

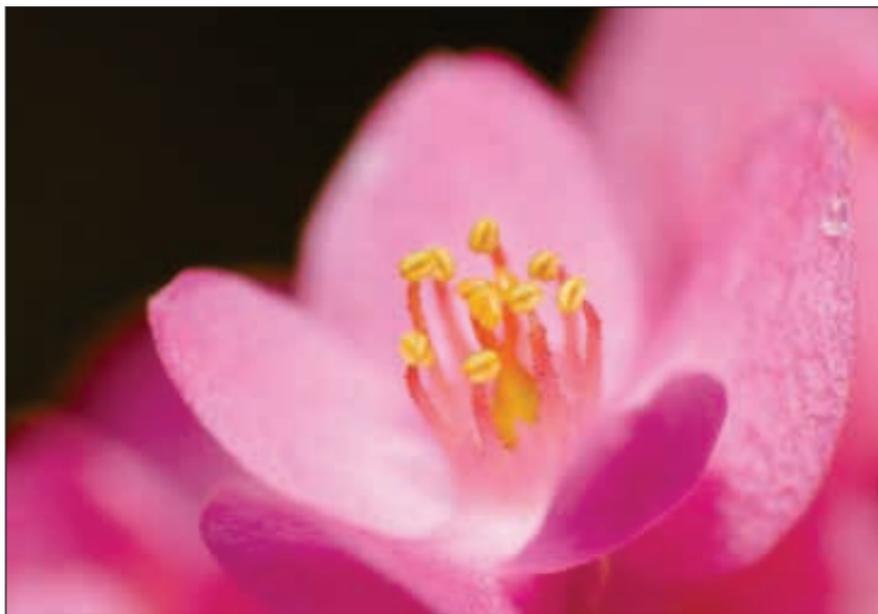
NAXOS

HANDEL

Keyboard Suites • 1

Nos. 1–4

Philip Edward Fisher, Piano



George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Keyboard Suites • 1

Handel's legacy is formidable. Operas, concertos, oratorios and instrumental suites – he wrote masterpieces in nearly every genre of his day, building a name for himself that was the envy of his contemporaries. Despite his later success, however, his musical career did not have the most auspicious of starts. Born in Halle in 1685, the young Handel was originally intended for the legal profession. His father, a barber-surgeon at the court of the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels and a prominent member of the community, discouraged his son's musical aspirations, and it was only upon the intervention of the Duke himself that the boy was grudgingly permitted access to a musical education. Under his first teacher Friedrich Zachow, Handel received organ, harpsichord and composition lessons, occasionally playing for services at the Liebfrauenkirche in Halle, where Zachow was organist. The death of his father in 1697 seems to have been a turning point for Handel. Although he enrolled at Halle University in February 1702 to study law, this was clearly a rather half-hearted gesture, as a month later he accepted the position of organist at the Cathedral Church. A musical career was beckoning, and the eighteen-year-old composer soon left Halle to embark upon the journey that would eventually make him a household name.

Although in later years he focused increasingly on choral music, the earlier part of Handel's career was centred around opera, and in 1704 he found employment at the opera-house in Hamburg. He began to travel abroad to Italy, including visits to Rome, Florence, Naples and Venice, where his reputation continued to grow. By 1710 he had attracted the attention of the future King George I, and he journeyed to London, the city which soon became his adopted home. Handel quickly put down roots in England, befriending the future Duke of Chandos and helping to found the Royal Academy of Music in 1719. Four years later he moved into No. 25 Brook Street, the house in which he composed some of his most famous music, including *Messiah* (1741), and in which he lived until his death

(after an extended period of illness) in 1759. His passing occasioned an outpouring of public grief, and three thousand mourners paid their respects at his funeral.

The four keyboard suites on this release (HWV 426–429) were published in November of 1720 as part of a set of eight, while Handel was living in London. The circumstances of their publication were somewhat fraught – in a preface to the volume, the irate composer stated that he had been forced to publish them “because surreptitious and incorrect copies of them had got abroad”. This was not uncommon – throughout his career, Handel was plagued by the illegal publication of pirated copies of his music, released without his knowledge. The frequency with which this occurred is a testament to Handel's fame and popularity, but it meant a loss of earnings for him and even potential damage to his reputation, as most of these pirated copies were replete with mistakes. As well as releasing his own authorised edition of the suites, Handel also retaliated by securing a Royal Privilege, which (in theory, at least) would protect his work from unscrupulous publishers.

The keyboard suites of 1720, or the ‘eight great suites’ as they are sometimes known, were composed over several years prior to their publication, and chronicle the development of Handel's musical style over this time. Some date from the period when he was working in Hamburg, some from his early years in England (presumably whilst he was staying at Cannons, the Duke of Chandos's residence), but most appear to have been completed by 1717. Many sections were revised for publication, however, and a number of entirely new movements were added. They were extremely well received, and were republished several times during Handel's lifetime. Despite their success, however, he composed very little music for the keyboard after 1720, and most of the suites which were published later on were actually written before this date.

The suites themselves are masterful illustrations of the genre. Technically extremely challenging, they testify to Handel's skill as a harpsichordist and

willingness to experiment as a composer. They are evidently the work of a young musician exploring his stylistic versatility and challenging the limitations of conventional form – while the traditional baroque keyboard suite consisted of four dance movements, most commonly an allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue, Handel breaks with this prototype to produce works of great variety and imagination.

Suite No. 1 in A major includes three of the expected movements (leaving out only the sarabande), but also contains a virtuosic opening *Prélude* of rippling arpeggios and glowing harmonies. The three subsequent movements, though in many ways less forward-looking, evidence Handel's deft command of traditional baroque dance styles. *Suite No. 2 in F major* is still more unusual, in that it abandons the conventional framework altogether. It also demonstrates the influence of Italian music on Handel's style: the initial *Adagio*, with its elaborate decoration and intricate fingerwork, and the following exuberant *Allegro* illustrate this particularly clearly. The final two movements – another *Adagio* and *Allegro* – showcase Handel's contrapuntal proficiency, closing with an animated fugue. *Suite No. 4 in E minor* returns to the conventional pattern in as much as it includes an *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue*. However, it begins with a dazzling fugue, which Handel added shortly before publication. The *Allemande*, with its delicate counterpoint and lucid

harmonies, and the vigorous *Gigue* are particularly striking examples of their genre.

Suite No. 3 in D minor is substantially longer than the others on this disc, being made up of seven movements, and is a grand synthesis of old and new. The opening two sections, an imposing *Prélude* and *Allegro*, form a classic 'toccata and fugue' pairing that sets up the dignified tone of the work. They lead smoothly into the middle two movements, a serenely beautiful *Allemande* and a purposeful *Courante* (both of which were newly-composed for publication), which hark back to an older style, before the final three sections break with traditional form yet again. Movement six, which consists of a set of elaborate variations on the preceding *Air*, is actually a reworking of an earlier keyboard piece by Handel that dates back to 1705. The suite is then drawn to a climactic conclusion by the dramatic *Presto*, music that the composer would later revise for use in his *Concerto Grosso in D major*, HWV 317. There is a melancholy, almost elegiac air about this work. The central interlude stands in sharp contrast to the movements that envelop it, yet somehow Handel manages to unify them. It is a testament to his versatility and extraordinary capacity to bring together disparate elements, to draw upon tradition and innovation, and create music of genius.

Caroline Waight

Philip Edward Fisher



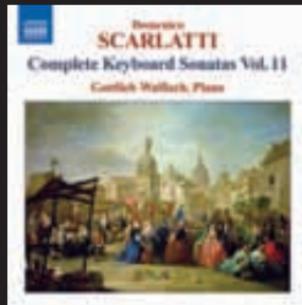
Philip Edward Fisher is widely recognized as a performer of refined style and exceptional versatility. Tours as a soloist and ensemble musician have taken him across his native United Kingdom to Italy, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Kenya, Zimbabwe, the Ukraine, and United States. 2002 marked his New York debut at Alice Tully Hall, performing Rachmaninov's *Third Piano Concerto*. He has also appeared in concert at Merkin Hall and Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, and venues in London include the Purcell Room, Wigmore Hall, Barbican Centre and Royal Festival Hall, with the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, and Symphony Hall, Birmingham. He has performed with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Copenhagen Philharmonic and the Juilliard Symphony. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music and the Juilliard School, and in 2001 received the prestigious Julius Isserlis Award from the Royal Philharmonic Society of London.

Photograph: Christian Steiner

Also Available



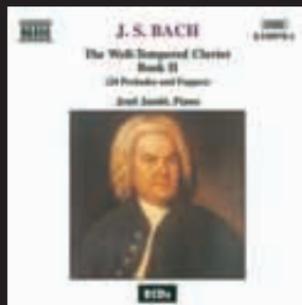
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Handel's keyboard suites may be among his lesser-known works, but the so-called 'Eight Great Suites' of 1720 are true masterpieces of the genre. This volume, containing the first four, showcases his extraordinary versatility, imagination and contrapuntal skill, as well as his willingness to break with tradition. Handel skilfully weaves together a wide range of forms, including fugues, a toccata, Italianate airs and Baroque dances.



George Frideric
HANDEL
(1685–1759)



Keyboard Suite No. 1 in A major,
HWV 426

11:38

- | | | |
|---|---------------|------|
| 1 | I. Prélude | 1:58 |
| 2 | II. Allemande | 3:58 |
| 3 | III. Courante | 2:34 |
| 4 | IV. Gigue | 3:08 |

Keyboard Suite No. 2 in F major,
HWV 427

9:26

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|------|
| 5 | I. Adagio | 3:10 |
| 6 | II. Allegro | 2:26 |
| 7 | III. Adagio | 1:44 |
| 8 | IV. Fuga: Allegro | 2:06 |

Keyboard Suite No. 3 in D minor,
HWV 428

25:07

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|------|
| 9 | I. Prélude | 1:10 |
| 10 | II. Fuga: Allegro | 2:23 |
| 11 | III. Allemande | 5:53 |
| 12 | IV. Courante | 1:47 |
| 13 | V. Air | 4:52 |
| 14 | VI. Doubles Nos. 1-5 (Variations) | 4:51 |
| 15 | VII. Presto | 4:11 |

Keyboard Suite No. 4 in E minor,
HWV 429

15:42

- | | | |
|----|------------------|------|
| 16 | I. Fuga: Allegro | 3:31 |
| 17 | II. Allemande | 3:30 |
| 18 | III. Courante | 1:54 |
| 19 | IV. Sarabande | 5:02 |
| 20 | V. Gigue | 1:45 |



Philip Edward Fisher, Piano

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