

BACH: THE CELLO SUITES

Originally dismissed as curiosities, J. S. Bach's Cello Suites are now understood as the pinnacle of composition for unaccompanied cello. This handbook examines how and why Bach composed these highly innovative works. It explains the characteristics of each of the dance types used in the suites and reveals the compositional methods that achieve cohesion within each suite. The author discusses the four manuscript copies of Bach's lost original and the valuable evidence they contain on how the suites might be performed. He explores how, after around 1860, the Cello Suites gradually entered the concert hall, where they initially received a mixed critical and audience reception. The Catalan cellist Pablo Casals extensively popularized them through his concerts and recordings, setting the paradigm for several generations to follow. The Cello Suites now have a global resonance, influencing music from Benjamin Britten's Cello Suites to J-pop and media from K-drama to Ingmar Bergman's films.

EDWARD KLORMAN is Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair at the Department of Music Research, McGill University, having previously taught at The Juilliard School and Queens College, CUNY. His award-winning first book is *Mozart's Music of Friends: Social Interplay in the Chamber Works* (Cambridge, 2016).

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EDWARD KLORMAN
McGill University, Montréal



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>List of Music Examples</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvi
1 Contexts: Cöthen, French Style, “Opus” Collections, and the Cello	I
2 Dance Types, Preludes, and Analytical Perspectives	33
3 The Four Manuscript Copies	62
4 Transmission, Performance, and Reception: 1720–c. 1900	80
5 Transmission, Performance, and Reception: After c. 1900	115
<i>Bibliography</i>	150
<i>Index</i>	166

FIGURES

- 1.1 Figure playing viola da spalla (inhabited initial “P” for “prelude”). From Giuseppe Torelli, *Concertino per camera a violin e violoncello* (Bologna, c. 1687), violoncello partbook (detail). Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. page 19
- 1.2 Figure playing viola da spalla. From *Procession de la Fête-Dieu à Aix-en-Provence* (c. 1710–40). Screen, oil on wood (detail). Reproduced by permission of the City of Aix-en-Provence and P. Biolatto. 20
- 1.3 Giovanni Battista Sintes and Arnold van Westerhout, engraving labeled “Viola,” after illustration by Stefano Sparigioni. From Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto armonico* (Rome, 1722). Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library. 21
- 1.4 Bernard Picart, figure playing cello (1704). Etching (detail). Reproduced by permission of the Rijksmuseum. 22
- 1.5 Thomas Gainsborough, *The Rev. John Chafy Playing the Violoncello in a Landscape* (c. 1750–52). Oil on canvas (detail). Reproduced by permission of Tate Images. 23
- 1.6 Attributed to Charles Philips, *Portrait of a Gentleman with a Violoncello* (c. 1720). Oil on canvas (detail), present whereabouts unknown. Reproduced by permission of Bridgeman Images. 24
- 1.7 Jean-Jacques Flipart, engraving of violoncello player. Frontispiece to Michel Corrette, *Méthode théorique et pratique pour apprendre en peu de tems le violoncelle dans sa perfection* (Paris, 1741) (detail). Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. 25

List of Figures

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 5.1 | Pablo Casals. Photo by Yousuf Karsh © 1954,
reproduced by permission. | 116 |
| 5.2 | Cellist Mstislav Rostropovich plays Bach at
Checkpoint Charlie (Berlin), November 11, 1989.
Reproduced by permission of Action Press. | 118 |
| 5.3 | Augustus John, <i>Madame Suggia</i> (1920–23). Oil on
canvas. Reproduced by permission of Tate Images
and the Estate of Augustus John. | 125 |
| 5.4 | Lillian Fuchs. Photo by James Abresch (c. 1950).
Reproduced by permission of the Juilliard Archives
and Amédée Williams. | 126 |
| 5.5 | Yo-Yo Ma with local drummers in Dakar (Senegal),
part of his thirty-six-city tour for <i>The Bach Project</i> .
Photo by Austin Mann © 2020, reproduced by
permission. | 135 |
| 5.6 | Dancer Eno Peçi and cellist Ditta Rohmann perform
Jerome Robbins's <i>A Suite of Dances</i> (1994). Photo
by Ashley Taylor © 2021. Reproduced by
permission of the Robbins Rights Trust and the
Vienna State Ballet. | 140 |

TABLES

1.1	Layout of the Violin Solos and Cello Suites.	<i>page</i> 13
-----	--	----------------

MUSIC EXAMPLES

- | | | |
|------|--|--------|
| 1.1 | Sieur de Machy, <i>Pièces de violle</i> (Paris, 1685),
Gavotte en rondeau. Reproduced by permission
of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. | page 6 |
| 1.2 | Solo music with chordal models representing hand
shapes. | 17 |
| | a. Johann Georg Pisendel, Sonata for unaccompanied
violin, Allegro. | |
| | b. Suite No. 3 in C Major, Prelude. | |
| 1.3 | Suite No. 5, Prelude, fugue subject as compound
melody. | 18 |
| 2.1 | Suite No. 3 in C Major, Allemande, double cadence. | 35 |
| 2.2 | Suite No. 5 in C Minor, Courante, hemiola effects. | 36 |
| 2.3 | Sarabandes, emphasis on second beats. | 38 |
| | a. Suite No. 1 in G Major. | |
| | b. Suite No. 3 in C Major. | |
| | c. Suite No. 5 in C Minor. | |
| 2.4 | Suite No. 1, Menuet I, two-bar units (<i>pas de menuet</i>). | 39 |
| 2.5 | Suite No. 3 in C Major, Bourrées I and II, “dactylic”
rhythm. | 40 |
| 2.6 | Suite No. 6 in D Major, Gavottes I and II, phrase
counting after Edward Aldwell. | 41 |
| | a. Gavotte I. | |
| | b. Gavotte II. | |
| 2.7 | Two styles of giges. | 42 |
| | a. Suite No. 6 in D Major: Italian giga (brilliant style). | |
| | b. Suite No. 5 in C Minor: French gigue. | |
| 2.8 | Suite No. 1 in G Major, harmonic motive. | 44 |
| 2.9 | Suite No. 3 in C Major, c' to C scalar motive. | 45 |
| 2.10 | Suite No. 4 in E \flat Major, emphasis on D \flat . | 46 |
| 2.11 | Suite No. 2 in D Minor, emphasis on Neapolitan
harmony (E \flat major). | 46 |

List of Music Examples

2.12	Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prelude, modified pattern prelude. a. Opening pattern. b. Freer material.	49
2.13	Suite No. 4 in E \flat Major, Prelude, figured-bass reduction.	51
2.14	<i>Niederfallen</i> figure: descending three-note arpeggio symbolizing Christ on the Mount of Olives. a. Suite No. 4 in E \flat Major, Prelude. b. <i>St. Matthew Passion</i> , recitative (“The Savior falls down before his Father”). c. Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, Mystery Sonata No. 6 (“Christ on the Mount of Olives”).	53
3.1	Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prelude: The four manuscript copies. Reproduced by permission of the Berlin State Library and the Austrian National Library. a. Anna Magdalena Bach (Source A). b. Johann Peter Kellner (Source B). c. Johann Nikolaus Schober (Source C, first half). d. Anonymous Hamburg copyist (Source D).	63
3.2	Violin Solos, comparing slurs in manuscripts by J. S. Bach and Anna Magdalena Bach. Reproduced by permission of the Berlin State Library. a. Sonata No. 1 in G Minor, Adagio (m. 6). b. Partita No. 1 in B Minor, Tempo di Borea (m. 58). c. Sonata No. 2 in A Minor, Andante (m. 9). d. Partita No. 2 in D minor, Allemande (m. 2).	66
3.3	Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Menuet I, variant readings in mm. 6–7.	73
4.1	Suite No. 1 in G Major, Gigue, syncopated ties as edited by Louis-Pierre Norblin. Reproduced by permission of the Music and Theater Library of Sweden.	86
4.2	Justus Johann Friedrich Dotzauer, two passages marked with <i>portamento</i> fingerings. a. Suite No. 1 in G Major, Menuet II. b. Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Sarabande.	89

List of Music Examples

4.3	Chords as renotated in Friedrich Grützmacher's "original" edition.	97
	a. Suite No. 1 in G Major, Sarabande.	
	b. Suite No. 5 in C Minor, Allemande.	
	c. Suite No. 6 in D Major, Sarabande.	
4.4	Suite No. 1 in G Major, Courante, comparing Friedrich Grützmacher's "concert" and "original" editions.	99
4.5	Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prelude, as edited by Hugo Becker. Reproduced by permission of McGill University.	101
4.6	Suite No. 6 in D Major, Gavotte II, as arranged by W. H. Squire.	105
5.1	Minor variants, as recorded by Pablo Casals.	121
	a. Suite No. 1 in G Major, Gigue.	
	b. Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Allemande.	
	c. Suite No. 3 in C Major, Bourrée I.	
5.2	Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Prelude, as edited by Diran Alexanian. Reproduced by permission of Riemenschneider Bach Institute, Baldwin Wallace University.	122
5.3	<i>Bariolage</i> figures performed as double stops by Pablo Casals.	124
	a. Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Courante.	
	b. Suite No. 3 in C Major, Gigue.	
5.4	Suite No. 6 in D Major, Courante, as analyzed by Ernst Kurth.	129
5.5	Suite No. 2 in D Minor, Prelude (climax), as analyzed by Ernst Kurth.	129

PREFACE

Like many string players, I first encountered music arranged from J. S. Bach's Cello Suites during my first year of lessons. I began studying the Cello Suites in earnest as a teenager, and I have never stopped exploring their musical and technical challenges. This handbook examines how these thirty-six remarkable pieces came to be foundational to the training repertoire for cello and why they today occupy such a special place in our musical culture.

Whereas Bach was inheritor to an important German tradition of unaccompanied violin music, it is not at all obvious why he chose to compose in this style for the cello. This book offers some context about Bach's creative activities around the time he composed the Cello Suites that allows us to speculate. I proceed in a spiral form, beginning with musicians in Bach's immediate circle c. 1720, gradually expanding outward to a broader array of German musical writers and critics, and finally following the Cello Suites' reception across Europe and eventually around the world, influencing musicians, artists, and a global public well beyond the "classical" music sphere. I devote special attention to the often-overlooked record of public performances before Pablo Casals's world-premiere recordings from the late 1930s. In recounting that history, we witness the surprising variety of interpretive approaches adopted by the first generations of musicians to grapple seriously with the Cello Suites.

Although this book focuses specifically on the Cello Suites, Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin (or "Violin Solos") are mentioned frequently. Indeed, there would have been compelling reasons for this study to consider the Violin Solos and Cello Suites together, since Bach conceived them jointly as a two-part collection. Nevertheless, since there are already several volumes devoted specifically to the Violin Solos, the Cello Suites deserve a dedicated study. Whereas we can definitively answer many

Preface

essential questions about the Violin Solos – such as their date of completion, the exact type of instrument for which they were composed, the earliest musicians to perform them, the whereabouts of their autograph manuscript, and precisely which notes and articulations Bach wrote – those issues all remain murky with respect to the Cello Suites. This book shows how information known about the Violin Solos can support educated guesses about the Cello Suites, even if such speculation necessarily remains inconclusive.

The absence of a surviving autograph manuscript of the Cello Suites has been a source of romance and mystery – as well as of frustration for cellists and editors. Pathbreaking research by Andrew Talle (discussed in Chapter 3) explains the most likely reason why the autograph has disappeared and challenges the long-standing, widespread belief that Anna Magdalena Bach’s manuscript copy should be considered as a kind of “surrogate” autograph. All citations of Talle’s edition of the Cello Suites (Bärenreiter, 2018) refer specifically to the revised preface of its third printing, which appeared in 2022 but bears a copyright date of 2018.

Discussions of the Cello Suites can be complicated by unexamined beliefs and opinions that are too often presented as facts. During my years as a viola student, I encountered a bewilderingly wide range of contradictory ideas about the “correct” way to perform the Cello Suites. In this handbook, I have endeavored to cut through the noise by presenting reliable information grounded in evidence. Rather than foregrounding my own personal preferences, I have focused on separating received myths from verifiable information and illustrating historical contexts that shed light on the available evidence. This approach, I believe, empowers readers to approach the Cello Suites from an informed position.

As this book is written for an anglophone readership, I cite historical sources in published English translations where possible. In other cases, translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. I primarily cite English-language secondary sources, even as I admire the tremendous body of Bach scholarship in other languages (especially German). I have retained variant spellings (such as “Suonaten” and “Suitten”) as they appear in historical

xiv

Preface

sources, with two exceptions: “bouree” and “gigue” are given respectively as “bourrée” and “gigue.” I use historical German forms such as “Capellmeister” and “Cöthen,” which today are spelled with a K.

References to “Bach” by default indicate J. S. Bach. Other members of his family are consistently given with full names. All examples are from Bach’s Cello Suites, unless otherwise indicated. With the exception of editions of Bach’s Cello Suites, citations of items dating from before 1900 omit publisher information. All Bach editions are listed in the Bibliography under their editors or arrangers, rather than under “Bach.” Since many historical editions are difficult to date precisely, dates should be understood as estimates.

Facsimiles of all manuscripts and many historical editions discussed in this book can be viewed on the Internet Music Score Library Project (<http://imslp.org>). Manuscript sources can also be viewed on Bach Digital (<http://bach-digital.de>). Examples from Suite No. 5 are generally given at sounding pitch, not in the original *scordatura* notation. References to “Suite No. 1” indicate Cello Suite No. 1 (BWV 1007), as opposed to any other Bach suite. I omit BWV numbers for very familiar compositions but include them for pieces that may be less well known. When precision is needed about pitches in specific registers, I adopt the traditional (Helmholtz) system, where the cello’s open strings are designated C–G–d–a and where middle C is c’.

A discography of Bach Cello Suites recordings, compiled by Charles Pidsley and Mark Siner, is available at <http://bachcello.suites.co.uk>. Albums cited in this book are included in the Bibliography under the names of the (principal) performer. Pablo Casals’s best-known recordings of the Cello Suites are the complete cycle recorded 1936–39, but this book also mentions his other studio and live recordings. Full discographic information for Casals’s recordings is available at www.paucasals.org/en/discography and is not provided in the notes or Bibliography.

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This book is dedicated to Heidi and Libba, in gratitude for your ever-inspiring teaching, about viola playing and about life.