

Johann Sebastian
BACH
Magna Sequentia III

A Contemplative Suite
compiled and performed by
Sonia Rubinsky, Piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) Magna Sequentia III

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 in Eisenach to a family of musicians. He received his earliest instruction from his father and brothers. After being orphaned at the age of ten, he went to live with an older brother, Johann Christoph, an organist in Ohrdruf. A precocious young man, he moved away in 1700 to attend the prestigious St Michael's School in Lüneburg, where he furthered his musical education with Georg Böhm. Bach's early career was primarily as an organist and keyboard virtuoso. He served as Capellmeister for the court of Prince Leopold in Cöthen for several years before ascending to the position of cantor at the prestigious St Thomas Church in Leipzig from 1723 until his death in 1750. Primarily recognised by his contemporaries as an outstanding harpsichordist and organist, Bach is now recognised as one of the greatest and most prolific composers of all time, whose official catalogue of works, the *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, numbers over one thousand compositions.

Sonia Rubinsky recorded the seven compositions in this playlist after recording two large collections of dance suites, *Magna Sequentia I and II*. In those innovative recordings, she created expanded Baroque dance suites consisting of a larger number of movements than found in Bach's suites. For these large suites, she selected movements from Bach's suites for keyboard. This unique format enabled her to contrast the different moods and styles found in Bach's writing.

The playlist is a contemplative collection that contrasts well with *Magna Sequentia I and II*. It is a varied group of pieces that spans Bach's compositional career, from very early works such as the *Prelude* from the *Suite in F minor* – of which we know very little – to works from the end of his life, such as the *Ricercar a Tre* from *The Musical Offering*, which has a well-documented history. In fact, the circumstances of its origin were written about on the front page of the *Berlinische Nachrichten!* It includes works originally written for the keyboard, but also works for organ and Sonia's own transcription of the well-known *Air* from the *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major*.

The *Suite in F minor, BWV 823*, is probably an early work of Bach's. It survives only in an incomplete form in a manuscript by Bach's student Johann Peter Kellner. The *Prelude* is unlike any other that Bach wrote, consisting of an eight-measure theme that alternates with related material throughout, the theme serving as a quiet *ritornello*.

Sonia has made her own transcription of the *Air* from *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068*, a work from Bach's time in Leipzig, when he had reached his full powers. This unassuming piece has a quiet beauty that is enhanced by Sonia's playing.

The next work, *Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier, BWV 731*, is an early organ chorale prelude with no direct source. Bach's score has a heavily embellished melody, and Sonia's approach conjures up the slow movements of a cantata or a concerto. For this piece and the following, Sonia performed directly from the organ score, and was able to deftly interpret works that when played at the organ utilise different sonorities to bring out the voices.

Another organ chorale prelude, *Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659*, follows. The provenance of this work is certain: it is from the *Great Eighteen Chorale Preludes*, gathered together by Bach in the last decade of his life. It is a famous hymn, composed by Martin Luther, and based on the plainchant *Veni redemptor gentium* by Ambrose. As with the others in the *Great Eighteen*, it is a *tour de force* of compositional ingenuity.

The *Ricercar a Tre* from *The Musical Offering, BWV 1079*, has a famous history, and is one of the first – and certainly the best known – compositions for the newly invented fortepiano. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel was employed as a musician in the court of Frederick the Great in Potsdam. Frederick was himself a musician – he played the flute and composed over a hundred flute sonatas – who held nightly concerts at which he often performed. During a visit made by J.S. Bach to Potsdam, during which he played all of the organs in the city, he made an appearance at Frederick's court, where the king showed off several of his Silbermann fortepianos, and tested the elder Bach's

improvisational reputation by presenting him with theme of this *Ricercar*, which was an old-fashioned name for a fugue. After improvising a three-part fugue, the king requested Bach improvise a six-part fugue. Bach demurred, and two months later published *The Musical Offering*, a large collection of pieces inspired by the *Thema Regium*.

The C major *Prelude* from the first book of *The Well Tempered Clavier I, BWV 846*, is one of Bach's best-known compositions. It has been played by generations of piano students because it is, beside beautiful, an excellent étude. An early version of the prelude, *BWV 846A*, is found in the *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, the collection Bach began compiling around 1720 for the

musical education of his eldest son.

The *Toccatà in E minor, BWV 914*, is another early work of Bach. It is the shortest of his seven 'manualiter' toccatas, and is in four sections. A short prelude is followed by a double fugue, then an *adagio* with a recitative-like quality, and another much larger fugue as the finale. This fugue has sections which are almost identical to an anonymous piece in the library of the Naples Conservatory of Music. It appears that Bach borrowed liberally from the Naples fugue, but made characteristically refined changes to the subject, and wrote his own episodic material.

Harold J. Bott Jr

Sonia Rubinsky

Sonia Rubinsky was awarded Best Recording of the Year in the Classical Category of the 2009 Latin GRAMMY® Awards for the eighth volume of the complete piano works of Heitor Villa-Lobos, recorded for Naxos (8.570504). She holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano performance from The Juilliard School, New York. Her discography includes works by Scarlatti, Mozart and Mendelssohn, as well as contemporary composers. She has been a three-time recipient of the prestigious Carlos Gomes Prize in her native Brazil, and was nominated by Murray Perahia to be artist-in-residence at the Edward Aldwell International Center for Piano Performance and Musicianship in Jerusalem, where she regularly gives masterclasses. She lives in Paris, teaching masterclasses, and performs as a soloist and recitalist around the world.

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Photo of Sonia Rubinsky © Isabela Senatore

Following on from the two large sets of dance suites, *Magna Sequentia I* (8.574026) and *Magna Sequentia II* (8.574027), *Magna Sequentia III* is a contemplative collection featuring a varied group of pieces that spans Bach's compositional career, from very early works such as the *Prelude* from the *Suite in F minor* to works from the end of his life, such as the *Ricercar a Tre* from *The Musical Offering*.

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| 1 | Prelude from Suite in F minor, BWV 823 | 2:29 |
| 2 | Air from Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068
(transcr. for piano by S. Rubinsky) | 6:32 |
| 3 | Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier, BWV 731 | 2:51 |
| 4 | Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659 | 5:19 |
| 5 | Ricercar a Tre from The Musical Offering, BWV 1079 | 7:47 |
| 6 | Prelude No. 1 in C major, BWV 846 from
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I | 3:24 |
| 7 | Toccatà in E minor, BWV 914 | 8:17 |

Sonia Rubinsky, Piano

Recorded: 6–10 January 2018 at The Theatre, Florida, USA
Producer: Alexander Berne, Harold J. Bott Jr, Sonia Rubinsky • Artistic direction: Edmundo Hora
Engineers: Gary Baldassari, Alexander Berne • Editor: Alexander Berne
Piano: Yamaha CFX • Piano tuning: Justin Elliott • Booklet note: Harold J. Bott Jr
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Playing Time
36:48



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