

# Von Westhoff: Suites for Solo Violin

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**Johann Paul von Westhoff: Suites for Solo Violin**

**Plamena Nikitassova**

**Outhere: Ricercar RIC 412. 56'59**

Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705) was one of the leading members of the flourishing school of Dresden-based violinists during the latter decades of the 17th-century. He was born in Dresden. His father was a lutenist and trombone player from Lübeck, who had briefly been a captain of horse in the Swedish army. Apart from influence from his father, the young Westhoff also learnt while serving in the Dresden Hofkapelle. He was one of the first to compose music for unaccompanied violin, a genre that culminated with Bach. This excellent recording by [Plamena Nikitassova](#) reveals the enormous talents of this adventurous composer.

His six Suites for solo violin were published in Dresden in 1696. They may be a reprint of an earlier 1682 collection, *Erstes Dutzend Allemanden, Couranten, Sarabanden und Gigueen* that is known about but assumed lost. The final Suite is damaged and incomplete in the surviving source and is replaced on this CD by the *Suite pour le Violon sans Basse Continu* published in the French magazine *Mercurie galant* in 1683. The year before, they had published a Sonata that Westhoff had played for Louis XIV, to much acclaim.

Plamena Nikitassova opens most of the Suites, and some of the other movements, with an improvisatory flourish. This element of improvisation is a feature throughout her playing, notably with her inventive ornamentation and elaborations in repeats. Quite an achievement, considering the already technically challenging nature of the music, with frequent use of double, treble and even quadruple toppings. The music is extraordinarily inventive, notably in its use of chordal writing and polyphony on a solo violin.

As interesting as the music is the playing technique used by Plamena Nikitassova, an acknowledged expert in early violin performance. She follows the advice of two German treatises, one of which suggests playing with the violin placed “on the left breast”. The other treatise suggests playing with the violin “held comfortably under the left breast”. Photos of the recording indicate that Plamena Nikitassova adopts the former position. The bow should be very short, and the thumb is used to maintain the tension of the bow hairs.

An excellent programme essay by the distinguished musicologist, Dr Peter Wollny, give a detailed background to Westhoff life and career, which seems to have been wide-ranging. He was a skilled linguist, teaching languages to the sons of the Dresden Elector, eventually becoming Professor at Wittenberg University. He was much travelled throughout Europe. He may have met Buxtehude in Lübeck in 1674 and may have played in some of his *Abendmusik* concerts. He also probably met the young Bach in Weimar in 1702. A visit to Vienna in 1699 seems to have resulted in him being ennobled by the Emporer, thereby adding the 'von' to his name. The recently published score of the Suites is available online. It is worth following along with, not least to see what Plamena Nikitassova.