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CONTEXTS: CÖTHEN, FRENCH STYLE, "OPUS" COLLECTIONS, AND THE CELLO

J. S. Bach's Cello Suites were most likely completed, like his Violin Solos ("Sonatas and Partitas"), around the middle of his tenure as Capellmeister and director of chamber music for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (1694–1728). Since Leopold's reformed Calvinist court chapel did not require elaborate church music or organ playing, Bach's responsibilities during his Cöthen period (1717–23) centered around composing instrumental music and secular cantatas to satisfy his patron's demand for musical divertissements. A devoted music enthusiast, Leopold sang and played harpsichord, violin, and viol (also known as viola da gamba).[1]

Despite the traditional portrait of Bach as an industrious, disciplined musician and teacher, he did not always get on well with his various employers.[2] Yet he enjoyed a notably good rapport with Leopold, who was nine years his junior. The prince paid Bach handsomely, showcased his talents during two trips to the fashionable spa in Carlsbad (Bohemia), and was godfather to his son Leopold Augustus (1718–19), suggesting a personal dimension to their relationship.[3] Even after financial and other personal circumstances led Leopold to scale back musical activities at his court, prompting Bach to seek other employment in Leipzig, the composer nevertheless retained the title of Capellmeister in Cöthen on a nonresident basis for the rest of the prince's life. Bach's devotion to his princely patron is evinced by his regular return visits to perform in Cöthen, usually together with Anna Magdalena Bach (1701–60), the last of which was to provide music for Leopold's state funeral in 1729. In a letter written the following year, Bach reminisced fondly about his time in Cöthen: "There I had a gracious Prince, who both loved and knew music, and in his service I intended to spend the rest of my life."[4] Bach's assessment was echoed some decades later by composer Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804): "This Prince Leopold was a great

connoisseur and champion of music; he himself played the violin not badly and sang a good bass."[5]

In its focus on secular music, the Cöthen position was unique among the posts Bach held throughout his career. Compared to his more extensive duties as court organist and chamber musician in Weimar (1708–17) and especially as cantor and music director in Leipzig (1723–50), the lighter responsibilities in Cöthen afforded Bach the time, flexibility, and creative freedom to complete some of his most ambitious instrumental projects, including not only the highly original music for solo violin and cello but also the French Suites, the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the Brandenburg Concertos.[6] Moreover, in the musicians of the Cöthen court Capelle, he had access to some of the finest performers he could have hoped for. A core group of eight soloists (plus Bach as Capellmeister), all distinguished virtuosos, lived in close proximity in the small town, rehearsing and performing together regularly, and their numbers were reinforced by additional ripienists (string section members) and guests when a larger ensemble was needed.

The Capelle's serious rehearsal practices were unusual enough to receive special comment in a 1722 report by the cantor of Cöthen's St. Jacobi Church: "The princely Capelle in this town, which week in week out holds its *Exercitium musicum*, makes an example that even the most famous virtuosos rehearse and exercise their pieces together beforehand."[7] This lauding account suggests a high artistic standard for the Capelle, and the members' close working relationships seem to have fostered some lasting personal connections. Although much of the ensemble music Bach composed in Cöthen does not survive, it must have been a remarkably fertile period, owing to Leopold's enthusiasm about and investment in musical life at his court, as well as to the inspiration of the outstanding musicians of the Capelle.[8]

Le Goût Français at German Courts

Although Bach never traveled to France, French manners, music, and dance were part of his upbringing and of the cultural atmosphere at Cöthen as he composed the Cello Suites. Leopold's court

included French paintings and tapestries and an orangery on the castle grounds.[9] During Bach's lifetime, the instrumental dance suite was understood in Germany largely as a French import. Whereas suites for unaccompanied cello were not an established genre among German composers, bass viol suites in the French tradition (*pièces de viole*) were almost certainly present at Cöthen and may in part have inspired Bach's conception of the Cello Suites.[10]

One could not overstate the role of French dance masters as the most important tastemakers at German courts, with an influence that extended beyond dance and music to manners, social rituals, and fashion. A well-known (satirical) representation of a Parisian dance master providing instruction in both dance and manners is found in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670). Pierre Rameau (1674–1748), dance master to the Queen of Spain, explained:

> We can say, to the glory of our nation, that it has a true gift for beautiful dancing. Far from denying this, nearly all foreigners have, for nearly a century, come to admire our dances [and] to educate themselves at our performances and in our schools. There is hardly a court in Europe that does not have a dancing master from our nation.[11]

The appointment of Parisian dance masters and other musicians in many German courts brought about both the diffusion of French music through manuscript copies and printed parts and performance of French or French-inspired music, dance, and theater.[12]

Bach was first introduced to French music, dance, and courtly culture as a teenager in Lüneburg, where he was a choral scholar at St. Michael's Latin School (1700–1702). Bach sang in the Matins choir with students from the adjacent *Ritter-Academie*, an elite school for noble youth, where French was the obligatory spoken language, where students had daily lessons in French language, dancing, and etiquette, and where entertainments included French theater and ballet.[13] Bach almost certainly had contact with the dance master of the *Ritter-Academie*, Thomas de la Selle (dates unknown), a pupil of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87) and a violinist at the French-styled ducal court of Celle. The renowned Celle Capelle was an ensemble of twenty-four musicians modeled after Lully's orchestra at Versailles.[14] Bach's obituary states that

hearing that "then famous band . . . consisting for the most part of Frenchmen . . . [afforded him] a thorough grounding in the French taste, which, in those regions, was at the time something quite new."[15] Since Bach himself was likely the ultimate source of this account, it would seem that his youthful introduction to French music and manners had made a lasting impression.

The infatuation of German princes with French courtly culture stemmed from the division of the Holy Roman Empire into some 300 small, sovereign principalities after the Thirty Years' War (1618–48). Princes "with small domains and large ambitions . . . did everything conceivable to create a miniature Versailles at [their] court[s],"[16] including by cultivating French language and manners and by mounting festivities that aspired toward the grandeur of those of Louis XIV (the "Sun King," 1638–1715).[17] German princes learned French from a young age and studied both dance and comportment with Parisian dance masters.

Leopold had cultivated French manners – including the language, dance, riding, fencing, and music – as a student at the Berlin *Ritter-Academie* (1707–10).[18] At the time, musical life at the Prussian court in Berlin had become highly Gallicized under the influence of the dance master and concertmaster Jean-Baptiste Volumier (c. 1670–1728). Steeped in an opulent French cultural environment, the teenage Leopold must have been a devoted dance student since, in 1708–9, he and his younger brother performed among the "Dancers in the Entrée of the Amours and Plaisirs" in a magnificent opera produced for the royal wedding.[19]

Leopold's grand tour, undertaken in 1710–13, reflected his devotion to music. He attended numerous opera performances; acquired a considerable amount of sheet music, including rare scores by Lully and Francesco Mancini (1672–1737); rented harpsichords in several locations; and engaged composer Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729) to join for a seven-month stretch of the journey.[20] In 1713, while he was still on his tour, a rare opportunity arose for Leopold to significantly expand and enhance the Cöthen Capelle when he learned of the abrupt dissolution of the Prussian court Capelle in Berlin, an "act of cultural barbarism" committed by Friedrich Wilhelm I (the "Soldier King," 1688–1740) just after his ascent to the throne.[21] Leopold persuaded his mother

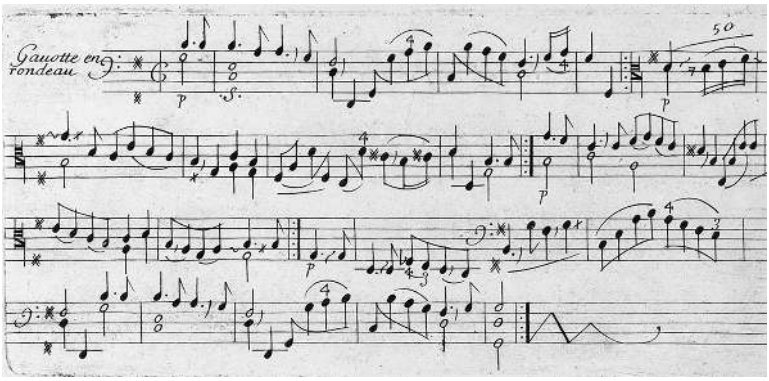
(then governing as regent) to hire several of the leading Berlin musicians, six of whom arrived in Cöthen soon after, with the cellist Christian Bernhard Linike (1673–1751) joining in 1716. In a shrewd maneuver, Leopold thus transformed the Cöthen Capelle into one that, in its size and virtuosity, rivaled those of many larger, more established courts.

Given Leopold's fondness for the viol, he must have been particularly pleased with the appointment of Christian Ferdinand Abel (c. 1683–1737), one of the finest German viol players, to the Cöthen Capelle around 1714. Having grown up at the French-styled court at Celle, where he probably served as a court musician, Abel was an accomplished virtuoso in the French viol tradition. His service at Cöthen afforded Leopold not only the pleasure of his performances but also opportunities to play with and to learn from him on the instrument.[22] Bach's three viol sonatas (BWV1027–29) were likely composed for Abel to play for or teach to Leopold.

It has long been speculated that Abel may have been the first performer of Bach's Cello Suites, given his close friendship with Bach.[23] This theory is difficult to support, given the lack of evidence that Abel played the cello – besides his primary background as a viol player, Cöthen court records show him as a violinist – and moreover considering the presence at Cöthen of the excellent cellist Linike. On the other hand, Abel may have influenced the conception of the Cello Suites in a different way. German viol players such as Abel and Leopold were inheritors to an extensive and venerable tradition of *pièces de viole* – collections of preludes, dance movements, and character pieces for bass viol, a repertoire that flourished in France and that was imitated extensively by German and Dutch composers. Example 1.1 reproduces a gavotte en rondeau by Sieur de Machy (fl. c. 1660–90), an avid proponent of the viol as a solo (unaccompanied) instrument. In this piece, the viol conveys both melody and harmony, sometimes through chords and double stops, as well as through registral leaps that distinguish the bass line from upper voices.

The French viol player Jean Rousseau (1644–99) described these features as the "harmonic" style (*jeu d'harmonie*) of viol playing, as opposed to the "melodic" style (*jeu de mélodie*), in which the

Example 1.1 Sieur de Machy, *Pièces de violle* (Paris, 1685), Gavotte en rondeau. Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.



viol simply plays the tune and requires extrinsic accompaniment.[24] Whereas Rousseau advocated the melodic style, de Machy considered a viol player playing only melodies to be comparable to "a man who plays perfectly on the harpsichord or organ, [but] only with one hand."[25] In practice, the distinction between the two styles was sometimes blurred, as some collections were composed to be playable either solo or with basso continuo accompaniment. Music in the *pièces de viole* tradition – either by French composers or by Dutch and German composers who inherited and extended it – was very likely part of the musical atmosphere at Cöthen,[26] considering that Leopold and Abel were both viol players whose musical sensibilities had been shaped in French-influenced courts.[27]

The "harmonic" style of viol playing broadly resembles the texture of Bach's Cello Suites, which combine melody, harmony, and bass line in a similar way (compare Example 1.1 to the Gavotte I from Suite No. 6, shown in Example 2.6a). At the time Bach composed the Cello Suites, the cello – a member of the Italianate violin family – was a comparatively newer instrument than the illustrious French viol. Lacking a robust tradition of unaccompanied music, the cello was best known north of the Alps as an instrument suitable for bass lines in ensemble music,[28] although one poised to grow in popularity as the viol was beginning to decline and as Italian instrumental music was gaining in prestige in German-speaking

lands.[29] Although seventeenth-century Bolognese cellists had composed for cellos tuned C–G–d–g (as in Bach's Suite No. 5), including Domenico Gabrielli's Ricercari for unaccompanied cello (1689), it is doubtful that this music would have been familiar to Bach or could have served as his prototype.[30] On the other hand, bass viol playing exerted a clear influence on early cello techniques and repertoires. Given the cross-pollination between these instruments, it is entirely possible that Abel's presence at Cöthen, and Leopold's presumed penchant for *pièces de viole* and for French courtly and theatrical dance, may have inspired Bach to experiment with transposing the solo-viol tradition into suites for unaccompanied cello.

Bach's Violin Solos and Cello Suites as "Opus" Collections

Starting during his appointment in Weimar (1708–17) and continuing in Cöthen (1717–23), Bach assembled some of his most impressive and original instrumental compositions into manuscript collections possessing what Christoph Wolff has called "opus character."[31] Although just a handful of Bach's compositions were published during his lifetime – and he assigned a literal opus number only once (to the *Clavier-Übung* I, published in 1731 as "opus 1") – various unpublished sets also stand out as touchstone collections, often comprising six pieces that were conceived or assembled with particular care and to which Bach attached special importance. Once these collections were polished into their final versions, Bach penned them in fair copies.

These "opus" collections aspire toward an encyclopedic ideal, as if Bach sought to reveal exhaustively the range of compositional possibilities of certain genres and instrumental forces. Musicians who play the six Brandenburg Concertos, for instance, encounter a variety of traditional and novel instrumental combinations, with many passages testing the limits of the soloists' technique and with each piece instantiating the genre of *concerto grosso* in a different way. Likewise, a keyboard player who studies either book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* will have Bach as a guide through a complete survey of all twenty-four major and minor keys, exploring a variety of styles and textures in preludes

and contrapuntal techniques in the fugues. Such collections are not only a means for musicians to develop and display their virtuosity as instrumentalists; they are, moreover, demonstrations of Bach's virtuosity as a composer.

The earliest writings to discuss Bach's Violin Solos and Cello Suites in these terms are by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–88) and his student Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720–74), whose coauthored obituary of the elder Bach was published in 1754. Comprising a brief overview of his life and works, the obituary includes a list summarizing his published and unpublished music, mostly detailing vocal, organ, and other keyboard music. The list of unpublished music also includes "six sonatas for the violin, without [accompanying] bass," "six of the same for the violoncello," and finally "a mass of other instrumental pieces of all sorts and for all kinds of music."[32] The obituary is slightly imprecise as to the genres of these collections: alternating church sonatas and partitas for solo violin and suites for solo cello. That these pieces were the only non-keyboard instrumental works singled out for special mention illustrates that the authors – and probably the composer himself – regarded them as extraordinary achievements comparable to his most notable works in the genres for which he was best known (vocal, organ, and keyboard).[33] C. P. E. Bach owned a manuscript copy of the Cello Suites, which he kept his whole life and of which he commissioned at least one copy (see discussion of Source C in Chapters 3 and 4).

Two decades later, C. P. E. Bach corresponded extensively with his father's biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749–1818). In an oft-cited letter describing his father's artistic traits, C. P. E. Bach wrote:

> He heard the slightest wrong note even in the largest combinations. As the greatest expert and judge of harmony, he liked best to play the viola, with appropriate loudness and softness. In his youth, and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly, and thus kept the orchestra in better order than he could have done with the harpsichord. He understood to perfection the possibilities of all stringed instruments. This is evidenced by his solos for the violin and for the violoncello without [accompanying] bass. One of the greatest violinists told me once that he had seen nothing more perfect for

learning to be a good violinist, and could suggest nothing better to anyone eager to learn, than the said violin solos without bass.[34]

Although during his lifetime Bach was best known as an organ and keyboard virtuoso and only secondarily as a composer, this account emphasizes his intimate knowledge of string instruments. Bach had played the violin from a young age, almost certainly having picked it up as a child through his father, Johann Ambrosius, an accomplished violinist from whom Bach probably inherited his Stainer violin.[35] According to C. P. E. Bach's letter, his father's expertise with string instruments was manifest not only in his masterful playing but also in his unaccompanied music for violin and cello, which explored those instruments to their full capacities.

Forkel likewise singled out the Violin Solos and Cello Suites for special mention in his 1802 biography of Bach. Noting that Bach composed concertos and other solo pieces for a wide variety of instruments, he observed that the composer "always contrived them so that his performers could, by their means, improve on their instruments."[36] He held that the Violin Solos and Cello Suites made up for the many instrumental pieces that had not survived, adding (in a gloss on C. P. E. Bach's aforementioned letter): "For a long series of years, the violin solos were universally considered by the greatest performers on the violin as the best means to make an ambitious student a perfect master of his instrument. The solos for the violoncello are, in this respect, of equal value."[37] Forkel's remarks were prescient as these pieces have since become central to the training repertoire for violinists and cellists. They are among the most frequently performed and recorded music for both instruments.

Bach's Violin Solos and Cello Suites were conceived together as a two-part collection. Scholars have made various speculations as to their chronology, but there are good reasons to presume that the violin pieces were composed first.[38] Since the complexity and originality of the Violin Solos suggest an extended gestation period, one might surmise that Bach probably began the set in Weimar. Although his primary Weimar post was as court organist, Bach also served as chamber musician and, after 1714, was

promoted to concertmaster, roles that would have included both harpsichord and violin playing. It was during this period that Bach first showed an interest in the violin as a virtuoso, polyphonic instrument. His oldest surviving chamber music, the Fugue in G Minor for Violin and Continuo (BWV1026), was composed in Weimar and illustrates his development of virtuoso violin technique including complex double stops and polyphony.

Whenever he may have begun working on the Violin Solos, he finished by 1720, when he copied them out in an extraordinarily neat, calligraphic manuscript. Containing virtually no errors, corrections, or other signs of creative deliberation, that manuscript is clearly a fair copy made from earlier composing drafts. Such ornate, tidy manuscripts date only from the Cöthen period, when Bach's relatively light duties permitted him to take such care with fair copies.[39] The aesthetic beauty of this manuscript also reflects the value the composer attached to the Violin Solos.

Bach undertook the copying work for the Violin Solos while visiting the Carlsbad spa in May–July 1720 as a member of Leopold's entourage. Since the autograph is written on paper manufactured nearby in Joachimsthal (Bohemia), Bach must have acquired the paper and begun the copying work during the extended trip.[40] The manuscript's title page is dated 1720 and bears the designation "Libro Primo," suggesting that the Cello Suites were already well underway (if not complete) and that their fair copy was presumably planned as the "Libro Secondo." However, to the great consternation of cellists worldwide, no such autograph manuscript is extant – neither a fair copy nor a composing draft.

Wolff offers a plausible explanation for the absence of an autograph fair copy. When Bach made his final copy of the Violin Solos in Carlsbad during spring 1720, the Cello Suites may well have been complete in draft form, ready to be copied into their final version (the would-be "Libro Secondo"). But Bach soon returned to Cöthen only to receive the shocking news that Maria Barbara Bach (1684–1720), his wife of almost thirteen years and mother of his first seven children, had died and been buried during his extended absence. This sudden personal tragedy was a devastating disruption for the Bach family. In the face of more pressing matters – including, just four months later, a long