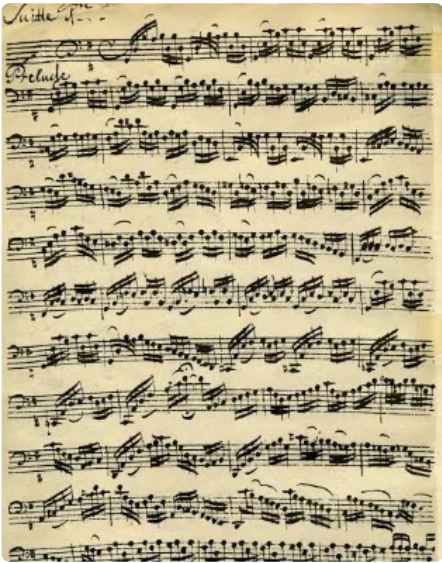


The Baroque suite

A suite is a set of dances in one key, played one after another. The dances were real — people had danced them at court within living memory — but by 1720 nobody was dancing to Bach. What survived was the *character* of each dance: its metre, its tempo, its favourite rhythm, the way it begins.

That is why the suite is such good teaching. Every movement is short, in binary form, and built on one rhythmic idea. Learn the twelve dances on these sheets and you can name almost any movement in the repertoire by ear in two bars.



THE SHAPE OF A SUITE

Optional opening Prélude Or Ouverture, Sinfonia, Toccata, Fantasia. Not a dance. Sets the key and the mood.	The core four A · C · S · G Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gigue — fixed in this order from the 1650s onward.	Inserted before the gigue Galanteries Minuet, Bourrée, Gavotte, Passepied and their friends — usually in pairs.	Sometimes instead Variations Chaconne, Passacaille, or a Double: the same music again, ornamented.
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IN THIS PACK

- 2 The core four — allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue.
- 3 The galanteries — minuet, bourrée, gavotte and the lighter dances.
- 4 Openings and non-dance movements, and the variation forms.
- 5 How a suite is put together — key, form, repeats, ornament, tempo.
- 6 Suggested listening, and how to write a suite of your own.

Every dance sheet gives you the same six things: where the dance came from, its metre, its tempo, its character in a few words, the telltale rhythm that identifies it, and one piece to hear it in.

Pairs with Music history — the six periods and the Composer's listening log.

The core four

Allemande · Courante · Sarabande · Gigue

These four, in this order, are the spine of almost every suite written between about 1650 and 1750. They were fixed in this sequence by the posthumous 1693 edition of Johann Jacob Froberger's keyboard suites — Froberger himself had been freer about it — and the order works because it alternates: moderate duple, quicker triple, slow triple, fast compound. Play the four in sequence and you have covered every metre a Baroque player needed.

Allemande

GERMANY · 4/4

Moderate, unhurried and serious, in common time. It almost always starts with a short upbeat — one or three semiquavers — and then runs in a continuous stream of small notes that never quite stops for breath. Both halves usually begin with the same upbeat figure, which is a handy giveaway.

Telltale — a semiquaver anacrusis, then unbroken semiquaver motion. No strong dance lilt; it feels like a walk, not a step.

Hear it — Bach, French Suite No. 5 in G, BWV 816.

Courante

FRANCE · 3/2 OR 6/4

The trickiest of the four. The French courante is moderate and deliberately ambiguous: written in 3/2 but constantly reorganising itself into 6/4, so you cannot be sure where the bar is. Its Italian cousin, the *corrente*, is a different animal — fast, light 3/4 with running quavers and no ambiguity at all.

Telltale — hemiola, especially at cadences: three groups of two where you expected two groups of three.

Hear it — Bach, Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1008.

Sarabande

SPAIN, VIA FRANCE · 3/4

Slow, grave and expressive — the emotional centre of the suite, and often the movement people remember. Its history is a surprise: it arrived from the Spanish colonies as a fast, disreputable dance and was banned in Spain in 1583 for indecency, before the French court slowed it down into nobility a century later.

Telltale — weight on the second beat, very often a dotted crotchet there. Sparse texture, room for ornament.

Hear it — Handel, Keyboard Suite in D minor, HWV 437.

Gigue

BRITISH ISLES · 6/8 OR 12/8

Fast, bouncing and compound — the finale, and deliberately the lightest thing in the suite after the sarabande's seriousness. Descended from the English and Irish jig. Bach's giges frequently open like little fugues, and the second half often answers by turning the opening subject upside down.

Telltale — a lilting long-short pulse in threes; a dotted or 3/8 variant appears in French suites.

Hear it — Bach, English Suite No. 3 in G minor, BWV 808.

One test, four answers. Count the pulse and ask two questions: is it in twos or threes, and is it fast or slow? Twos and moderate is an allemande. Threes and moderate with the bar slipping about is a courante. Threes and slow with a heavy second beat is a sarabande. Threes inside twos, and fast, is a gigue.

The galanteries

The lighter dances, inserted before the gigue

lighter

shorter

squarer phrases

usually paired

more recently danced

These were the fashionable dances of the French court, and unlike the core four they were still in real use. They are shorter, tunier, and built in tidy four-bar phrases. Composers slot them between the sarabande and the gigue, nearly always in pairs — dance I, dance II, then dance I again without repeats (*da capo*). The second of the pair often changes to the tonic minor or major, or thins to three parts, which is why it is sometimes labelled *Trio*.

DANCE	METRE	TEMPO	BEGINS ON	CHARACTER AND HOW TO SPOT IT
<i>Minuet</i>	3/4	moderate	the beat	The most durable of them all — it outlived the suite and became the third movement of the Classical symphony. Elegant, poised, phrases in fours, no upbeat.
<i>Bourrée</i>	2/2	quick	one crotchet up	Brisk and cheerful duple time with a single crotchet anacrusis. Very often the catchiest movement in the suite.
<i>Gavotte</i>	4/4 (cut C)	moderate	the half bar	Phrases start and finish in the middle of the bar, giving a curiously balanced, slightly formal swing. Two crotchets of upbeat.
<i>Passepied</i>	3/8 or 6/8	fast	one quaver up	A quick, light minuet — smaller note values, tripping along. Bach uses it in the English Suite No. 5.
<i>Rigaudon</i>	2/2	lively	one crotchet up	Provençal, close to the bourrée but blunter and more foot-stamping, with repeated notes.
<i>Loure</i>	6/4	slow	one crotchet up	Stately and heavily dotted — the slow, grand end of the compound-time family. Bach, Violin Partita No. 3.
<i>Polonaise</i>	3/4	moderate	the beat	Polish in flavour, with the first beat split into a short-short-long figure and cadences on weak beats.
<i>Forlane</i>	6/4 or 6/8	lively	the beat	Venetian, boisterous, often with a rondeau-like refrain. Rare, but Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 1 has one.
<i>Air</i>	any	gentle	any	Not a dance at all: a song without words, put in for pure melody. Sometimes followed by variations.
<i>Badinerie</i>	2/4	very fast	the beat	"Banter" — a joking finale. One famous example: the flute movement closing Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2.

Where the upbeat tells you everything

In duple time the anacrusis is the fastest identification you have. No upbeat and in threes: minuet. One crotchet up: bourrée or rigaudon. Two crotchets up: gavotte. Get in the habit of checking the first bar before you look at anything else.

How a pair is written out

You will see *Menuet I — Menuet II — Menuet I da capo*, and only the two dances are printed. Play I with repeats, II with repeats, then I again straight through. The same convention gives us the Classical minuet-and-trio, and later the scherzo.

Openings, and the variation movements

Two kinds of movement in a suite are not dances. The first comes at the front, to establish the key and get the audience's attention. The second replaces or follows the dances with a set of variations over a repeating pattern – and these are often the longest and most ambitious things in the whole repertoire.

WAYS TO BEGIN

Prélude

FREE

Improvisatory in origin – literally the warming-up before the piece. It may be a single unbroken texture of broken chords (Bach's Cello Suite No. 1), a fully worked movement, or something close to a toccata.

Ouverture

TWO OR THREE SECTIONS

The French overture, from Lully's theatre music: a slow, majestic opening in heavily dotted rhythm, then a fast fugal section, then usually a return of the slow music. Bach titles his four orchestral suites *Ouvertures* after it.

Sinfonia · Toccata

ITALIAN

Bach's Partitas show the range: No. 1 opens with a *Praeludium*, No. 2 with a *Sinfonia* (slow, then an Andante, then a fugal Allegro), No. 6 with a *Toccata* framing a full fugue.

Fantasia

FREE

The loosest label of all, and the composer's licence to do as they please before the dancing starts. Bach's Partita No. 3 begins with one.

VARIATIONS OVER A REPEATING PATTERN

Chaconne

Slow triple time. A short harmonic progression, often four or eight bars, repeated as the ground for continuous variation. Descending bass lines are common but not required.

Bach, Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor – the Chaconne runs as long as the four dances before it put together.

Passacaille

The close relative: variations over a repeating bass rather than a repeating chord scheme. In practice the two names were used almost interchangeably at the time.

Handel, Keyboard Suite No. 7 in G minor, HWV 432.

Double

A varied repeat of the dance just played: the same harmony and phrase lengths, now decorated into faster notes. Written out because the ornamentation is too elaborate to leave to the player.

Bach, Violin Partita No. 1 in B minor – every dance has its double.

And one form that turns up anywhere: the rondeau

Any dance can be cast as a rondeau – a refrain that returns between contrasting episodes (A B A C A). The French keyboard composers loved it: much of Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin* works this way, and Rameau's *Les Tendres Plaintes* is a rondeau. It is the ancestor of the Classical rondo finale, so hearing it here makes that later form obvious.

How a suite is built

Six conventions do nearly all the work. Once you know them you can read an unfamiliar suite at sight and know what is coming before you play it.

One key throughout

UNITY

Every movement stays in the same key — that is what makes the collection a suite rather than a set of separate pieces. The only licensed departure is the second of a paired *galanterie*, which may go to the tonic minor or major.

Binary form

||: A :|||: B :||

Two repeated halves. The first moves from the tonic to the dominant (or to the relative major in a minor key); the second wanders further afield and comes home. Both halves usually share the same opening figure — that is *rounded* binary when the opening returns intact at the end.

Repeats are for ornament

PERFORMANCE
PRACTICE

The written repeat is not a photocopy. Players were expected to decorate the second time through — trills, mordents, appoggiaturas, passing notes, and in the French style whole added lines. The *double* is simply this written down.

One rhythmic idea per movement

CHARACTER

A dance movement almost never changes its rhythmic vocabulary. The opening bar declares the pattern and the whole piece elaborates it. This is the single most useful thing to copy in your own writing.

Contrast by tempo and metre

ORDERING

Because the key never changes, variety has to come from pulse. Look at the core four: moderate duple, quicker triple, slow triple, fast compound. When you insert *galanteries*, keep alternating — do not put two quick duple dances side by side.

Notes inégales

FRENCH CONVENTION

In French music, pairs of quick notes written evenly were played unequally — long-short — whenever that note value carried the movement's motion. Nothing in the score says so; you are expected to know. Dotted figures in a French overture are likewise sharpened rather than played mathematically.

A MODEL SUITE YOU COULD WRITE THIS WEEK

MOVEMENT	METRE	BARS	YOUR JOB
<i>Prélude</i>	free	16	One broken-chord pattern through the harmonies of the key.
<i>Allemande</i>	4/4	8 + 8	Semiquaver upbeat, then keep the semiquavers running.
<i>Sarabande</i>	3/4	8 + 8	Slow, weight on beat two, leave gaps for ornament.
<i>Menuet I & II</i>	3/4	8 + 8 each	II in the tonic minor, thinner texture, then I <i>da capo</i> .
<i>Gigue</i>	6/8	8 + 12	Fast and light. Invert the opening figure to start the second half.

Three mistakes to avoid

- 1 Changing key between movements. It breaks the one thing holding the suite together.
- 2 Giving a dance the wrong upbeat — a gavotte that starts on beat one is not a gavotte.
- 3 Writing too much material. One figure per movement, and trust it.

Suggested listening

Start at the top and work down

Listen with the movement titles in front of you and name each dance as it starts. Two suites heard properly teach more than twenty skimmed.

COMPOSER	WORK	DATE	WHY THIS ONE
J. S. Bach	<i>Cello Suite No. 1 in G, BWV 1007</i>	c.1720	The clearest possible statement of the standard plan: prelude, the core four, with a pair of minuets slipped in before the gigue. One instrument, no accompaniment, nothing hidden.
J. S. Bach	<i>Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D, BWV 1068</i>	c.1731	A full French overture, then the famous Air, then gavottes, bourrée and gigue. Hear how much the trumpets and drums change the character.
Handel	<i>Water Music, HWV 348–350</i>	1717	Suite as public event — written for the King's barge party on the Thames. Hornpipes, bourrées, minuets, and horns outdoors.
Lully	<i>Le Bourgeois gentilhomme, suite</i>	1670	The source of the whole French tradition: the overture style, the dotted grandeur, the courtly dances as they were actually danced.
Couperin	<i>Pièces de clavecin, Ordre No. 6</i>	1717	French keyboard writing at its most refined, with picture-titles instead of dance names and ornamentation written into every bar.
Rameau	<i>Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin</i>	c.1729	More brilliant and more violent than Couperin. <i>Les Trois Mains</i> and the <i>Gavotte et six doubles</i> show the double at full stretch.
Jacquet de La Guerre	<i>Pièces de clavecin, Suite in D minor</i>	1687	One of very few women in print in the period, and a chance to hear the unmeasured prelude — a French keyboard speciality, written without bar lines or note values, that Bach never took up.
Telemann	<i>Water Music (Hamburger Ebb und Fluth)</i>	1723	A suite with characters rather than dances — each movement a sea deity. Proof of how flexible the form had become.
Bach	<i>Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004</i>	c.1720	Four dances and then the Chaconne — the summit of the variation movement. Leave this until the others make sense.

The suite after the Baroque

The form never quite died. Composers returned to it whenever they wanted to write in an older voice: Grieg's *Holberg Suite* (1884), Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), Warlock's *Capriol Suite* (1926), Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1920), Schoenberg's *Suite* op. 25 (1923) — a suite of Baroque dances written entirely with twelve-tone rows.

A listening exercise

- 1 Play a movement without looking at the title. Count: twos or threes?
- 2 Find the upbeat. None, one note, or two?
- 3 Name the dance, then check. Log the ones you miss and re-hear them.
- 4 Then write eight bars in the same dance, in your own key.