

Research Article

From the Baroque Dance Suite to the High Classical Symphony

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Abstract

The origin of the Classical symphony has long been a mystery. The Baroque dance suite and the concerto were popular musical forms in the 17th century and early 18th century, both consisting of collections of shorter musical pieces. Those who listen to classical music are left to wonder whether the Classical symphony arose spontaneously, or rather grew organically from pre-existing musical forms. We chose to compare the new musical form, the Classical symphony, with the pre-existing musical forms. Using quantitative methods, we propose a tentative explanation for the origin of the Classical symphony in the structure of the Baroque dance suite. We study the components and ordering of 423 movements in 70 dance suites by six prominent Baroque composers. The most common elements of these suites appear to carry part of the evolution of the symphony from its early manifestation as incidental music for operas. The Baroque dance suite explains the transition from the early three-movement symphony to its high Classical four-movement structure. This allows us to see the Classical symphony as a continuation and specialization of the popular Baroque dance suite. It further opens a door to aspiring symphonic composers to find inspiration in the Baroque dance suite, to revitalize this popular musical form.

Keywords

Baroque, Classical, Dance Suite, Symphony

1. Introduction

To the casual fan of classical music, it appears something of a mystery how the early 18th century so prominently featured polyphony and imitative counterpoint, while the modern symphony was firmly established by the late 18th century. Was Baroque music thoroughly rejected and replaced by the Classical style? Was the symphony a revolutionary invention by Franz Joseph Haydn or his predecessors of the middle 18th century?

Some standard histories of Western classical music include [1-4, 12-14]. The most prominent narrative is that the symphony appeared as a three-movement suite of incidental music

for chamber ensemble or small orchestra, employing the fast-slow-fast pattern used in most concertos. This makes the early symphony essentially a concerto without soloists. The transition from the early three-movement symphony to the standard four-movement symphony is not typically explained, even in such thorough sources as [10, 11, 5].

We shall attempt to demonstrate an evolutionary connection between the Baroque and Classical eras, and explain the emergence of the standard symphony, by focusing on the Baroque dance suite. For more details, see [6-9]. The Baroque dance suite is one of the two signature multi-movement forms

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Received: 19 June 2025; **Accepted:** 9 July 2025; **Published:** 28 July 2025



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of instrumental music of the Baroque era, the other being the concerto. The content of Baroque dance suites is flexible, even among suites written by the same composer. Nevertheless, there is a tendency towards a standardized core of movement types and of movement orders.

Our study focuses on 70 suites containing 384 movements, composed by six composers from Germany, England, Italy, and France. They span about 17.5 hours in performance time. In approximate chronological order:

- 1) 4 suites with 23 movements by Arcangelo Corelli (his Op. 6 concerti grossi, Nos. 9-12);
- 2) 8 suites with 29 movements by Henry Purcell (his keyboard suites Z660-663 and 666-669);

- 3) 3 suites with 17 movements by Georg Philipp Telemann (suites from Tafelmusik TWV55e1, 55D1, and 55B1);
- 4) 2 suites with 14 movements by Jean-Philippe Rameau (two keyboard suites);
- 5) 35 suites with 215 movements by Johann Sebastian Bach (6 English Suites; 6 French Suites; 6 Partitas; the French Overture; 3 suites for violin; 6 suites for cello; 1 suite for flute; 2 suites for lute; 4 Orchestral Suites);
- 6) 18 suites with 86 movements by George Frideric Handel (14 keyboard suites; the 3 Water Music suites; Music for the Royal Fireworks).

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of the 70 suites above by composer and instrumentation.

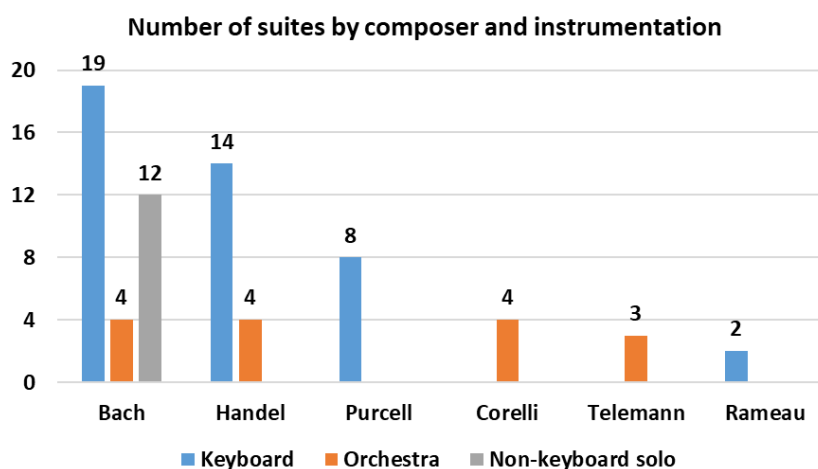


Figure 1. Distribution of 70 Baroque dance suites by composer and instrumentation.

Figure 2 depicts the distribution of the suites by composer, including the number of movements.

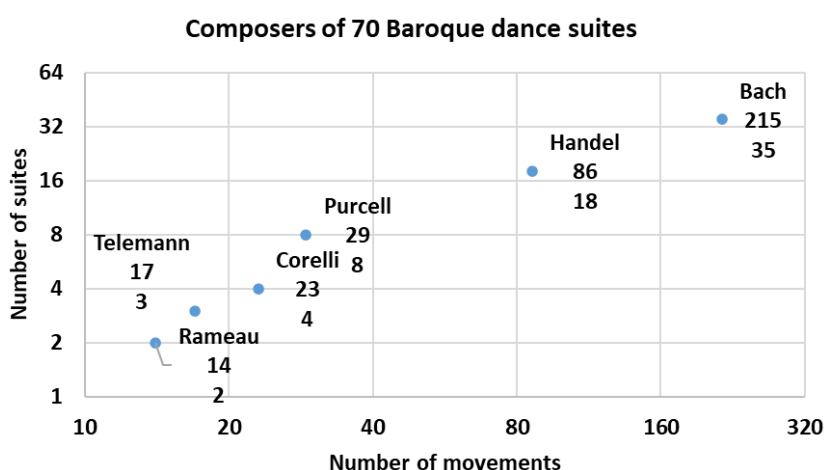


Figure 2. Number of suites and movements by composer.

The numeration above counts binary dances, such as the common forms Gavotte I-II, Bourrée I-II, Minuet I-II, and Gigue I-II as single movements.

The list above is by no means exhaustive of Baroque suites. This is true particularly for Telemann, whose 27 overtures with 192 dance movements are not represented above. Also

omitted are ordres for clavecin 1, 2, 3, 5, and 8 by François Couperin. Telemann's overtures and Couperin's ordres are frequently a mixture of dance music and programmatic music,

as shown below. The prolific Antonio Vivaldi's instrumental works are primarily concerti, with most of the remainder being sonatas; he composed no dance suites at all.

2. Analysis

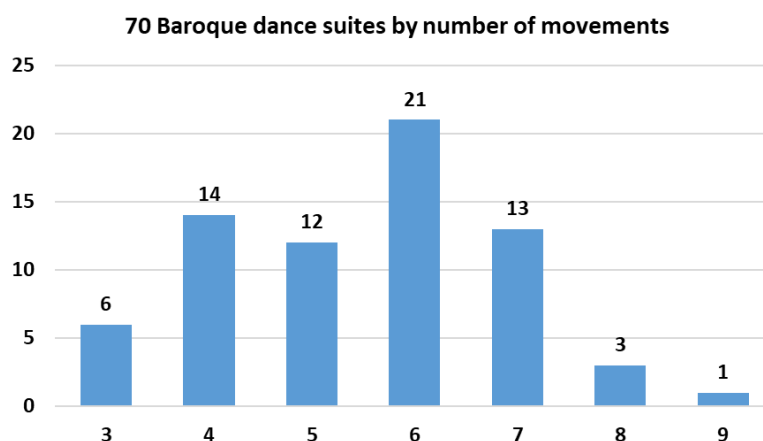


Figure 3. Frequency table: number of Baroque dance suites with specified number of movements.

In our corpus of 70 late Baroque dance suites, the number of movements varies from three to nine (omitting the doubling of any dance form). The mean number of movements is 5.49, the median is 6, and the mode is 6. Fifty suites, 85.7% of the total, have between four and seven movements. See [figure 3](#).

We enumerate the number of movements of each type within the 70 suites. [Figure 4](#) depicts the percentage of suites containing a movement of a given type, focusing on the most frequently occurring movement types; no other movement type is present in more than 10% of the suites.

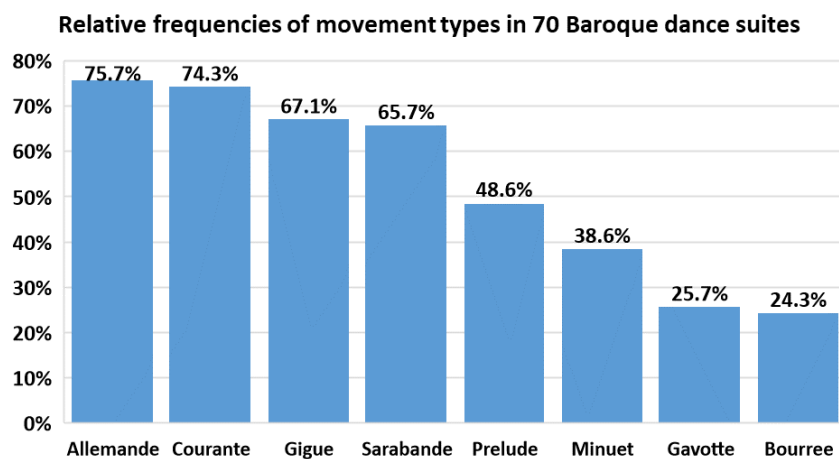


Figure 4. The relative frequency of movement types in the 70 suites.

These eight movement types (allemande, courante, gigue, sarabande, prelude, minuet, gavotte, bourree) account for 294 out of 384, that is 76.6%, of all the movements within the 70 suites, with the rest divided among the overture, air, passepied, double, adagio, allegro, fugue, and many others.

Our study will focus on the eight dominant movement types. For convenience, we establish the following abbreviations: P for prelude; A for allemande; C for courante; S for

sarabande; V for gavotte; B for bourrée; M for minuet; G for gigue.

The next issue is movement sequencing. Although there is flexibility, in a majority of the 70 suites, the order of movements is compatible with the following: PACSVBMG. That is, in a majority of suites where two of the dominant eight movement types occur, the sequencing will be the same as the letters of PACSVBMG.

Not all composers rely on PACSVBMG movement types in their suites. [Figure 5](#) shows the percentage of movements in the 70 suites constituted by the PACSVBMG types, by composer.

The chart illuminates why it is that the inclusion of additional Telemann suites, such as his very inventive overtures, would have little effect on the interests of this paper.

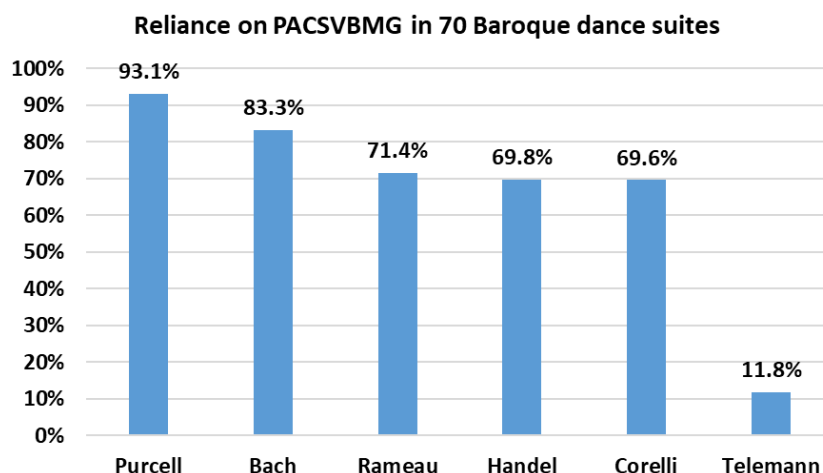


Figure 5. Percentage of movements of PACSVBMG type by composer.

Next, we enumerate the relative frequency of the eight individual PACSVBMG movements, together with selected combinations of them, in [figure 6](#). AC, for example, refers to suites containing both an allemande and a courante, in either

order. For reasons explained below, we have chosen to include all eight individual movement types; all pairs within PACSMG; and all subsets of ACSG.

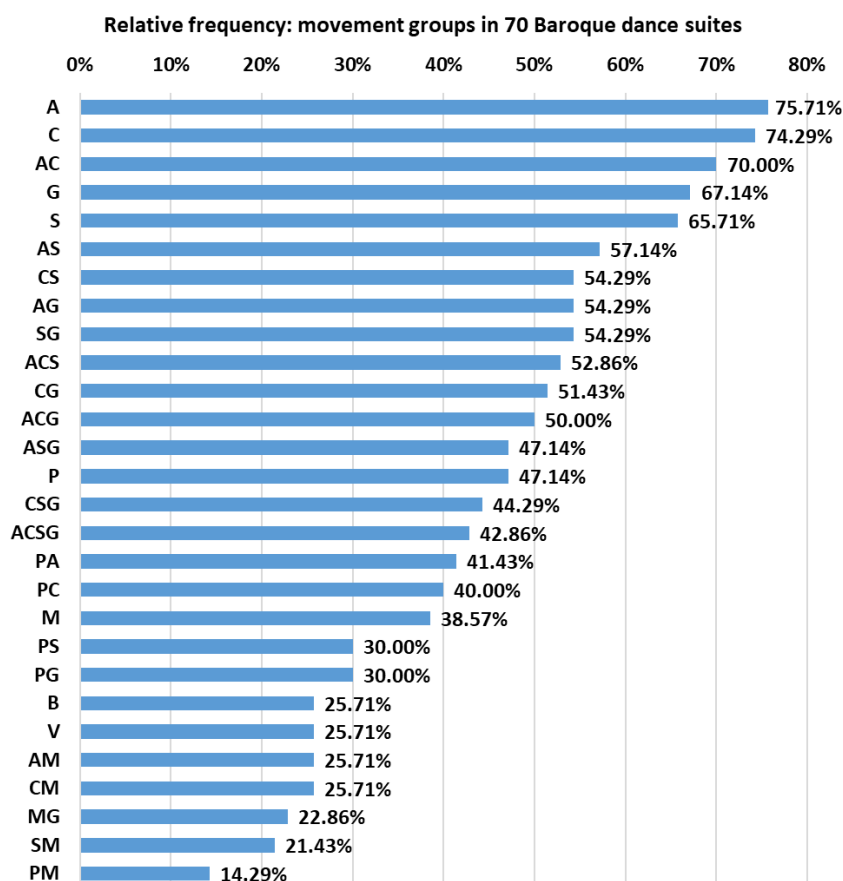


Figure 6. The relative frequency of selected movement groups in the 70 suites.

The combination AC, with a relative frequency of 70%, occurs more frequently than any individual movement type other than A and C themselves. Every subset of ACSG, other than CSG and the full ACSG, occurs more frequently than all non-ACSG movement types. This explains why ACSG is sometimes considered to be the core of the standard Baroque dance suite, once it was established by Johann Jakob Froberger (or his publisher) in the 17th century. Of the 70 suites in our corpus, 30 are of type ACSG. None of those 30 suites is orchestral, however.

P and M occur reasonably frequently as individuals, and in pairs with ACSG, but B and V, the two most popular galanteries other than the minuet, are too infrequent to be relevant for the rest of our analysis. So from now on, we shall concentrate on PACSMG and its subsets.

Among the 30 ACSG suites, 15 contain preludes, 12 contain minuets, and five contain both preludes and minuets. For completeness, the five PACSMG suites are: one keyboard suite by Rameau (also containing a venitienne and a gavotte); English Suite No. 4, Partita No. 1, and the suites for cello nos. 1 and 2 by Bach. Those four suites by Bach are thus the only pure PACSMG suites.

Table 1 provides more detailed information about the four pure PACSMG suites, including BWV number, key signature, and time signature of the movements. There is substantial but not complete consistency of structure among the four suites. All allemandes are in simple meter, and all movements after the allemandes are in compound meter. Only with the preludes is there flexibility; all are in simple meter except for the Cello Suite No. 2.

Table 1. The four pure PACSMG suites.

Suite	Prelude	Allemande	Courante	Sarabande	Minuet 1	Minuet 2	Gigue
English Suite No. 4							
F major	4	4	3	3	3	3	12
BWV 809	4	4	2	4	4	4	8
Partita No. 1							
B $\flat$ major	4	4	3	3	3	3	12
BWV 825	4	4	4	4	4	4	8
Cello Suite No. 1							
G major	4	4	3	3	3	3	6
BWV 1007	4	4	4	4	4	4	8
Cello Suite No. 2							
D minor	3	4	3	3	3	3	3
BWV 1008	4	4	4	4	4	4	8

For completeness, we note that there are 13 ASMG suites and 12 CSMG suites. Interestingly, all the CSMG suites also contain an allemande, so the set of 12 CSMG suites is a subset of the set of 13 ASMG suites. In addition to the five PACSMG suites enumerated above, the following are also ACSMG: Bach's French Suites Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6, and his Partitas Nos. 4 and 5.

3. Comparison of the Baroque Dance Suite with the High Classical Symphony

It is now time to explain the evolution of the Classical symphony from three movements to four. In table 2, we line

up the movements of the PACSMG Baroque dance suite against the movements of the early and high Classical symphony.

Most of the earliest Classical-era symphonies followed the pattern fast-slow-fast: for example, the symphonies of Giovanni Battista Sammartini. The addition of a minuet movement between the slow movement and the last movement has remained an unexplained mystery.

Now, however, the evolution of the symphony appears quite natural. Apparently, the high Classical symphony is a product of the early symphony's interaction with the then well-known musical form, the Baroque dance suite, with the minuet taking its accustomed place between the slow movement and the fast final movement. This is seen not only in the

symphonies of Franz Joseph Haydn, but even earlier in the symphonies of Johann Stamitz, for example. The evolution of the string quartet at the hands of Haydn follows a similar path.

Stamitz has been recognized previously as the father of the four-movement symphony; see [15], for example. However, a plausible motivation of Stamitz for adding a minuet between the andante and the allegro movements has not been identified until now. This motivation remains conjectural, but the coincidence of structure is too substantial to overlook.

The comparison above illustrates only the issue of sequencing movement types. It does not address the origin of sonata form (exposition-development-recapitulation). Moreover, the time signatures in the movements of symphonies have never been restricted to the dominant time signatures of

table 1, with the obvious exception of the minuet.

Table 2 is not intended to suggest that there are necessarily additional missing movements towards the beginning of the symphony. Rather, the intention is that the first movement of a symphony can have varied structures and tempos. Nevertheless, table 2 calls to mind the first movement of Johannes Brahms's Symphony No. 1. The first movement begins with an extended introduction, *un poco sostenuto*, preceding the main allegro section. This lengthy and slow introduction nearly stands as a movement in its own right. It is difficult to avoid suspecting that in composing the first movement, Brahms was motivated by the structure of the Baroque dance suite.

Table 2. *The Baroque dance suite and the Classical symphony compared.*

Baroque dance suite	Early Classical symphony	High Classical symphony
Prelude (stately)		
Allemande (moderate)	1. Allegro	1. Allegro
Courante (lively)		
Sarabande (slow)		2. Andante
Minuet (3/4)	2. Andante	3. Minuet
Gigue (lively)	3. Allegro	4. Allegro

Maurice Ravel composed an enchanting six-movement suite for piano, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, modeled in part on the Baroque dance suite. He orchestrated four of those movements. Today, one may eagerly welcome the composer who creates a new six-movement symphony based on the PACSMG model.

Abbreviations

P	Prelude
A	Allemande
C	Courante
S	Sarabande
V	Gavotte
B	Bourrée
M	Minuet
G	Gigue

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his heartfelt appreciation to his wife Yan for her continuing encouragement and patience. Hopefully, all those hours listening to Baroque dance suites were enjoyable.

Author Contributions

Hal M. Switkey is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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