

BACH'S SOLO SUITES FOR CELLO

By John Marks (reprinted by HDTT with his kind permission)

As stated by J. S. Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, writing in 1774 to Johann Nikolaus Forkel, J. S. Bach's first biographer:

"In his youth, and until the approach of old age [my father] played the violin very 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 the violoncello without bass."

J. S. Bach understood to perfection not only the "possibilities" of all stringed instruments. He also profoundly understood the individual technical and musical character of each stringed instrument, as well as its limitations. (J. S. Bach's father was a string player. It is probable that the violin was young Johann's first instrument.) Nowhere is Bach's holistic understanding of a stringed instrument more evident than in his six works for violoncello solo. Bach writes completely in harmony with the natural pitch, tone quality, and pace of the violoncello.

Bach's technical understanding was applied in the service of a musical inspiration that brought forth works of endless fascination, challenge, beauty, and spiritual renewal. With the sparest of musical materials, Bach set out not only to suggest a separately moving bass line, but also to provide a palpable harmony, all without overshadowing the importance of the melody. That the listener instinctively never feels the lack of a keyboard or continuo in this music is proof that Bach succeeded.

Because Bach's music was almost never printed or published in his lifetime, we cannot trace the conception or evolution of a work by means of correspondence with publishers, as we can for many later composers. However, it is generally accepted that it was during Bach's tenure at Köthen (1717-1723) that he put the cello Suites into nearly final form. Where and for how long he had worked on them beforehand, we may never know. We can say that the Suites ended up as a set, but not



J.S. Bach

Cello Suites

Nathaniel Rosen



necessarily that they started out as a set.

The court at Köthen had a somewhat Calvinist orientation toward worship. With less demand for church music than he was used to, Bach had more time to devote to secular, and specifically instrumental, works. It was at Köthen that Bach composed or put into final form the sonatas for violin and clavier, for viola da gamba and clavier, the works for solo violin and solo cello, and the Brandenburg Concertos. In purely human terms the years at Köthen were probably the happiest of Bach's entire life.

As shown by the above quotation from the letter to Forkel, even by Carl Philipp Emanuel's time it had become customary to think of the six cello Suites as a set, a counterpoint to the set of three sonatas and partitas for violin solo. The oldest surviving manuscript of the cello Suites (a fair copy made by Bach's wife Anna Magdalena during their time at Leipzig--unlike for the violin sonatas and partitas, no manuscript in Bach's own hand survives), which accounts for the works' sequential B.W.V. numbers, would seem to bear this out.

Indeed, the formal and harmonic compactness of the Suites provides impressive support for the "set theory." Each Suite begins with a Prélude, followed by an Allemande, Courante, and Sarabande, and concludes with a Gigue. For fifth movements, two Suites have Menuets, two have Bourrées, and two have Gavottes. The keys of the Suites all relate to three keynotes: C, G and D. The keys of the Suites can thus be grouped as C Major and C Minor, E-Flat Major (C Minor's relative major), G Major, and D Major and D Minor.

However, concentrating on the formal similarities and harmonic relationships among the Suites runs the risk of obscuring the remarkably individual character of each Suite. For the Sixth and Fifth Suites, that individuality extends to the very nature of the instruments for which those works were conceived, a factor not present in the works for violin solo.

The Sixth Suite was written for an instrument smaller in size than a standard cello and with an additional high string, for a total of five. Especially in matters of left-hand position and string crossing, then, what we usually hear today as the Sixth Suite is a transcription for four-string cello, of a work conceived for a different instrument. This, of course, only adds to the challenge of what is a culmination of difficulties, as from a technical standpoint the Suites become more difficult from first to last.

The Fifth Suite requires that the player re-tune the cello's top string, A, down a step to G, giving the cello both a low and a high G string. Bach doubtless made this choice not for technical but rather musical reasons. This is an example of the tension between those Suites in keys that exploit the cello's 'natural' tonality as expressed through its open strings, and those that modify or avoid it.

The Fourth Suite is another such example. Its key, E-Flat Major, avoids the open A string. Some commentators believe that Bach attached a certain theological or liturgical significance to E-Flat Major, seeing in its three-flat key signature a symbol of the Holy Trinity. In its grandeur of concept and architecture, the Fourth Suite is a perfect contrast to the First (G Major) Suite, the Prélude of which exploits, even revels in, the sound of the open A string. That sunny, uncomplicated but enrapturing movement, by the way, is itself an almost perfect parallel to the first prelude of Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier. The balance among the Suites is maintained with the dark mood of the Second Suite contrasting with the prevailing joy of the Third.

Bach's music was the first that required a "revival" to bring it before the modern concert going public. The first phase of the Bach revival culminated in 1829 with Devrient and Mendelssohn's centenary performances of the St. Matthew Passion. Nonetheless, the historical record shows that, at least among Bach's biographers and other scholars, the cello Suites were always recognized as works of a singular grandeur and endless quiet beauty. It is safe to conclude that as long as there are cellos, and cellists to play them, that judgment is not likely to change in the least.

NATHANIEL ROSEN (b. 1948) began his study with legendary cellist Gregor Piatigorsky at University of Southern California at age 13. After graduating from USC at age 22, he served as Piatigorsky's teaching assistant for five years until the latter died in 1976. The following year he became principal cellist of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under conductor André Previn. In 1978 Rosen won the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, being the first American to do so since Van Cliburn. This win launched his career as a leading international soloist, playing with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, London Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic, and Leipzig Gewandhaus. He also participated in major chamber music festivals and taught at a number of important universities and conservatories.

PRIOR REVIEWS OF THIS GRAMMY-NOMINATED RECORDING

... no one makes this music more riveting than Rosen, and in certain pieces—the tragic Second and monumental Fourth, for example—he sets a standard for the cellists who will follow him. -THE BALTIMORE SUN

[Rosen's] Bach solo cello suites combine elegance of articulation with an imaginative flair that blows the scholarly dust off these pieces. -THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

[The Suites] unfold beautifully and lyrically, impelled by a technique that is at once virtuosic and unselfconscious ... -STEREOPHILE [Recording of the Month]

Mr. Rosen's interpretations are daring and free-spirited, an approach that is evident nearly from the start. ...there is something persuasive about the broad strokes in which he paints. -THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rosen's view of the Bach moves from a highly charged atmosphere at the opening Preludes to a cold sobriety in the slow movements. Yet one is never in doubt that he feels passionately about these works ... -THE STRAD

Nathaniel Rosen's recording of the six Bach cello suites are the kind of deeply considered readings we'd expect of a mature artist, but there's no lack of the technical sparkle and shameless electricity that helped Rosen win the 1978 Tchaikovsky Competition. -STEREO REVIEW

Even in a market crowded with performances of the Bach cello suites, I can certainly recommend this production highly. ... there's no doubt that these are interpretations from a first-rate cellist and musical thinker. -FANFARE

Rosen conquers [the Suites] with performances of dark-toned, probing intensity without neglecting to convey the dance inspiration of the quicker movements. -THE LOS ANGELES TIMES



Johann Sebastian Bach
Six Suites for Violoncello Solo, BWV 1007-1012
Nathaniel Rosen, Cello

Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007 (19:09)

01. I. Prelude 2:43
02. II. Allemande 4:38
03. III. Courante 2:44
04. IV. Saraband 3:12
05. V. Menuet I & II 4:01
06. VI. Gigue 1:51

Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008 (21:55)

07. I. Prélude 4:45
08. II. Allemande 3:42
09. III. Courante 2:13
10. IV. Sarabande 5:00
11. V. Menuet I & II 3:23
12. VI. Gigue 2:52

Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009 (24:33)

13. I. Prélude 4:12
14. II. Allemande 4:06
15. III. Courante 3:42
16. IV. Sarabande 4:32
17. V. Bourrée I & II 4:19
18. VI. Gigue 3:42

Suite No. 4 in E-Flat Major, BWV 1010 (21:54)

19. I. Prélude 5:53
20. II. Allemande 2:35
21. III. Courante 2:27
22. IV. Sarabande 4:43
23. V. Bourrée I & II 4:29
24. VI. Gigue 1:47

Suite No. 5 in C Minor, BWV 1011 (24:08)

25. I. Prélude 7:38
26. II. Allemande 2:53
27. III. Courante 1:53
28. IV. Sarabande 4:12
29. V. Gavotte I & II 5:19
30. VI. Gigue 2:13

Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012 (24:37)

31. I. Prélude 5:47
32. II. Allemande 4:39
33. III. Courante 2:45
34. IV. Sarabande :41
35. V. Gavotte I & II 4:35
36. VI. Gigue 3:10

Total Time: 136:16

Violoncello: 1738 Domenico Montagnana, ex-Servais (A=440 Hz).

Recorded December 18-19, 1993 (Suites 4-6) and July 6-7, 1994 (Suites 1-3) at Music Division Recital Hall, Purchase College of the State University of New York.

Producer: Doris Stevenson. Cover photo of Mr. Rosen: Bahman Soltani. Recorded by Jerry Bruck, Chief Engineer and Owner, Posthorn Recordings, NYC, with Richard Brause, Assistant Engineer, in Nagra D format (44.1 kHz, 20 bits).

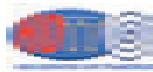
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Original editing and mastering by Gabe M. Wiener, Quintessential Sound, Inc., NYC, 1994.

New transfer from digital master tape, restoration and remastering by John H. Haley, Harmony Restorations, LLC, 2021.



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