

SIX SUITES FOR UNACCOMPANIED CELLO
(BWV 1007-1012)
July-December 1720
J. S. Bach
John Kaboff, Cellist

Musicians have devoted more time and energy over the last 100 years to analyze, interpret, edit and perform the six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello (BWV 1007-1012) by Johann Sebastian Bach than any other piece of music in the standard cello literature. The Suites, popularized (not discovered) by Pablo Casals, more than a century ago, were not always in such high esteem for their musical form and content, nor were they performed with any great regularity, even in Bach's own time. This paper will discuss the form and history of the Baroque suite and its dances, discuss the environment in which Bach composed the Suites, explain the various controversies surrounding the various early editions, discuss various performance practices and explore the sixth Suite BWV 1012.

J.S. Bach was employed by the court of Prince Leopold of Cothen from 1717 to 1723. These years were extremely important in that his greatest compositions of solo, chamber and orchestral music emanated from this period. These include the Well-Tempered Clavier I, Das Orgelbuchelein, the English and French Suites for Harpsichord, the Two and Three Part Inventions, six Suites for solo Violin, six Suites for Solo Cello, three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord BWV 1027-1029, the Brandenburg Concertos, and the four orchestral Suites. As Cothen was a Calvinistic ('reformed') city, its religious practices forbade the use of secular art music in the church religious service and had no exceptional organ for which to inspire the young and ambitious Bach. This explains why the compositions composed at Cothen were composed for secular genres. Prince Leopold was an avid amateur and played several instruments well, including the viola da gamba and the cello. He took such pride in the musical production at his court that he allowed Bach to freely choose what and for which instrument to compose and he also was a generous employer to all musicians at his court. Bach might have remained at Cothen longer had it not been for Prince Leopold's wife who deplored music, influencing the Prince to become increasingly removed from the musical life at his court.

There are many questions as to why and for whom the suites were composed. In an extraordinarily short amount of time, Bach created virtuosic repertoire for an instrument that was just barely beginning to gain recognition as a solo instrument. The cello as we know it has existed since the mid sixteenth century but its primary role was to accompany church choirs. It began to be more prominent in the late seventeenth century as the viola da gamba could not project to the end of the newer and larger concert halls that were beginning to spring up across Western Europe. There was already a vast repertoire for the viola da gamba, but very little existed in contrast for the cello. Although some pieces did in fact exist for the cello, it is J. S. Bach who created the first masterpieces for this genre. Bach combined many aspects of music to create the Solo Suites such as the experimental, the pedagogical and the systematic. This is also seen the Well-Tempered Clavier, Das Orgelbuchelein and The Art of The Fugue to name a few. It then seems logical that Bach should compose a group of didactic works for the cello. Not only would the cellist raise his/her level of physical technique by studying these works, there is also an increased knowledge in theory and counterpoint. This is accomplished by analyzing the way harmony is implied through the use of double and triple stops, sequencing, cadencing, melodic motion and harmonic rhythm. Bach is able to imply harmony and

counterpoint by restricting each melody to its own line and sounding successive melodic fragments in different voices in alternation with the other. It is this ingenuity that is able to take a melody instrument and create a piece of music that fools the listener into thinking there is more than one instrument being played simultaneously. It should be noted that Bach himself did not invent these ideas, rather, he continued their tradition by composing them for a new medium. The art of double and triple stopping notes for reasons of implied harmony and implied polyphony using style brise was developed previously from the renaissance by composer/performers such as Marin Marais, August Kuhnle and Heinrich Biber.

Many mysteries surround the six Suites as to the date of their composition. They were composed between July–December, 1720, shortly after the death of Bach's first wife, Maria-Barbara. The original has long since been lost and there are three main early manuscripts that modern cellist/editors have based their own editions on: the first, copied by Anna Magdalena, Bach's second wife dates from ca. 1730; the second by Johann Peter Kellner, a pupil of Bach, is now thought to date from 1726; the third is the Westphal edition ca. 1750. The Magdalena manuscript, according to most scholars, is by far the least accurate and is full of errors as is the Kellner to a much lesser degree, though. In all three editions, however there are several obvious mistakes, many important omissions regarding bowings, tempo markings, dynamics and ornaments. These combined present modern cellists with the dilemma as how to perform these suites accurately according to the style set forth by Bach. The Suites existed for about a century in manuscript form before the first printed edition became available by the Probst editorial board in 1825 edited by Friedrich Dotzauer. This predates the release of the Bach-Gesellschaft Critical Edition by over fifty years as well as the Bach revival led by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in 1829. Friedrich Grutzmacher released two editions of the Suites; the earlier being highly romanticized with many embellishments in the style of his own days performance practices and the latter rejecting the former's soloistic changes in is based on the Bach-Gesellschaft edition.

The Baroque suite has existed and evolved over several centuries and it is one of the first purely instrumental genres utilized by composers and originated during the Middle ages when lutenists grouped the popular dances of the day into a cycle of movements. By Bach's time, the dances lost their previous purpose and became more abstract and stylized and were idiomatically composed for a particular instrument and only the Galanterien more of their dance quality. The other dances did, however, retain their formal structure and kept a similar sense of rhythmic pulse. Because of this transformation, the movement of a suite had the possibility of varied meter, rhythm, tempo and mood. The dances have a binary structure in that the first section travels from the tonic to the dominant key in the first half and the beginning of the second half begins in the dominant key and returns to the tonic. The thematic material in the A section is often reused in the B section with the key being altered but the pitch relationship remaining similar. Bach adhered to the basic sequence of movements of the baroque suite when composing the six Suites: an Allemande, a Courante, a Sarabande, and a Gigue. He preceded these with a prelude and inserted a coupling of newer and more concise dances called galanterien (Menuet I, II; Bourree I, II; Gavotte I, II) between the last two older dances.

Prelude: The prelude is improvisatory and fantasia-like in nature as it displays arpeggiated chords, scale passages and quasi-cadenzas all within the same movement. Medieval lutenists often tested the tuning of their instruments in similar fashion during the prelude before beginning the actual suite of dance movements.

Allemande: The allemande is German in origin and is one of the oldest dances. It was no longer danced long before Bach's time and was a somewhat slower dance composed in a 4/4 meter with a highly ornamented reflective melodic line.

Courante: The courante is a court dance that was performed in brisk pantomime. It has two distinct styles: Italian and French. The Italian courante (corrente) most likely originated in the sixteenth century and generally consists of fast passages in triple time with a melody plus accompaniment texture. The French style usually consists of dotted rhythms and is in a slower meter usually alternating from 3/2 to 6/4. The French courante also tends to have a thicker texture.

Sarabande: The Sarabande was an extremely popular court dance that most likely originated in Spain in the early seventeenth century by the Moors. It evolved overtime and was stylized by composers so that it barely resembles its original form; a dance requiring its participants to make brisk movements and poses that are lascivious and suggestive in nature. It was modified by the French court and by Bach's time was a tame stately court dance thus allowing him to compose in a slow triple meter with a stress on the second beat.

Menuet: The word Menuet is derived from the French words pas menu meaning small step thus suggesting the elegant movement required for this dance. This dance had at one time been a folk dance from the Pitou region but was modified in the court of Louis XIV into a court dance and in Bach's time required graceful movements in a bending or gliding motion in a triple meter.

Bourree: The word Bourree originates from the French verb bourrir meaning to flap one's wings or arms. This dance is, however, rustic and rapid but has nothing to do with flapping one's arms and it is an Auvergnat folk dance and did not evolve into a court dance until the late seventeenth century.

Gavotte: The Gavotte originated in Upper Dauphine in France by the Gavots. It is a bright and spritely dance which became one of the most sophisticated court dances.

Gigue: The origin of this dance has a long circular cycle of evolution. It first is derived from the English 'jig' which was derived from the French word gigner meaning to dance and/or the German word Geige meaning violin/fiddle. The exact order of what preceded what is unclear but in any case, it was popular at the English court of Queen Elizabeth. A French gigue is most often in a 6/8 meter and is characterized by quasi-fugal writing with wide leaps and dotted rhythms. An Italian gigue, however, is not fugal and is more scalar in structure.

Bach composed the Sixth Suite for an instrument consisting of five strings. Most scholars agree that it was either a viola pomposa (actually invented by Bach) a violoncello piccolo or a small five stringed cello, but in any case had an E string tuned a fifth above the A string. This would account for the high tessitura of this suite. In modern times, however, this suite is performed on a four-stringed cello, thus presenting quite a difficult technical and interpretive challenge for the

performer. Pitches played higher up on the A string result in a more intense, slightly higher pitched sound, than if played on an E string. The Prelude of this suite is quite long and difficult as it is a perpetuum-mobile in 12/8 meter that spans a wide range on the cello, from two octaves below middle C to an octave and a half above middle C. It opens with triplet figures that alternate between forte and piano that provide a contrast of sounds and colors. A quasi-cadenza beginning at measure 83 where instead of eight note triplets, there are arpeggiated sixteenth notes that breeze by rapidly, gives this movement its element of fantasia. The Allemande is a highly stylized movement here which gives a feeling of improvisation but is also very melodic with many ornaments which gives it a sense of poise. It is quite slow which requires the performer to have a very beautiful and delicate legato. This particular Courante is in the Italian style and has wide leaps and arpeggiated inversions of chords as part of its makeup. The Sarabande is an expansive movement in a 3/2 meter that contains only chordal progressions. The movement also tests the performer's ability to sustain long legato phrases in such a high tessitura. Gavottes I and II are both in D Major and are spry and extroverted in nature. The first gavotte contains grandiose chords mixed with linear motion while the second gavotte is similar to a motion. The gigue closes the suite on a brilliantly triumphant tone similar to a fanfare.

How to correctly perform the Suites has plagued performers since their revitalization. Although there is no continuous tradition that extends from Bach's time, a substantial amount of information regarding baroque performance practice has survived through the didactic writings of J.S. Bach, Johann Quantz and Francois Couperin. Today, there are two major schools of thought regarding performance options; the modern approach and the baroque approach. The baroque approach advocates using instruments built to period specifications and hold the cello between the knees and calves as did cellists before Servais invented the endpin. Modern soloistic innovations such as the use of vibrato would, if at all, be used sparingly⁵ as Baroque scholars/cellists feel that the music should be as authentically performed as possible. A wide range of dynamics would most likely be absent with the use of "gut strings". The Modern approach would be to use a modernized instrument which includes a longer bass bar, higher fingerboard and bridge, steel strings and an endpin. These, in conjunction with an A=440 hertz (vibrations per second), creates a more powerful and projecting tone. Modern performers see these changes as the natural evolution and revision that earlier music must undergo.

After 285 years people are debating the correct way to perform these works. Since there are no recordings in existence as to a correct original performance, one should concentrate less on the correct performance rather to one's own individual. Paul Tortelier once said, "The ideal solution for members of the purist league would be to open the scores and read them in silence." His point being, that in spite of arduous efforts there will always be members of the general audience who do not appreciate a particular approach and those members should sit and read the scores in silence.

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