

J. S. Bach's Six Unaccompanied Cello Suites: What did Bach Want?

Brooke Mickelson

Composers of the Baroque period are known to have maintained a level of detachment from their music, writing scores absent of many now commonplace musical notations. This creates a problem for modern musicians who want to understand the composer's vision. This analysis is driven by a call to understand Bach's intended style for the six cello suites, debunking main controversies over the cello suites' composition and discussing how its style features can be portrayed in performance.

The Bachs and Origins of the Cello Suites

The Bachs were a German family of amateur musicians who played in the church and the community. Johann Sebastian's career began in this Bach tradition, playing organ in Lutheran churches, and he was one of a few family members to become a professional. He showed exceptional talent in improvisation and composition, and around age 20 became the church organist for the court in Weimar. In this first period, he composed organ and choral music for church services and events.¹

Looking for a change, Bach moved to become capellmeister (music director) for the court in Cöthen, where the prince was an amateur musician attempting to bring music into his court. This is considered his "instrumental period" because of Bach's greater output of instrumental music to please the prince. Scholars believe that he composed the violin sonatas and partitas and the cello suites in this period. Finally, he moved to Leipzig to work as cantor (choir master) of Saint Thomas's Church. Sometime during the first decade in Leipzig, Anna Magdalena made copies of Bach's

¹ Christoph Wolff, et al., "Bach," *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press (accessed October 11, 2017).

important works, which included the violin sonatas and the cello suites.² In this last period, Bach composed new cantatas for four churches weekly Sunday services and wrote other religious music for special occasions.³ These weekly deadlines really drove him to compose the immense amount of music he is known for today.

To understand the origins of the cello suites, this paper focuses on Bach's instrumental period in Cothen. Shortly after moving to Cothen, Bach's first wife of seven children passed away. Around this time Anna Magdalena was appointed court singer in the Cothen court, and a year later married Johann Sebastian. Anna Magdalena and Johann Sebastian were a power couple, working together to create and perform music programs for the court and the church. Wolff suggests they were highly esteemed because Bach earned the second highest wages in the court and Anna Magdalena earned up to three quarters of what he did,⁴ earning even more money than the concertmaster.⁵ Anna birthed 13 Bach children, although only seven survived to adulthood, and four of Bach's children became fabulous composers by their father's instruction.⁶

The exact date and origins of the cello suites are unknown because no original autographed version of Bach's has been discovered. When Bach died, his music was divided among his family members. A large portion of his instrumental music went to Wilhelm Friedmann, who sold many of the scores individually to unknown buyers. Most of our surviving documentation of his scores were preserved by Anna Magdalena, Johann Christoph Friedrich, Johann Christian, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.⁷ Besides Anna Magdalena's 1730s copy, there is a 1726 incomplete study-copy by

² Peter Williams, *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 156.

³ Wolff, "Bach," *Grove Music Online*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ Jarvis, Martin, "Did Johann Sebastian Bach Write the Cello Suites?" *Musical Opinion* 126 (November 2002), 79.

⁶ Wolff, "Bach," *Grove Music Online*.

⁷ Wolff, "Bach," *Grove Music Online*.

one of Bach's important copyists Johann Peter Kellner. Two other anonymous copies from 1768 and 1790 are also referenced because some scholars believe they were copied directly from Bach's autographed version in C.P.E Bach's possession.⁸

Scholars propose that he composed the suites for the viola da gamba player Christian Bernhard Linike, one of Prince Leopold's capelle.⁹ The sixth suite was originally written for the viola pomposa, a violin/viola hybrid five-stringed instrument that Bach created.¹⁰ This instrument has not survived, so we do not know what the suite sounds like played on its intended instrument.¹¹

Ledbetter and other scholars guess that Bach wrote the cello suites during his instrumental period and around the time of the violin sonatas. Most of my sources agree that they must predate the violin sonatas because they are less complex and, according to Williams, "less innovative." Spitta takes a kinder perspective than Williams, claiming that the cello suites have a "quieter beauty and more serene grandeur" than the violin sonatas.¹² Other scholars think that the violin sonatas were composed first simply because Anna Magdalena placed the violin sonatas first in her score.

One writer in the *Musical Opinion* journal questions if Bach even wrote the cello suites. Martin Jarvis speculates that Anna Magdalena wrote the cello suites based on the following evidence: 1) there is no dated copy with Bach's autograph, 2) Bach's biography and chronology is mostly speculation, 3) Bach's best works were produced after his marriage to Anna Magdalena, suggesting she was at least involved and at most composing music under his name, 4) Kellner and other copyists could have copied Anna's version, 5) they are simpler and more unified than the violin

⁸ Ledbetter, David, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*. (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ Spitta, Philipp. *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany 1685-1750*. Vol. 2. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1951), 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 99.

sonatas and Bach's other works,¹³ 6) Bach and Anna worked closely and had similar handwriting that is easy to mix up,¹⁴ and 7) Bach had no reason to compose for an inferior new instrument like the cello, so he could have handed it off to Anna Magdalena to compose.¹⁵

Jarvis's evidence is at least equally as speculative as scholars' ideas about Bach's life. He uses the lack of evidence as proof when in fact it is just a lack of evidence. Science doesn't make conclusions based on a lack of evidence, but only on an abundance of evidence collected over time. Evidence actually suggests that Anna Magdalena did not have the education to compose in Bach's style and with his expertise. This is evident in her copies of the violins sonatas and cello suites, which contain errors.¹⁶ Jarvis himself explains that she is a well-trained vocalist and keyboard player,¹⁷ and not a string player. And ultimately, she must have been too busy for composition. She was working as court singer and a mother of at least seven children at the time.

On Bach's end, he had every reason to compose the cello suites. His viola pomposa creation itself demonstrates that he must have enjoyed learning about and composing for new instruments. It is known that Bach was proficient with string instruments (and yes, he preferred the viola over violin). The cello suites must have been written by someone who had "attained practical exercise" with the instrument, rather than whirled it up out of inexperienced "theoretical speculation."¹⁸

Wolff summarizes this section articulately: "it is unlikely that any complete and exact chronology will be established for the instrumental works."¹⁹ Since the chronology is so sparse and speculative, we will never be certain what notes or bowings Bach wrote for the cello suites. We cannot

¹³ Jarvis, "Did Johann Sebastian Bach Write the Cello Suites?", 80-81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 8-9.

¹⁷ Jarvis, "Did Johann Sebastian Bach Write the Cello Suites?", 79.

¹⁸ Tarr, Carol, Barbara Thiem, and David Littrell. "The Bach Six Suites for Solo Cello: New Studies." *American Suzuki Journal* 38 no. 2 (Winter 2010), 68-70.

¹⁹ Wolff, "Bach," *Grove Music Online*.

prove whether he actually composed them. But based on my sources' opinions and strong speculations that Bach is the sole person capable of writing them, we will continue with the educated assumption that he composed the original score which was lost after others made several copies.

Form and Style of the Baroque Dance Suite

German baroque dance form evolved in the 1700's out of the concept of paired dances from the Renaissance. This arose out of the desire to "arrive at a higher form of art" after the 30 Years War by mixing dance tunes of different European cultures into domestic music. The first standardization is the clavier suite, whose movements are based off of the German allemande, Italian/French courante, Spanish sarabande, and English gigue dances. For these suites, composers enlarged and extended dance music and songs to be suitable for the concert stage.²⁰

Beyond the national origin of the dances, composers of different nationalities approached suite composition with unique perspectives. Italians notated the prominent style of a piece using the terms *da balla* (dance) and *da camera* (sonata),²¹ but generally favored the sub-divided sonata style. The French usually preferred dance phrases, which have a simpler and more balanced rhythmic structure.²² History suggests that dance music led to the sonata, but that does not mean that dance is the overruling style. Ledbetter claims that either can be dominant, depending on the piece.²³

It is considered that Bach perfected this suite form. In the cello suites, he uses a "mixed style"²⁴ of primarily clavier German and French forms with Italian influences to devise his own German standards for composition.²⁵ Although, he followed even his own "structural elements

²⁰ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 73-74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 189.

²³ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 84.

loosely.²⁶ Williams notes that the cello suites embody French characteristics, whereas the violin sonatas adhere more to Italian forms.²⁷

Now we address the characteristics of each dance type in the German style, as these inform general performance. The suite is presented in sets of movements that compliment and contrast each other. Common time allemandes pair with triple meter courantes, and brooding, dark sarabandes pair with jolly giges.²⁸

The first pair invite the listener to pay attention and the dancers to take the floor. Allemandes have a content character and moderate tempo. They contain two sections, usually of eight and sixteen bars. They have an expansive quality that echoes Bach's preludes with broad harmonic structures and broken chords. Courantes attempt to intensify the calm mood of the allemande by switching between triple and duple meter irregularly and placing random syncopation and accents. The pair are unified by characteristic pickup notes to each phrase and balanced phrase structures.²⁹ Typically, allemandes and courantes are more sonata-like.³⁰

The final pair contrast emotionally but always leave the listener on a lighthearted note and the dancer on a light foot. Sarabandes are grave and haughty movements in slow triple meter. Traditionally, they contain two sections of eight bars, but daring composers sometimes extended the second section or devised a third section. Their most characteristic aspect is a prolonged accent on the second beat. The gigue is like the last movement of a sonata or concerto that rushes to an excited finish. They are cheerful and animated and are in compound meter like 6/8, 3/8, and 12/8. Like all the other clavier movements of the suite, giges are in two sections, but they have a unique

²⁶ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 2.

²⁷ Williams, *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music*, 141.

²⁸ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 91.

²⁹ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 89.

³⁰ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 69-70.

contrast of tempi. Bach is known for using fugal devices in the first section and inversion in the second part.³¹

Bach's German suite form added characteristic preludes and soft intermezzos to the clavier suites.³² He wrote each of his "preludes characteristically different to distinguish" each suite,³³ although each prelude is broad and grandiose. Intermezzos are meant to dampen the contrast between the allemande/courante and the sarabande/gigue pairs. Common intermezzos are gavottes, passepieds, and bourees, and scherzos and minuets in the later Baroque.³⁴

In the cello suites, the intermezzo dance types appear in pairs by type. Suites one and two feature a minuet and trio, suites three and four use bourees, and suites five and six explore the lesser known gavottes.³⁵ Another sign of compositional unification is the presentation of keys for the cello suites: G, d, C, Eb, c, and D. Bach sandwiches minor keys in major keys to create an overall concept of major. The unifying characteristics of each suite exist even more profoundly in the music itself, as is explored in the next section. Furthermore, the suites are "organized with increasing elaboration." Suite five uses a technique called scordatura, requiring the A string be tuned down to a G, and suite six was written for Bach's five-stringed viola pomposa.³⁶

Many sources provided additional guidelines for performing Bach's suites. Williams notes that Bach's notation is not literal. Bach writes note values "at lengths impossible to play," especially chordal bass notes. Williams concludes that Bach is merely notating the harmonic rhythm of the underlying harmony, and that performers need not hold the bass note for its full notated duration.³⁷

³¹ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 90-91.

³² *Ibid.*, 100.

³³ Williams, *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music*, 141.

³⁴ Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music*, 91.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁶ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 10-11.

³⁷ Williams, *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music*, 141.

Spitta notes the “overpowering influence of the organ style... with special regard to [double stops].” He suggests that performers emphasize the difference between bass and soprano notes, between harmony and melody.³⁸

Cooperative authors in the *Suzuki Journal* discuss books that address performance discrepancies over technical aspects like slurs and trills. Carrington explains that trills in the 1800’s came from above only 35% of the time. He claims that trill direction really depends on harmonic structure and voice-leading between neighboring notes. For example, if the preceding note is a higher pitch than the trilled note, then the trill will probably come from above. Bach’s trills are usually notated, but this is a safe guideline for those that are not written out. Starkweather compares Anna Magdalena’s and Kellner’s editions to Bach’s autographed version of the violin sonatas to note divergence.³⁹

Suite No. 2 in D minor

Ledbetter informs this section almost exclusively, as his book was the only source to scrutinize each suite from its unifying motifs to its figured bass outline. He frames the second suite as a pair with the first suite by contrasting mood and structure. The second suite is melancholy and lyrical in its d minor key. It is unified in using open triads, such as the arpeggiated d minor chord opening the prelude, to make the music feel expansive.⁴⁰

The prelude is in three broad sections (mm. 1-13, 13-36, and 36-63) ending with perfect authentic cadences (PAC), but the first two cadences are elided (i.e. overlap into the next phrase). Section one opens with a four-bar phrase that then follows a sequence to the cadence. C#, Bb, and E and sensitive notes.⁴¹ Key 8th notes contrast the constant 16th notes. Dotted 8th notes are even

³⁸ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 70.

³⁹ Tarr, "The Bach Six Suites for Solo Cello: New Studies," 15.

⁴⁰ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

more monumental. Section two features sharpened bass notes (avoided in the first section) that seem to rise stepwise to V in a minor but avoid cadencing and fall back to d minor. The wave rises again in mm. 25-30 but this time to half cadence on V of the home key.⁴²

Section three of the prelude features the lowest and highest notes of the tessitura in quick succession from the low C# in bar 40 to the highest G in bar 44. A series of climaxes follow and lead to a dramatic, fully-diminished quarter note chord with a fermata. Throughout the movement, C# is a structurally and dramatically crucial note (bars 2, 40, 48, and 54), and it reaches its full dramatic impact in m. 54 (although this cadence is weaker than that of bar 44). Performers and scholars debate whether one should arpeggiate the cadential chords of the last few bars of the prelude. Ledbetter suggests arpeggiating from the top down like the slurred chords at the end of the prelude to the first suite, but claims it really is up to the performer's discretion.⁴³

This allemande leans more to the Italian sonata allegro style, although the first phrase is very French. Bars 1-2 feature descending fifths (A-D and D-A) that are highlighted throughout the movement. 8th notes mark phrasing by breaking the continuous 16th notes typical of allemandes. Motives drive the movement ahead. One motif is the A4 in bars 5,8, and 10 and the d5 in bar 9, whose tension is released by a shower of 32nd notes.⁴⁴ The paired courante is also less French, and it contrasts the allemande's frequent cadences with few cadences of ritornello form like the prelude. The first phrase sounds a tetrachord that is important throughout the movement: D, C, Bb, and A. As is characteristic, this courante emphasizes beats two and three of each bar with broken intervals. It ends with a closing pedal in the soprano that foreshadows the gigue.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 187.

⁴³ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 188.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 190-191.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 195.

The sarabande is incredibly brooding and yet gallant. It opens with a cadence. Each half note and quarter note has its own weight, making 8th notes and 16th note embellishments seem free. Trills, resultantly, do not need to be played for their full duration to provide time for “luxurious and long appoggiatura[s].” Ledbetter notes the contrast of long 16th note runs in m.3 and paired 16ths in m.7 and suggests slurring the pairs in m.7 to highlight this. This movement demonstrates the conflict between sonata and dance rhythms, alternating between them every 2:1 bars.⁴⁶

Next come the minuets. Menuet I combines features of the previous dances. It restates the tetrachords of the courante and sarabande and reformulates the closed-space triad of the prelude into a blocked chord. It is simply two, four-bar parallel phrases. Menuet II exposes how weighted Menuet I was. It is in D major with notes flow and leap like it is spring. Menuet I alternates dance/sonata rhythms every bar, and Menuet II alternates only every four bars. This creates a paired contrast between the flowing sonata bars and the fragmented dance bars. As is formulaic for minuet and trio form, Menuet II ends with a da capo back to Menuet I. Anna Magdalena’s version writes a fermata at the end of each Menuet, but Ledbetter suggests lengthening Menuet I’s final note only on the da capo.⁴⁷

Finally, we arrive at the gigue, a lighthearted and energetic summary of the suite. This gigue is in 3/8 time, a meter inherently more disjointed than continuous. It is very sonata-like with extended running 16th note passages that are often interrupted by 8th notes that mark the phrases like the courante. It strategically uses pedal notes to recall the prelude and the courante. The pedal is in the bass in m.21-24 and in the soprano in m.25-28, and is reversed in the second strain. Section one opens with two 16-bar sentence of 4+4+8 ending in a half cadence. It then modulates in bars 17-24 with another sentence (this time half as long) and closes over the next eight bars. The second strain’s

⁴⁶ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁷ Ledbetter, *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, 194.

structure is 4+4+16, where the last phrase is 4+4+8. Finally, uninterrupted 16th notes drive the music to a close.⁴⁸

This research has opened an informed discussion on the history and style characteristics of the baroque dance suite, including the cello suites, with a special consideration of the second suite. Although there is disparity over Bach's music and life, his music continues to inspire people because of its incredible flexibility and adaptability. His music has a significant influence on how western culture composes and perceives music today. Everyone has their own perspective on life and music, and now perhaps we can understand bit of Bach's approach to life and music. The answer to the question "what did Bach want?" is irrelevant. The real question is "what do you want?".

⁴⁸ Ibid., 195-196.

Bibliography

- Bach, Anna Magdalena. *Copy of 6 Suites for Solo Violincello*. Bach digital. [c1727-1731].
- Bach, Johann Sebastian. *6 Suites for Solo Violincello*. Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel. [1998].
- Jarvis, Martin. "Did Johann Sebastian Bach Write the Cello Suites?" *Musical Opinion* 126 (November 2002), 78. <http://libproxy.boisestate.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.boisestate.edu/docview/1122250?accountid=9649>.
- Ledbetter, David. *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*. London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Spitta, Philipp. *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany 1685-1750*. Translated by Clara Bell and J. A, Fuller-Maitland. Vol. 2. New York: Dover Publications inc., 1951.
- Tarr, Carol, Barbara Thiem, and David Littrell. "The Bach Six Suites for Solo Cello: New Studies." *American Suzuki Journal* 38 no. 2 (Winter 2010), 14-15. <http://libproxy.boisestate.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.boisestate.edu/docview/753573198?accountid=9649>.
- Williams, Peter. *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Wolff, Christoph, et al. "Bach." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed October 11, 2017. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40023pg10>.