BACH CELLO SUITES
DAVID WATKIN

RES10147

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Cello Suites

David Watkin *baroque cello*

Cello by Francesco Rugeri, Cremona c. 1670 (Suites 1-5)

Cello by Antonio & Hieronymous Amati, (5-String), Cremona c. 1600 (Suite 6)

Baroque bow by John Waterhouse, after Tononi? Italy c. 1725

About David Watkin:

'He not only brings that dedicated scholarly view of playing characteristic of period instrument specialists, but he plays with such huge commitment'
Sir Charles Mackerras, BBC Music Magazine

'Hushed and flawless Bach'
The Observer

To my teachers, family and friends, especially those who have been more than one of those things.

Disc One

Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007	
1. Prélude	[2:14]
2. Allemande	[4:39]
3. Courante	[2:41]
4. Sarabande	[2:50]
5. Menuet I & II	[3:48]
6. Gigue	[1:43]
Suite No. 3 in C major, BWV 1009	
7. Prélude	[3:00]
8. Allemande	[4:13]
9. Courante	[3:07]
10. Sarabande	[4:37]
11. Bourrée I & II	[4:00]
12. Gigue	[3:15]
Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011	
13. Prélude	[6:36]
14. Allemande	[7:09]
15. Courante	[2:35]
16. Sarabande	[3:39]
17. Gavotte I & II	[5:34]
18. Gigue	[2:29]
Total playing time	[68:19]

Disc Two

Suite No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1008	
1. Prélude	[3:19]
2. Allemande	[3:39]
3. Courante	[2:04]
4. Sarabande	[5:13]
5. Menuet I & II	[4:00]
6. Gigue	[2:54]
Suite No. 4 in E flat major, BWV 1010	
7. Preludium	[3:27]
8. Allemande	[4:04]
9. Courante	[3:24]
10. Sarabande	[3:41]
11. Bourrée I & II	[6:24]
12. Gigue	[2:49]
Suite No. 6 in D major, BWV 1012	
13. Prelude	[4:56]
14. Allemande	[8:49]
15. Courante	[3:42]
16. Sarabande	[4:59]
17. Gavotte I & II	[4:55]
18. Gigue	[4:13]
Total playing time	[76:42]

Johann Sebastian Bach: Cello Suites BWV 1007-1012

Bach spent nearly his whole life in the service of the Lutheran Church. Except for brief visits to Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707) in Lübeck and Frederick the Great (1712-1786) at Potsdam, he spent it in an area of a few dozen kilometres. But for a couple of years from 1721 he was Kapellmeister at the Calvinist court of Köthen, and the majority of his secular music hails from this time. Yet even these works are signed off by Bach: 'S.D.G.' – 'Soli Deo Gloria' (Glory to God alone). Music in dance metre permeates even his most profoundly sacred works, alongside elements from opera and popular song – Bach didn't share today's demarcation between sacred and secular music, as witness the Sarabande-like final chorus of the St Matthew Passion, BWV 244.

So it is unsurprising, for instance, that the chord sequence over a tonic pedal which opens the first Cello Suite is shared with the opening recitative of the St Matthew Passion. Musical archetypes found in his large-scale works reappear with similar resonances throughout these Suites, often giving them a sense of unity across the dances. The Prelude from the third suite, for example features an extended dominant pedal with a chain of suspensions in two upper voices – a major mode version of those in the opening chorus of the St John Passion, BWV 245. As well as blurring the sacred and secular, Bach also saw no distinction in meaning between his largest- and smallest-scale works. In fact the limitations of four fingers and four strings seem no limitation at all to Bach. The Cello Suites are, in Wilfrid Mellers' words, '[...] an example of Bach's metamorphosis of a technical problem into a spiritual experience.' In the traditions of Biber, Domenico Gabrielli etc. they are not so much unaccompanied as 'self-accompanied'. This music is the ultimate audience participation '[...] festooned with little time-bombs of harmonic potential that tease the listener to speculate on how they might turn out' as John Eliot Gardiner puts it. Bach, the skilful lace maker knows exactly what can be pared away to leave the most delicate lattice.

But scholars argue about the warp and weft of Bach's musical fabric. Followers of Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) and Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935) use nineteenth-century terms (like 'tonality') to trace the relationship between vertical harmonies, while for others (e.g. Laurence

Dreyfus (b. 1952)) his harmony is a result of the interplay of horizontal lines. A piece like the first Prelude, with almost continuous semiquavers, is so skilfully woven through that it defies this distinction. Even structural and decorative notes become hard to distinguish. In Bach we hear a unified creative gesture of *inventio* (idea), *elaboratio* (structure), *decoratio* (decoration) and *oratio* (performance). To his critic Johann Adolph Scheibe (1708-1776), Bach was producing written out improvisations, taking from '[...] the realm of the performer'. Bach didn't want to leave *decoratio* to the whim of improvisation. For him, like the Orders of Classical architecture, the proportions and relationship of structure to decoration were crucial.

Bach is often described as bringing together the Italian and French styles, but this was no self-conscious act of cultural assimilation. He had grown up with French Baroque dances. Their specific characteristics and metrical implications were in his blood. The dances that were central to social and political life at Versailles were equally central across much of Europe – even in German speaking Lutheran courts. Whether anyone actually danced to the Cello Suites is, of course irrelevant. How could he imagine that one day there might be musicians who would not know how to dance a minuet? He also assumed a familiarity and fluency in *figuren*, the common vocabulary of note patterns and gestures that his *decoratio* inhabits. Bach often delineated these figures with slurs, written in as he composed, not added as an afterthought. The figures become the key to understanding the slurs. The *messanza* figure (three conjunct notes slurred, one disjunct) in the first Courante, for instance, could be so casually written by Anna Magdalena precisely because of that assumed familiarity.

Prelude

The suites are 'preluded' (verb not noun) by music flowing from an improvised tradition. Lute players, making a virtue out of a necessity, improvised little links between the chords they needed to tune. By the time it reached the hands of Bach 'preluding' had become an art in itself. The first and fourth Preludes follow the model of the first pages of the Well-Tempered Clavier, 'harmony expressed in pattern' – more a principle than an archetype. It is simple but complete even without Gounod's addition of *Ave Maria*. A plan of keys to visit would be enough for the performer once they

Cello by Francesco Rugeri, Cremona c. 1670

had established how the first bar's pattern works and how it might be varied. In his contrapuntal music Bach enjoys setting voices with predictable lines against each other, while the listener gasps in anticipation at how the impending clashes might be resolved. In this type of Prelude, the 'harmonic time-bombs' result from pitting the pattern against the implications of the harmonic journey, inverting it, or forcing it to work against a pedal. The second and third Preludes have a more narrative flow, 'Bach, the Fifth Evangelist', orating. The Sixth Prelude combines these two styles, all the time keeping the ebullient character of a gigue. The fifth Suite is unique with a heavily-dotted French Ouverture conceived on the scale of Bach's Orchestral Suites.

Sarabande

The five dance movements centre around the Sarabande. One breathless account from 1671 of a solo dancer gives a sense of what French Baroque dance involved: 'Now and then he would express anger and spite with an impetuous and turbulent cadence, and then, evoking a sweeter passion by more moderate motions, he would sigh, swoon, let his eyes wander languidly; and certain sinuous movements of the arms and body, nonchalant, disjointed and passionate made him appear so admirable and so charming that throughout this enchanting dance he won as many hearts as he attracted spectators.' (cited in Little and Jenne, *Dance and the Music of Bach*). Sublime, majestic, contemplative, the sarabande is in triple time, yet it has two beats per bar ('one, two--'). Too slow a tempo and the two chords lose their harmonic cohesion. Like a pair of magnets, the force drawing them together depends on distance, until at a certain point suddenly becoming useless. It is this interaction between dance metre and harmony which, like a Maglev train, keeps the music airborne. Like good Shakespearean verse-speaking, the metre must be latent throughout, embodied yet also transcended – a paradox reminiscent of Karl Kraus: 'It is equally fatal to have a system and not to have a system. One must combine both.'

Allemande

Each Suite proper opens with an Allemande, by Bach's day already out of date. According to Little and Jenne, no Allemande choreographies survive, and there are an enormous number of different styles: reflective, meandering (Suites 1 and 6), jumpy, exuberant (Suite 3) and a heavily-

Cello by Antonio & Hieronymous Amati, (5-String), Cremona c. 1600

dotted French-style (Suite 5). Only the second and fourth seem ‘typical’. Whichever style he chooses, Bach uses the Allemandes to bridge the chasm between the narrative world of the Préludes and the more strongly felt metre of the other dances.

Courante

Despite the spelling, these Courantes are relatives of the virtuosic Italian corrente found in Corelli. A ‘running’ or ‘flowing’ dance, metric play is common, sometimes alternating between 3/4 and 6/8 times. The fourth Suite further complicates this ambiguity by alternating duplet and triplet quavers. The fifth Suite has the only real French Courante of the set, conceived in stately 3/2 time.

Courtly dances

After the Sarabande comes a pair of courtly dances: Menuets, Bourrées and Gavottes. Of these dances, the Bourrée was the fastest dance and Menuet the slowest. In the fourth Suite there is an extended first Bourrée, and the little second Bourrée, like the A minor Violin Sonata, uses two separate voices but with different articulation. The bow dips down to dab the bottom string while playing sustained notes on the upper string.

Gigue

Little and Jenne distinguish three types of gigue: the heavier ‘two notes slurred, one separate’ type which I associate with the opening of the sixth Brandenburg Concerto (in Suites 1, 2, 3 and the Prelude to 6); the faster rolling type with groups of three under the slur (Suite 4); and the dotted French type (Suite 5). Although it is unlikely that Bach knew Purcell’s opera, the G major Gigue shares the same ironic major/minor mode switch of Aeneas’s boozy sailors with their ‘vows of returning, to their nymphs on the shore, [minor] while never intending to visit them more (no, never!) [major].

Performing the Cello Suites

Since hearing the Toccata and Fugue in D minor as a child, Bach has had a special place in my life. From my teens I played Bach to my teachers whenever I could, to the exclusion of all else if possible: Sharon McKinley, Amarylis Fleming, William and Anthony Pleeth, and Anner Bylsma (whose 1979 recording was a revelation). Over the years I also played them to Gustav Leonhardt, Laurence Dreyfus and John Butt. At 15 my parents commissioned a Baroque cello from Clive Morris, which I still use.

In the same year I saved up and bought Nikolaus Harnoncourt's recording which came with a free copy of Anna Magdalena's manuscript marking the beginning of an ongoing journey to find the meaning behind this document.

One stage on that journey came when I played the third Prelude to a class of primary school children. I told them about Bach's rhetoric, how it stops near the end, but only to hold up a finger, in dramatic pause. I said I had my own 'story' for it but I wouldn't tell them because they might have their own. Afterwards they all had to tell their story and one little boy's image has stuck with me. "There's this man!" he began breathlessly, "and he's going to be executed, but he escapes! He runs away down the road and across some fields, and he comes to a HUGE WATERFALL!" That nine year old boy's vivid image for the opening build up and extended dominant pedal section with its wave-like pattern, seems to me just as valid a response as any published analysis, PhD, or perhaps even Mark Morris' fabulously inspiring choreography for the suite *Falling Down Stairs*. The descending scale and broken arppeggio opening – which gives Mark Morris his title – rather than being an accident, very deliberately exhorts us to listen. If this is a 'sermon in music' it is a very dramatic one. Even without the benefit of Bach's rhetorical education, we recognise the act of declamation unfolding throughout: long phrases build with sequences and false endings catch us by surprise, the opening exhortation making unscheduled intrusions into the narrative. The 'waterfall' creates its effect using *bariolage* – where the bow hops between three voices creating the illusion of sustained parts, impossible in reality.

The third Prelude has long been played in a slow, grand style. Yet one important source from Bach's time (Peter Kellner's) marks it *Presto*. The same *Falling Down Stairs* gesture opens the Well-Tempered Clavier Book Two D minor Prelude, unmarked but always played fast! It is also found in the cello piccolo obbligato in *Mein Gläubiges Herz* BWV 68 – marked Presto. The case grows for a more lively tempo.

The E flat Suite is unusual in that the home key doesn't resonate well with the cello's open strings. This gives the Suite a characteristic resonance, even when trying to generate supporting resonance by holding down the fingers for as long as possible. The sarabande principle that

the beats in a bar do not have to be the same length also extends to the fourth Prelude. The rise and fall of the jagged pattern generates a grouping of the eight quavers into 3:2:3, not pairs or fours. On inversion the pattern produces a more standard stress 4:2:2 (like the hymn 'Ye Holy Angels Bright').

In Bach's day the cello had only recently arrived at today's tuning of a, d, G, C, so it should not be surprising that in two of the Suites, alternative tunings are called for. The sixth Suite requires a higher fifth string, while the fifth Suite calls for the older tuning g,d,G,C – made perhaps by tuning up the bottom three strings of the old B flat tuning rather than down the top string in today's tuning. Either way, the fourth between the top two strings, and perhaps lower tension, gives the instrument not only new combinations of notes and chords, but new timbres, recalling Bach's fondness for the sonorities of 'old fashioned' instruments like the viola d'amore.

The French flavour of the fifth Prelude permeates the whole suite, with its dotted Allemande, French Courante ('noble and restrained') and French Gigue, making the Suite the most French of an otherwise typically 'transalpine' set. Even the more modern Gallant pair of Gavottes have a strong French feel. The central Sarabande is for many listeners one of Bach's most profound utterances. The descending steps of angular quavers flow like tears suggesting the chromatic 'cross' motive found in the Well-Tempered Claver Book 1 B minor Fugue. To truly play these figures legato, one's left hand ends up in contortions like something from a Grünwald Crucifixion. Moreover, because of the partial transposition required by the tuning, Bach is able to specify 'fingerings'. The Suite is full of sophisticated examples of expressive choices and technical decisions, but one particular example comes in the Sarabande. The opening three bars build up a 'sighing' pattern with two notes played on one string, then crossing to the lower strings. The third bar repeats the pattern with a larger interval, the heightened third rhetorical statement. It could easily be played 'cleanly' by changing string after the first note, but Bach/Anna Magdalena specify one string again for the first two notes. This, along with the all-important legato slur, invites a more expressive sigh down the augmented fourth.

A controversial note appears in the Allemande at bar 25. Anna Magdalena (and probably Bach) write the chord 'G, D, a flat' while

cadencing into E flat. This ninth breaks many of Bach's own rules, not least being unprepared. Far more obvious would be 'B flat, D, a flat' for the cadence. Yet Bach repeats the offending bass note in his autograph transcription for lute. Rather than correct his mistake he 'explains' the dissonance by adding piles of thirds in the lute version to beautiful effect, the 'grain of sand in the oyster' as John Butt puts it. That these extra notes are unavailable to the cellist leads me to conclude that Bach's mistake must be corrected.

Bach only used the cello 'a cinque chords' in a handful of Cantatas and the sixth Suite, but always to great effect. The fifth string creates a lot more sympathetic resonance, especially higher overtones. Almost every note on the instrument 'lights up'. It can give the instrument a soft plangent sound, (Allemande, Sarabande and the second Gavotte's Musette drone). But in fast music the jangling interplay of overtones makes the instrument effervesce. Its broader canvas allows Bach not only to use a higher register but to 'travel' further with sequences, giving the music a wider harmonic sweep. Rather than the normal 2 ½ octave human voice range of four strings, the additional string gives the instrument a super-human voice with a bigger range than any other non-keyboard instrument used by Bach. Its use in the Cantatas often signifies archangels or events of heroic proportions. Almost like accounts of the castrato range, or even the huge sweep of Richard Strauss's horn writing, the effect of a unified tone over such a range has a certain nobility, and Bach clearly enjoyed writing for it.

A note on the instruments

The small five-string cello by Brothers Amati, Cremona from Amarylis Fleming's collection, was kindly loaned by the Fleming Trust and the Royal Academy of Music. This extraordinary instrument was the obvious choice for the sixth Suite, although it is difficult to know exactly what kind of instrument Bach envisaged for the sixth Suite. Anna Magdalena specifies the tuning on the first stave, but the word 'piccolo' appears nowhere. Physics dictates the string length and hence body size – much longer than the Amati's 25.5 inch string length and the E string (whether at A=415 or A=392) is perilously close to breaking point. The cello by Francesco Rugeri, who probably trained with Amati, provides a perfect match.

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David Watkin

Unaccompanied Bach has taken David Watkin all over Europe, from the Palace of Frederick the Great at Potsdam to the Prague Spring Festival. He played three of the Suites as part of Sir John Eliot Gardiner's Bach Cantata Pilgrimage, sitting by the font in which Bach was baptised, in Eisenach, and featured in Gardiner's TV programme *Bach, a Passionate Life*. He is a juror for the Leipzig Bach Competition.

David Watkin studied the cello with William Pleeth, whilst reading Music at Cambridge, where he was also a choral scholar. Since then he has been principal cello in some of the world's leading ensembles including English Baroque Soloists, Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique (ORR), Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE), the Philharmonia Orchestra and Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Solo recordings include music by Vivaldi, Haydn, Beethoven, and Francis Pott. He has been a soloist at Barbican, Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Carnegie Hall, New York and performed the Schumann Concerto with Sir John Eliot Gardiner and ORR at Lincoln Center, New York. As a guest artist he has collaborated with, among others, Robert Levin, Fredericka von Stade and the Tokyo Quartet

As a founder member of the Eroica Quartet he has performed all over Europe and the US, including at the Wigmore Hall; the Frick Collection, New York; and the Library of Congress, Washington. They have recorded to great acclaim the complete quartets of Mendelssohn and Schumann and a Beethoven disc (Harmonia Mundi USA), the world premiere recording of Mendelssohn's Octet original version and quartets by Debussy and Ravel (Resonus Classics).

David Watkin has revived the eighteenth-century practice of realising figured bass (improvising chordal accompaniments) on the cello and used it in recordings of Corelli with Andrew Manze (Harmonia Mundi USA) and John Holloway (Novalis) and in Mozart operas with Sir Charles Mackerras and the SCO (DG) and OAE (Chandos). His writings about this and other aspects of music have been published by *Early Music*, *The Strad* and the Cambridge University Press volume *Performing Beethoven*.

Conducting is now an increasingly important part of his music making. He has conducted a wide range of repertoire with groups including the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Swedish Baroque Orchestra, the Academy of Ancient Music and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. He founded the Edinburgh International Cello Continuo Clinic and also teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

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