
15	II. COURANTE	2:15
16	III. SARABANDE	2:54
17	IV. ANGLAISE	1:20
18	V. MENUET I	:58
19	VI. MENUET II (TRIO) / MENUET I DA CAPO	1:22
20	VII. GIGUE	1:50

French Suite IV in E-flat major, BWV 815

21	I. ALLEMANDE	2:52
22	II. COURANTE	1:53
23	III. SARABANDE	2:45
24	IV. GAVOTTE	1:08
25	V. AIR	1:24
26	VI. MENUET	:47
27	VII. GIGUE	2:14

PLAYING TIME 53:38

DISC 2

French Suite V in G major, BWV 816

1	I. ALLEMANDE	2:23
2	II. COURANTE	1:38
3	III. SARABANDE	4:41
4	IV. GAVOTTE	1:03
5	V. BOURRÉE	1:09
6	VI. LOURE	1:45
7	VII. GIGUE	2:58

French Suite VI in E major, BWV 817

8	I. PRÉLUDE (BWV 854/1)	1:14
9	II. ALLEMANDE	2:14
10	III. COURANTE	1:20
11	IV. SARABANDE	3:23
12	V. GAVOTTE	:58
13	VI. POLONAISE	1:20
14	VII. BOURRÉE	1:20
15	VIII. PETIT MENUET	1:13
16	IX. GIGUE	2:08

Fantasia and Fugue in A minor, BWV 904

17	I. FANTASIA	3:47
18	II. FUGUE	5:17

Fantasia and Fugue in A minor, BWV 904

19	I. FANTASIA	2:59
20	II. FUGUE	5:07

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

21	I. FANTASIA	7:27
22	II. FUGUE	4:26
	PLAYING TIME	59:48

Johann Sebastian Bach

THE SIX FRENCH SUITES
BWV 812—817

BACH'S SIX BEAUTIFUL AND REFINED FRENCH SUITES FOR KEYBOARD WERE COMPOSED IN 1722—25. They follow the six English Suites (ca. 1720) and precede the six Partitas (1726–30) and the Overture in the French Style (1731–35). All these dance suites were composed in the contemporary French manner, no matter what they are called. What makes the French Suites more "French" than the other sets — at least in the ears of Bach's immediate successors, who gave these pieces their nickname — is perhaps the great sophistication, *à la* François Couperin, of their musical language, as well as their smaller, more *galant* scale, in keeping with contemporary French compositions; further "Frenchness" comes in the number of the French Baroque dances (minuets, gavottes, and the like) that Bach interpolates between the obligatory sarabande and gigue within the French Suites: that number ranges progressively from two (Suites I and II) to three (Suites III, IV and V), and to four (VI).

Unlike the English Suites and the Partitas that feature opening movements of various lengths and designs, the French Suites begin directly with allemandes. One of the manuscripts of the Sixth Suite, however, opens the work with a prélude almost identical to the E Major Prelude from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*; it is included in the present recording.

The French Suites' musical features make me think that the six works are not a random collection of suites of comparable size, but were composed as a set. Take the gradual rise in the number of non-compulsory movements, cited above. Note how the second strain

of many of the dances opens with the soprano theme from the first strain sounding in the bass (e.g., the Sarabandes and Minuets from the First and Third Suites, the Courante from the Fifth, or the Bourrée from the Sixth). Moreover, the Suites' respective moods progressively brighten as we traverse from the dark First to the somewhat less melancholy Second, the considerably lighter Third, the poetic Fourth, brilliant Fifth, and effervescent Sixth.

Bach's own manuscripts of the more musically advanced versions of the French Suites did not survive, and these more refined readings only exist in copies by Bach's students, each of them offering its own set of problems for the editor and the performer. The Bärenreiter Edition, on which the present recording is based, features two different versions, the so-called "older" and "newer." The older version is based on the manuscript by Bach pupil and son-in-law Johann Christoph Altnikol, the newer on a number of copies by Bach's students of a younger generation. The newer version features many more embellishments, and the musical text is quite different on several occasions, too, always offering more sophisticated variants than those in the older version.

I structured my performances on this recording along the possibilities provided by both of these versions. For example, I leave the first statement of each strain minimally embellished unless expressly required by the text; the strain's repeat, however, introduces most of the ornaments of the newer version. It would be virtually impossible to include all of these ornaments while playing these works on the modern piano: the harpsichord or clavichord's lighter action and more transparent sonority allows for a greater degree of embellishment. Still, the modern piano can accommodate much of that ornamentation with sufficient clarity. Another possibility I take is to include a different original textual version in a repeat when the opportunity presents itself. For example, the Sarabande from the Fifth Suite has two completely different endings: the older version moves the melody into the

middle register and is somewhat subdued, while the newer version moves the melody to the very top and is exhilarating. I employ the older for the first statement and the newer for the repeat. (Other examples of this approach include Minuet II from the First Suite, Air from the Second, Minuet I from the Third, as well as Courante and Loure from the Fifth.) The Sarabande from the Sixth Suite is a particularly interesting case, offering two completely different sets of ornaments, both authentic, which makes it possible to alternate them between the two statements of each strain.

The dances' order presents a dilemma in that there is no certainty as to the position of the minuets in the Third, Fourth, and Sixth suites: in certain manuscripts, they appear after the gigues, as they do sometimes in the contemporary French repertoire. I place them before the gigues, as it is Bach's custom elsewhere. The vivacious gigue makes a brilliant ending, so it is only logical to precede it with the graceful, charming — and sometimes humorous — minuet.

Johann Sebastian Bach

FANTASIA AND FUGUE IN A MINOR
BWV 904 (CA. 1723)

THE A-MINOR FANTASIA AND FUGUE IS ONE OF BACH'S MOST MOVING WORKS. The foundation for the Fantasia's main thematic material (the ritornello) is the Phrygian tetrachord (four notes of natural minor that descend from tonic to dominant) which appears in the bass, a well-known *topos* of inexorable fate or of lament. While the musical idiom of the Fantasia is somewhat archaic (on first hearing, one could mistake the music for that of William Byrd or Orlando Gibbons), the Fantasia's concerto-style ritornello form is modern: old meets new.

The fugue is a contrapuntal *tour de force*. It is a double fugue in three large sections, the first two of which introduce and develop the subjects separately. The first subject is diatonic, the second chromatic. The first subject gently questions; the second proceeds with the implacability of a rite, while the countersubjects weave their intricate and sinuous fabric around the subjects and get developed in the episodes. The final section of the work astonishingly combines both subjects and details of their respective countersubjects.

The Fantasia can take a number of interpretive approaches: it can be performed as a solemn, philosophical, and melancholy work, as it is here in the first take. It is also possible to give it a faster tempo and a more dynamic character, which I attempt in my second take. The two takes feature, respectively, two different Steinways: a clear-sounding Hamburg (the French Suites are also recorded on it), and a more mysterious and mercurial New York (also used for the following Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue).

Johann Sebastian Bach

CHROMATIC FANTASIA AND FUGUE IN D MINOR

BWV 903 (CA. 1720)

THE EXTRAORDINARY CHROMATIC FANTASIA AND FUGUE SHOW BACH AT HIS MOST DARING. In the Fantasia, striking modulations abound; the florid, quasi-Lisztian textures change seemingly at random. The entire piece sounds like a vast Romantic improvisation, and it was, in fact, prized as such by the Romantic generation.

In his Chromatic Fantasia, Bach seems to be in favor of tuning the keyboard in such a way so as to permit playing in all the keys. In fact, this work is hardly playable unless the more modern tuning is employed, as the previous systems of tuning resulted in the so-called "wolf" intervals that rendered some keys unusable; and it is no wonder that the First Book of The Well-Tempered Clavier, consisting of preludes and fugues in all the keys, would soon follow suit, in 1722. By using enharmonic modulations, often via the diminished-seventh chord, the Fantasia goes into extremely remote keys, such as, for example, A-flat minor, B-flat minor, and C-sharp minor. It should be noted that, with a few exceptions, it is minor keys that are used; the avoidance of major keys is a *tour de force*, especially in the Fugue, where the subject does not enter in any major keys at all. The predominant use of minor keys results in great pathos and tremendous excitement.

Subjectively, I associate the "recitative" section of the Fantasia with the scene of Orpheus in the Tartarus (cf. the slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto) — the singer's gentle pleas are answered by the Furies' harsh chords that deny him his request for Eurydice's shadow. Orpheus's increasingly more expressive entreaties seem gradually to mollify the Furies, but only up to a point; then the anguish continues, and the hero, in the extraordinarily moving coda, eventually accepts his fate.

The Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue is a tremendous virtuoso composition, and Bach is unambiguous about it: to cap it all, he writes a series of fast-moving double octaves at the end of the Fugue — one of this work's features that herald the future development of the keyboard technique, and something that, to my memory, Bach doesn't do in any of his other keyboard pieces.

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer, writes of the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue:

"This fantasia is unique, and never had its like…. It is remarkable that this work, though of such intricate workmanship, makes an impression even on the most unpracticed hearer if it is but performed at all clearly." (—Forkel, trans. Arthur Mendel)

Forkel then quotes a short "macaronic" poem by a friend of his, who sent him the poem along with the music of this work:

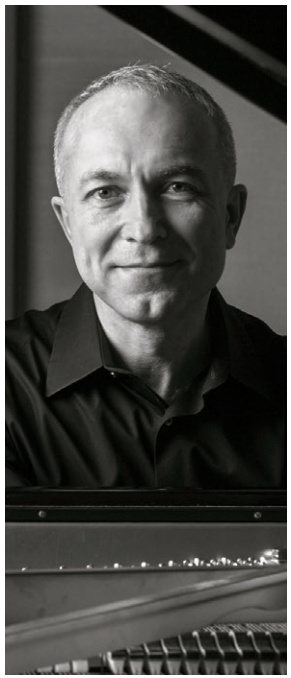
Anbey kommt an
Etwas Musik von Sebastian,
Sonst genannt Fantasia Chromatica;
Bleibt schön in alle Saecula.

Herewith arrives
A bit of music by Sebastian,
Otherwise called *Fantasia Chromatica*;
It will remain beautiful in all the *Saecula* [i.e., forever].

—Sergey Schepkin


Johann Sebastian Bach.

Sergey Schepkin is recognized as one of the world's foremost interpreters of keyboard works by Johann Sebastian Bach. Schepkin made his Carnegie Hall début in 1993 at Weill Recital Hall, and has performed to great acclaim for the Great Performers Series at Lincoln Center, Celebrity Series of Boston, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, the Maestro Chamber Series in Los Angeles, the Philharmonic halls in St. Petersburg, Russia, and the Sumida Triphony Hall in Tokyo, among many other places. He is a recipient of numerous awards and grants, and a prizewinner in several international competitions.



Schepkin has performed concertos with such conductors as Kazuyoshi Akiyama, Nikolai Alexeev, Max Hobart, Christian Knapp, Keith Lockhart, Jonathan McPhee, Edward Serov, and Vassily Sinaisky. A passionate chamber player, he has performed with renowned instrumentalists, including the Borromeo, Cuarteto Latinoamericano, New Zealand, and Vilnius string quartets, as well as the Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston, of which he was a founding member. He is a member of the Boston-based Trio Amici.

A naturalized American, Sergey Schepkin was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. He studied piano at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with Alexandra Zhukovsky, Grigory Sokolov, and Alexander Ikharev. He studied with Russell Sherman at New England Conservatory in Boston, where he earned an Artist Diploma in 1992 and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in 1999.

This album is part of Schepkin's large-scale recording project that will eventually comprise all of Bach's keyboard works performed on the modern piano while having historical performance practice as a source of inspiration.

Schepkin is Associate Professor of Piano at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and is also a member of the piano faculty at the New England Conservatory School of Preparatory and Continuing Education in Boston.

Sergey Schepkin is a Steinway Artist.

All performances were recorded at Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston: *The Six French Suites* on August 21 and September 10, 2013; the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* and version two of the *Fantasia and Fugue* on January 4, 2011; version one of the *Fantasia and Fugue* on July 11, 2011.

Producer: Sergey Schepkin
Recording and Editing: Patrick Keating
Executive Producers: Eric Feidner, Jon Feidner
Piano: Steinway Model D
Art Direction: Jackie Fugere
Design: Oberlander Group
Cover Painting: The Foursome, c.1713 (oil on canvas) by Jean-Antoine Watteau
Photo of Sergey Schepkin: Michael Lutch

Special thanks to Patrick Keating, Michael Lutch, Ellen Cole, Ian Lindsey, Aaron Mendelsohn and Marcia Adelstein, Gregory J. Tolwinski, and Christopher Trapani.

This album is dedicated to the loving memory of Eugene Saletan.

Publishing Editions: NBA (Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel); BGA (Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig)