

Those of us who attempt to play early music exactly as its composers might have expected it to sound are unfortunately very like Susie, the little girl in art class. Asked by her teacher what she was painting, she replied: “A picture of God.” “But, Susie,” her teacher pointed out, “Nobody knows what God looks like.” “Well,” replied the child, “They will in a minute!”

The present recording is the first – and I trust not the last – in which four fundamental changes are made to the way these suites have been played until now, in accordance with what we understand of Bach’s own performance practices. They include: tempi derived from Baroque sources, chiefly from Johann Mattheson’s 1739 treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*; the incorporation of timbre changes, such as the use of pizzicato, con sordino, and sul ponticello, known to be used by continuo cellists at least since Monteverdi’s time; the use of additional improvised harmony and counterpoint, as described by Bach’s student Agricola and consistent with contemporaneous practices of continuo cellists; and finally consideration of these works’ context as autobiographical statements.

It would not be out of place to assert here that these suites take their place in what the late art historian Erwin Panofsky called the Baroque Pastoral Elegiac Tradition. This genre encompasses operas by Monteverdi, Peri and others, paintings by artists such as Poussin and Guercino, much poetry, and several works for theater. It is of critical importance to take into consideration the fact that Bach became a widower at the time he wrote them.

Text and Context: Anachronism in Score Reading:

What did Bach “intend” with this music? On one hand, the wide acceptance of Benjamin Constant’s 1804 idea of Art for Art’s Sake renders even the most basic “intention” – to communicate – well beside the point in much artistic criticism (it is a central tenet of Aestheticism that art should be contemplated without regard for its original social, political, or moral context). The dominant view today holds that art must reach out to later generations universally through form alone; this is an important cornerstone of critical thinking for the past two centuries. On the other hand, Bach died well before those two centuries began. Might this not be too limiting a view of Bach’s art, owing to its anachronism? Rendering such works as the cello suites as much as possible the way Bach might have expected to hear them reopens a controversy, one side of which was best encapsulated in an essay by Wimsatt and Beardsley entitled “*The Intentional Fallacy*.” This argument posited the futility of attempting to emulate little Susie *per se*; by the 1960’s it had been ably refuted by E. D. Hirsch, but its influence is still felt in music education today.

I believe Bach’s *stated* intention – the score – is the most significant part of the question, but far from the whole question. His *manifest* intentions, discernable through what we can piece together of the world of ideas in which he created music, impinge profoundly upon how it finally sounds. When we fail to do all we can to understand Bach’s original context we create by default a spurious one, resulting in several sorts of musical anachronism. Musicians are currently trained to use the most accurately

reproduced scores available, but very often without regard for how the composer expected them to be read at the time. The modern set of *a priori* assumptions underlying our study of Bach's scores might benefit from the stripping away of literary-critical accretions, rather similarly to the way published scores themselves needed to be rid of much editorializing when the *Urtext* movement began.

Using Biographical Means to Reconstruct Original Intention:

The fact that Bach suddenly became a widower the year he composed them provides insight into why these unaccompanied string works were written. In July of 1720 he left Cöthen for a spa in Bohemia as part of a princely entourage, and on returning home was shocked to find that his first wife, Maria Barbara, had died and been buried weeks before. Although the original manuscript of these cello works is lost we do know they were designated as the second volume of (at least) a two-volume compendium. The first volume comprises his three sonatas and three partitas for unaccompanied violin (into which are encoded Maria Barbara's name; Bach often used such symbolism in his works, usually in numerological form). The title page of his violin sonatas and partitas, surviving in Bach's hand, reads: "*Sei solo a violino senza basso accompagnato*," or, "Six solo for violin without basso continuo." Why not "*Sei soli*" ("Six solos"), which would have been correct Italian? This question is not explicable the same way one might account for "*Six concerto*" by Boismortier or Corrette, which is a phonetically correct misspelling (in French, the words 'concerto' and 'concertos' are pronounced identically). The Italian *6 Sonate* appears to a French reader so that the noun disagrees with its article in the same way). Bach's phonetically unmistakable *non-sequitur* appears to be a pun. To an Italian speaker *Sei solo* actually reads – variously, "You are alone," or "He is alone" – a cryptic reference to Bach's bereavement. This observation is not new but, reconsidered in the context of the cello suites and bearing in mind they are volumes I and II of the same larger work, it leads us to extrinsic meanings in all the unaccompanied instrumental works.

Bach's having cast the opening keys of both unaccompanied string works in G, or "Sol" (solo, or alone) – specifically G minor for the first violin sonata and G major for the first cello suite – implies a pendant relationship, in the same way portraits of husbands and wives during this period were hung on either side of the family hearth. The masculine voice of the cello becomes the counterpart to the feminine voice of the violin. It has been observed that the prelude of the first cello suite is a musical tone-painting of a running brook, or *Bach* in German, hence that it is Bach's personification – this idea was first posed to me by the late cellist Paul Tortelier in 1985. While Bach's name, spelled musically: B-flat, A-natural, C-natural, and B-natural (*H* in German) appears neither in the first cello suite nor the first violin sonata, three of the four letters are contained in each work simply because of their modes. The selection of G major and minor may have held more nuanced significance for Bach than the name's explicit spelling in that the keys "complete" his name only in combination. This may be read as an analogy to the Baroque conception of a husband and wife "completing" each other. There is much evidence Bach's way of thinking demanded actual linkage between his life and symbolism in the music he wrote, or even the portraits for which he sat. Such a remarriage might conceivably have been consummated in Bach's mind only if and when

his second wife, Anna Magdalena, copied out all these works in her own hand, since she was unable to play them at the violin.

Orthodox Paradox in the Performance of Bach:

Today it is customary to play this music essentially as Casals did, and on a Baroque cello if the intention is to recreate its original sonic atmosphere. Although this idea is taught to students as a matter of orthodoxy or artistic principle, it paradoxically has little to do with what we have long understood about Bach's own performance practice. The single printed edition of these suites supplementing harmonies and counterpoint appeared during the 1860's, edited by Friedrich Gruetzmacher. It touches a raw nerve today because in written form it does not discriminate between what Bach set down and what Gruetzmacher added. Notwithstanding the fact it has been out of print for generations one well-meaning modern authority recently characterized this edition as "a travesty" and "unforgivable." Many performers are all too anxious to avoid authorial censure generally and are easily intimidated by pronouncements like these. We too often seek the blessings of various high priests – Casals was certainly one such – which in the long run serves to inhibit the spirit of enquiry that should characterize the pursuit of artistic excellence. Consequently, most modern performers address relatively minor issues with laser-like focus. Many believe the most pressing problem is the question of Bach's original bowings. These have been lost, probably irretrievably, at least since the death of cellist Louis Pierre-Martin Norblin in Commeny, France in 1854; he purportedly uncovered, and was the last person to own, the "*précieux manuscrit*" in Bach's hand. Not to be deterred, many otherwise sane voices still argue for the "use of the original bowings," despite the unwelcome truth that they do not exist. Of the four (five, in the case of the fifth suite) manuscript copies considered original sources, including the oldest by Bach's student Johann Peter Kellner, and a later copy by Anna Magdalena (recently used as the basis of an extraordinary claim that she, not he, was the author of this music), no two sets of bowings agree.

This inconsistency is of itself an important message from the early eighteenth century. Assuming slurs meant then what they mean now, what degree of importance did Bach's circle attach to bowings and articulations? If both the earliest sources contradict each other and the autograph of the lute suite in G minor in that respect, then evidently a much lesser degree than we attach today. (This is not to say that if the original manuscript appeared tomorrow I would refrain from devouring the original markings as voraciously as the next cellist, but I would do so primarily to see what they could tell us about how to structure additional counterpoint.)

The impossibility of an *Urtext* score creates cognitive dissonance for many modern cellists. There emerges an irrational need to somehow create one. Some posit that the Anna Magdalena score, for no apparent reason other than the fact that her handwriting looks the most like her husband's, must be viewed as the sole authoritative source for bowings, in spite of ample evidence this is wishful thinking. Discrepancies between bowings and articulations in her copy of the violin works and those in her husband's hand reveal that these transcriptions tended to be quite slipshod. Unfortunately, no amount of quibbling over manuscript copies will ever dispel the central issue: unless and until Bach's *Handschrift* reappears there is little to be gained from

speculation over what in his time were evidently considered relatively minor details decided at the performer's discretion. Bach's manuscripts, written for a small circle of musicians he himself had trained, were not really blueprints for outsiders. If I have come to believe Bach intended all twelve works for unaccompanied strings (as well as some solo flute and solo keyboard music) to function as his prayer to be made "whole" again, in the Baroque sense that the wife and husband complete each other, this is not to characterize these works merely as a sort of elaborate "personals ad." The point impinges significantly on the way one performs the music; the player is invited to become an active participant in the process of making Bach whole.

Tempi:

Casals did not get everything right. Nor did he get everything wrong. As is immediately obvious, some of the tempi in the present performances differ radically from those in all other recorded performances to date. They are conceived as a way of finding quite different music in the same notes, following clues left us in original sources. They include, for instance, much slower courantes, bourrées, and minuets. The history of these dances is not as clear-cut as one might expect from the degree of tempo consistency on recordings. Casals played the courantes as the fastest movements in each suite; after his great success all subsequent cellists have done the same. In historical fact, one form of the courante is often described as the *slowest* dance of the suite (Arbeau, Charbonnel, d'Alembert, Mattheson, Pécour). The major difference between the two dances sharing the same name is identifiable through their respective rhythms; the virtuosic Italian corrente is a movement of more or less uniform note values. The stately French courante is a dance with a wider range of rhythmic values and metric complexities. In Bach's suites there is a difference immediately noticeable between the (certainly Italianate) correntes of the second and third suites and all the others. For these two, running eighth notes are virtually uninterrupted; in all the rest there is much more rhythmic variety. A certain graceless, jagged rhythmic style, resulting from its treatment as an allegro, is especially noticeable in the courante of the fifth suite; we have nevertheless become inured to how very cramped and un-Bach like it sounds this way. The rhythmic textures of courantes I, IV, and VI are much more consistent with the fifth, especially when written-in ornamentation is stripped away. Mattheson's characterization of the courante as the "masterpiece of the lutenist" also serves as a springboard from which to explore a pizzicato texture in performance.

The question of tempo in Bach's bourrées is again one of national style. The bourrée of the Auvergne is the heartiest romp of all French folk dances, and Casals chose this tempo approach in order to maximize contrast between them and the preceding sarabandes. Johann Mattheson characterized the German bourrée in the following way:

The word 'Bourrée' in itself really means something stuffed, filled out, sedate, strong, weighty, and yet soft or delicate [. . .] This is in agreement with the qualities of the Bourrée, namely: content, pleasant, untroubled, tranquil, listless, gentle, and yet agreeable. [*Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, p. 454, translation from Horst: *Pre-Classical Dance Forms*.]

An important edition of these suites, unfortunately represented as *Urtext*, provides another translation of this very important passage in a text volume treating upon performance practice. Mattheson clearly described the German bourrée as a slow dance. Yet, in the paragraph immediately before this quote, the editors characterize the bourrée (without distinguishing between French and German variants) as a “lively running dance” (in accordance with Quantz’s characterization?) without further comment. The fact that these two dances, albeit of the same name, are at opposite ends of the affective spectrum on either side of the Rhine seems to have gone unnoticed. (Quantz, despite his German name, was a French-trained flautist and composer in the employ of Frederick the Great at Potsdam. His job was to furnish the Royal Court with music after the French *galant* taste.) There is no reason whatever to suppose Bach intended the Auvergne-style bourrée here; the tempo is certainly open to question. But a performers’ consensus, following Casals, appears to have induced some scholars to ignore what original sources tell us, because original information contradicts every rendition we have ever heard.

The allemande was originally performed in at least two ways. One, in which partners held hands constantly for the duration of the dance – the only dance of the Baroque suite where this was true – was a sort of institutionalized flirtation; the other, a line dance with one fewer woman than the number of men, involved the theft of another’s partner by the “odd man out,” characterized by periodic convulsions in an otherwise slow dance. The flurry of thirty-second notes in measure 9 of the D minor allemande, in stark contrast to the rest of the movement, identifies this allemande uniquely among all the six in the cello suites as the line form of this dance (a strong reason, along with Scheibe’s observation that Bach tended to write out his melodic embellishments, not to obscure these works’ original textures with effusive ornamentation). It describes a mad scramble to steal another dancer’s partner, and is a charming *topos* by which Bach identifies his readiness to remarry, which in fact he does later the same year (December, 1721). *Fortspinnung* of this motif accounts for the tempo of the succeeding courante; the latter movement is generated from, almost as a rhetorical *elaboratio* of, this flurry of thirty-second notes. The same cell in inversion – a descending seven-note scale and a turn – opens the G minor violin sonata, playing an important unifying role between violin and cello works. It also reappears, almost in the manner of a *leitmotiv*, twice in the prelude of the C minor suite and generates the following fugue exactly as it did the corrente of the D minor suite.

The minuets are a more complex matter. In both sets of them (the first and second suites) one finds the same important consideration: Bach’s predilection for, as Dreyfus notes, “ennobling” a piece through the crossing of genre lines. This is something Bach’s contemporaries Mattheson and Scheibe found very objectionable (see Laurence Dreyfus: *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*). In each opening of the two minor-key minuets the bass line is that of a descending minor tetrachord – the *lamento* variant of the chaconne bass (see Ellen Rosand: *The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament*, in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 65 / 3 (July, 1979), pp. 346-359). In the G major suite Bach relies on the performer to construct the implicit bass in the second minuet; in the D minor suite it is actually sketched and merely requires fleshing out. But this means their tempi must be considerably slower both than Casals’s and, it must be said, Mattheson’s conception(s); the Minuetti are ennobled by their new meanings as laments. The bass, being an independent line, is ornamented with descending half steps, consistent with the

way in which laments were customarily ornamented. A famous instance is *Dido's Lament*, from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), in which a series of descending semitones, the English term for which is "chromatic backfalls," embellished the basic descending minor tetrachord. Bach used the identical chromatic embellishment often in his cantatas, for example BWV 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, BWV 78, *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, and in the *Crucifixus* of his *Mass in B Minor*. By its nature this ornamentation produces an apparent change in harmony in the bass line in the second suite's first minuet, which then appears "wrong" to a person accustomed to the Casals interpretation, but which undeniably both functions beautifully and is also technically correct.

Supplemental Harmony:

Modern aestheticians teach us that if Bach had intended a chromatically-inflected descending tetrachordal bass line he would have written one. Yet we have ample evidence the contemporaneous continuo player was expected to interpolate harmony or counterpoint where the texture demanded (see David Watkin: *Correlli's Op. 5 Sonatas: 'Violino e violone o cimbalò'?* in *Early Music* 24 / 4 (November, 1996), pp. 645-663). Even more important and specific is evidence provided by Bach's student Agricola; he describes how Bach himself performed these very works, in the following passage from the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (Berlin, 1775):

They [the violin works] are certainly harder and in more parts than Herr Benda's capriccios, but they are written for a similar purpose. Their author often played them himself on the clavichord, adding whatever harmonies he found necessary. Here too, he recognized the need for fine-sounding harmonies that could not have been fuller than [he made them] in th[ese] composition[s].

We know Bach improvised full harmonies to this music, that he taught his students to do so, and that Agricola wrote this testimony in 1775 as an illustration of differences between the latest musical style and Bach's, at a time when the skills of structural improvisation and harmonic embellishment were evanescent. Bach himself initially gained a wide reputation as a great improviser upon themes handed to him; he was purportedly capable of improvising entire fugues in three parts on some of these themes. When in the mood he was also quite fond of astonishing his fellow composers by performing their trio sonatas with improvised extra parts, as quartets. To insist that doing likewise in his cello suites is somehow incorrect or irresponsible is to ignore much of what is Baroque in his music. These considerations come within the purview of nineteenth-century observations by such authors as Hugo Riemann ("vanished verities once considered self-evident"), Friedrich Gruetzmacher (whose fully-realized edition of these suites elicits such opprobrium today), and many other authors of musical treatises living during the generations that spanned the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many of these allude to sea-changes in musical procedures, both performed and written.

Timbre effects:

Tone color is also at the heart of Baroque music; the word Baroque itself comes from the French *bariolé*, meaning multi-colored or gaudy. We know Bach himself was active in designing organ stops, that he did most of his own rebuilding and regulating of them, and was celebrated for their imaginative combinations in performance. Since contemporaneous writings indicate Bach's use of organ stops fully exploited the color potential of that instrument, it may reasonably be assumed that the music he wrote for other instruments did likewise. Yet a total of only eight stop indications appear in all his organ music. This cannot possibly have reflected either his own practice or the practice of the time, but does serve to illustrate where he left matters to the performer. The tacit assumption that these cello works were simply bowed throughout, because no markings to the contrary appeared in them, has its basis in later, anachronistic thinking. Mattheson specifically describes the courante as "the masterpiece of the lutenist." Yet we avoid pizzicato even as we are aware Bach's own transcriptions of these works for the lute represent completely pizzicato-based conceptions of the same music. This is to infer, erroneously, that the degree of specificity exhibited in Baroque scores must somehow have been the same as that expected in all texts approximately after Kant's third *Critique* (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790), that Bach's scores fit with a concept of specificity belonging to a later period. One cannot have it both ways; what Kant leads us to expect of texts in general has nothing whatever to do with Bach, and teleological thinking has no legitimate role in performing his music.

Use of the Five-Stringed Violoncello Piccolo:

The only suite for which Bach specified a five-stringed violoncello is the sixth; the only one for which he specified a four-stringed one is the fifth. All six works are playable on either instrument – with or without harmonic realizations. Doing so entails use of thumb position technique. Thumb positions are thought by many scholars to postdate these suites by more than two decades. It is thought they originated in 1741, which is the date of the first treatise on cello playing to make direct reference to them. This treatise, by Michel Corrette, is not prescriptive but rather describes *established* technique. The sonatas of Antonio Bononcini, probably written as early as 1694 and published during the first decade of the eighteenth century, are clearly written for a cellist familiar with thumb positions, as in truth are the Bach suites (several passages, done on either a four or five-stringed Baroque cello even without harmonic realizations, are virtually impracticable without them). Moreover Bernhard Linigke, the cellist for whom Bach probably wrote this music, may have been personally associated with Bononcini (a contemporaneous publication exists in which cello sonatas by both men appeared in an Amsterdam publication together in the same volume; Linigke was possibly of the Bononcini school). Furthermore, the cello in Germany during Bach's lifetime did not yet have fully established design specifications; Bach himself worked with the Leipzig luthier J. C. Hoffmann on cello designs. The instrument had many names, tunings, and forms: three, four, and five-stringed, with some found tuned partially in fourths (one such tuning is specified in Bach's C minor suite). Designations like *bas quint-Geig* lead us to assume the cello was generally identified by its tuning in fifths, and the use of scordatura notation

in the fifth suite means its intended performer was used to fifths. (This scordatura is a convincing argument against Forkel's speculation Bach intended the cello works for the gambist Abel; Bach's scordatura replaces the only open-string interval with which a gambist would have been comfortable with a doubly confusing one.) Since both the cello's forms and functions were still experimental in Germany at this time – examples reveal much structural evolution during the half-century between 1670 and 1720 – there is evidence Bach considered them to some extent interchangeable. I employ a five-stringed variant on this recording. I do not argue that this is the instrument Bach intended – the playability of this music on a four-stringed instrument is consciously designed into all of it – however the optional use of a five-stringed cello remains consistent with Bach's own practices. Little Susie would approve.

A Short List for Further Reading:

Beach, David: *Aspects of Unity in J. S. Bach's Partitas and Suites: An Analytical Study* (University of Rochester Press, 2005).

Little, Meredith and Natalie Jenne: *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Indiana University Press, 1991, 2001).

Panofsky, Erwin: *Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*, from *Philosophy and History, Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, reprinted in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: Phoenix Edition, 1982, pp. 295-320).

Walden, Valerie: *One Hundred Years of Violoncello: A History of Technique and Performance Practice, 1740-1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Wimsatt, William K. and Monroe Beardsley: *The Intentional Fallacy*, reprinted in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, David Richter (ed.), pp. 1382-1391. (New York and Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1989). (This excellent compilation also contains E. D. Hirsch's riposte to *The Intentional Fallacy* and a translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.)

Winold, Allen: *Bach's Cello Suites: Analyses and Explorations* (University of Indiana Press, 2007).

Myles Jordan is cellist of the DaPonte String Quartet. His pioneering work in the field of full continuo realization at the cello, an art that has been dead some two hundred years, is garnering international professional interest. The present recording follows lecture-

recitals presented at the Boston Early Music Festival, the University of North Texas Graduate School Early Music Division and others, which reexamine the impact of post-Kantian literary criticism on contemporary performances of early music.

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– M. J.