

This program grew out of a continuing dissatisfaction with traditional presentation and reception of classical music—in this case, with the typical programming of Baroque dance suites.

The suite was the dominant secular instrumental form in the Baroque and represented the apex of Baroque internationalism. The obligatory four movements employ contrasting tempo, meter, and affect, and are of diverse national origins. In the cultural context of 18th-C Europe, this variety made the dance suite riotously multi-cultural.

It is ironic, then, that to modern concert audiences, the effect of a complete suite is likely to be one of homogeneity and—dare I say?—tedium. Given the vastly greater variety of music present to listeners today, it can be difficult to maintain focus through a performance of a half-dozen pieces of the same historical period, by the same composer, for the same instrument, all in the same binary form and same key.

In order to recapture something like the reception Bach could have expected, and in order to give each piece in the suite its own “setting,” I contrived to compile a “Double Suite” in which the movements of Bach’s Partita are interleaved with American vernacular dance pieces (all in the Partita’s key of B-flat).

The effect of the juxtaposition is both striking and edifying. The fresh context brings Bach down from his sometimes forbidding pedestal, and his humor and swing come through more plainly—especially to non-specialist audiences who may be primed to talk Bach deadly seriously. The ragtime and related American pieces, by contrast, come from an often denigrated folk/entertainment culture. Even the elevation of jazz to “high-art” status has not helped much, as many jazz musicians and critics view ragtime as the trivial music of jazz’s Uncle Tom prehistory. Hearing ragtime presented matter-of-factly in this setting, with the rags holding their own among the Bach movements, makes more of an impression to a broad audience than earnest discourse on the “legitimacy” of early African-American popular music.

The Bach-Ragtime Double Partita is part of a larger program of two double suites, which includes a similar treatment of the *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm* of Béla Bartók. It is my hope that this approach can attract new audiences to classical concerts and bring new insight to aficionados.

Suite and Low Down

A Bach-Ragtime Double Partita

*College Music Society
Northeast Chapter Conference
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David Feurzeig
University of Vermont
David.Feurzeig@uvm.edu

Program

(Double Suite no. 2 will not be played at CMS conference)

Double Suite no. 1 in B-flat

Partita no. 1 & American Dances

Partita no. 1, BWV 825

J.S. Bach
(1685-1750)

Prelude

Interlude: about this program

Allemande

Interlude: Prelude no. 1

George Gershwin
(1898-1937)

Courante

Interlude: Euphonic Sounds

Scott Joplin
(1868-1917)

Sarabande

Interlude: The Graceful Ghost Rag

William Bolcom
(b. 1938)

Menuets I & II

Interlude: Charleston Rag

Eubie Blake
(1887-1983)

Gigue

Double Suite no. 2

Bulgarian Dances & Barbarian Interludes

Bulgarian Rhythm no. 1 (2+2+3)
Mikrokosmos no. 117

Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)

Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm
Mikrokosmos nos. 148-153

Dance no. 1 (4+2+3)

Interlude: La colombe (The Dove)

Olivier Messiaen
(1908-1992)

Dance no. 2 (2+2+3)

Interlude: A Ragtime Nightingale

Joseph Lamb
(1887-1960)

Dance no. 3 (2+3)

Interlude: Bélának a Blues-a (Bela's Blues)

David Feurzeig
(b. 1965)

Dance no. 4 (3+2+3)

Interlude: Impromptu in Two Keys

Gershwin

Dance no. 5 (2+2+2+3)

Interlude: Prelude & Fugue in C-sharp minor, WTC I

Bach

Dance no. 6 (3+3+2)

~ Intermission ~