

Understanding J.S. Bach's Allemandes from the French Suites

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BAROQUE DANCE

Baroque Dance flourished in the courts of Europe over 100 years, from about 1661 – 1789. During the 17th century, court dancing had not only a great social importance but also political importance. It was regarded as a physical manifestation of music, one which allowed the dancer to achieve a more virtuous and even more noble life.

Training in dance was essential, along with fencing, poetry and music. Nobles were expected to dance before the king, and in doing so, demonstrate the purity of their nobility and virtue. Couples dancing in the court were observed and assessed by the assembled company as they moved through their steps. Baroque dancers were dancing for those who were watching, and not for their own enjoyment.

Baroque dance is comprised of a basic vocabulary of approximately twenty steps, which were performed with many subtle variations in the choreography of each individual piece of music to be danced. The aesthetic of Baroque dance was all about being contained, smooth and graceful with every motion, including those of the arms, intended to create a striking visual impression. Modern ballet is an outgrowth of the courtly dancing of this period.

There was not a basic universal pattern of steps used for each type of dance, such as the “waltz step.” Rather, each piece was choreographed according to the melodic and rhythmic intricacies of the music. From this time period, there are over 350 extant dances published in notation. At least 20 different *types* of dances were notated (e.g. allemande, sarabande, bourrée, gavotte, gigue chaconne, menuet).

While the French style of dancing had prominence throughout most of Europe (including Britain, Germany and Russia), in Italy there was a parallel development of a distinct Italian style continuing Renaissance traditions of dance. Dancing masters in Italy were described as either ‘French’ or ‘Italian’ in accordance with the style in which they specialized. French dance is characterized by intricate footwork and careful attention to deportment, while Italian style has quicker, more virtuosic steps, with a freer, more improvisatory feel.

FRENCH SUITES

J.S. Bach wrote the French Suites between 1722 – 1725, possibly as a wedding present for his wife, Anna Magdalena. Suites 1-5 appear in the Anna Magdalena Bach book of 1722 in their original form. Bach continued to rework the pieces and later added a sixth suite. Although no original manuscript in Bach's hand exists, many copies by Bach's pupils have survived, showing the pedagogical importance of this music.

Bach called these pieces *Suites pour le Clavessin* [Suites for the Harpsichord]. These dance suites are not particularly French, just as the English Suites are not particularly English. Twelve years after Bach's death, music critic and theorist Friedrich W. Marpurg referred to them as "Six French Suites." In his 1802 biography of Bach, Johann Nikolaus Forkel also called them French Suites. Many have tried to determine why they were so called, when the suites include dances which are clearly written in Italian style, as well as some in French style, and typical of Bach, many of the dances are a synthesis of various European styles.

These Suites follow the basic form of the Baroque dance suite, with the four main dances: the allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. Extra dances are included before the concluding gigue. This highly stylized dance music was not intended to be danced, but presents the essence of each dance form, conveying the character of the dance it represents.

ALLEMANDE

The **Allemande** (allemanda, almain, or alman) began life as a dance in the Renaissance, and by the end of the 17th century it became one of the four standard dances of the suite. In this moderately slow, serious dance in quadruple meter and binary form, the dancers formed a line of couples, extended their paired hands forward, and paraded back and forth the length of the ballroom, walking three steps, then balancing on one foot.

While much is written about the French style versus the Italian style of the Courante/Corrente, not much has been said about the styles of Allemande. I believe the Allemande also appears in French style, as well as in Italian style.

The French style_allemande could be quite slow, since it was originally intended as a walking piece. The French style is rhythmically complex, with a texture varying from 2 to 4 or more voices, often using *stile brisé* (arpeggiated style). The Italian style allemande is a much simpler piece, with a clear harmonic and rhythmic structure. It's often imitative, written in two-part texture, and played faster than the French style. Bach's French Suites contain two Allemandes written in Italian style, and four others in French style.