

INTERPRETATIONAL ANGST AND THE BACH CELLO SUITES

by **Tim Janof**

I yearn to deeply comprehend the Bach Cello Suites. Much to my dismay, so does everybody else, including the world's greatest musicians. Whether Pablo Casals, Paul Tortelier, Rostropovich, or whoever your favorite cellist may be, they all rightfully speak of the Suites with an effusive reverence. They all refer to the "infinity" of Bach, the "oceanic depths" of Bach, or the "cathedral" of Bach.

Though inspiring and poetic words, as a student of the Suites, I want to know more. What are the underlying principles that guide the great interpreters? How are tempos chosen? How are bowings chosen? How are articulations chosen? It is this kind of concrete information that will guide me on my quest, not heartfelt utterances from the soul or Zen-like koans.

The purpose of this article is not so much to come up with the answers, as it is to state the questions, or at least some of them. In some cases, answers from the various artists are shared, but their responses are by no means considered to be the last word. Often, their answers only lead to more questions, hence my interpretational angst.

Head vs. Heart (Apollonian vs. Dionysian)

One of the ancient and ongoing battles in the music world is the conflict between Scholars and Performers, a battle we must also fight internally. Of course, the dividing line between the two camps is rather fuzzy, since many serious musicians put a lot of thought into how they play, and often research the historical background and practices of the works they perform. And scholars seek more than mere theoretical correctness in performances. This line has become particularly unclear with the emergence of the Early Music movement, which "Modern" performers eye with deep interest, suspicion, and even a little anger. But I think it's safe to say that Performers tend to place a higher emphasis upon inspiration, connecting with their own emotions and the audience, and the poetry of the music, whereas Scholars tend to emphasize historical and theoretical accuracy. Both approaches to music are important, and could not, and should not, exist without the other.

This dichotomy clearly surfaces when the Bach Cello Suites are discussed. Rostropovich states the problem for many in his recent Bach Suite videos: "The hardest thing in interpreting Bach is the necessary equilibrium between human feelings, the heart that undoubtedly Bach possessed, and the severe and profound aspect of interpretation... You cannot automatically disengage your heart from the music. This was the greatest problem I had to resolve in my interpretation ... I had to search for the golden medium between a romantic, rhapsodic interpretation of Bach and scholastic aridity." [1]

This is a dilemma we all must face. If we play the Suites in a "romantic" manner, are we playing in a way that is as incongruous as when Shakespeare's Macbeth is re-set in a dude ranch, using Bach's notes, but not

staying within his sound world, his Baroque aesthetic? And if we choose a more personal approach to the suites, is it bad?

For those over thirty years old, Pablo Casals was probably the most influential Bach Suite interpreter of our musical upbringing. Casals' thundering words still echo in our heads, Bach "has every feeling: lovely, tragic, dramatic, poetic ... always soul and heart and expression. How he enters into the most profound of ourselves! Let us find that Bach." [2] Casals' dominating influence resulted in generations of pseudo-imitators, leading Richard Taruskin to react with the following controversial statement: "Pablo Casals ... revived [the Suites] from the dead, made them a classic, created their performance practice, and -- as interpretations of consummate authority will -- ruined them for generations to come." [3]

But was Casals correct? Did Bach compose the suites while deeply connected with his emotions and soul? Or did he just rattle them off like a mathematician? Yes, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach said that his father "was no lover of dry, mathematical stuff," [4] but does that justify pouring one's heart and soul into the Suites? Or should it even matter to a performer what Bach was thinking or feeling while he composed them?

Editions

Much has been written about the Bach Suite editions in the last few years, including my 1995 article, "[A Survey of Bach Suite Editions](#)," so I will not spend too much time on this issue, though I have some additional thoughts.

Jeffrey Solow, in his own article on the Bach Suite editions, points out that the various editions of the cello suites can be divided into four categories:

1. Facsimiles of the Manuscripts
2. Scholarly or Critical Editions
3. Unedited Editions
4. Performance Editions [5]

I believe that items 1-3 can be roughly combined into a single category, 'scholarly', since they all keep a mindful eye on the facsimiles. Thus, reinforcing my earlier discussion of the scholar/performer duality, there are essentially two classes of editions: scholarly and performance editions. The Wenzinger and Markevitch are examples of scholarly editions. The Fournier and Casals-Foley are examples of performance editions.

Performance editions should be used with caution. "Studying a performance edition is like having a lesson with the cellist who edited it and can be very interesting and useful ... But, in my opinion, the Suites should never be learned solely from a performance edition. One should always have the manuscripts and scholarly editions for study and reference." [6] Otherwise, one runs the risk of interpreting another cellist's interpretation, instead of interpreting Bach.

A Different Aesthetic

The Baroque composers' concept of music was very different from our own, which is more akin to the 19th Century view. Counterpoint, with its multiple, intertwining, semi-melodic lines, yields, in the 19th Century, to music with single melodies supported by more chordal accompaniments. Also, an overtly emotional element gradually emerges as the 19th Century progresses.

"The goals in Baroque music are often very different. In some ways you could say that Baroque music is much more formal and formulaic. It's something that's not only found in the music, it's a sign of an era. When

you look at Baroque art, Baroque architecture, and Baroque literature, you find the same kinds of fascination with form and structure. You find fascination with repetition in a way, and with how you can express yourself within a rather strict or ... sometimes rigid framework. This is a very different concept and a very different aesthetic from Romantic music." [7]

Baroque music, like the Bach Cello Suites, seems less "goal-oriented" than much 19th Century music. "The German term 'durchfuhrung,' which is used to describe the Baroque technique of melodic elaboration, is often translated as 'spinning out.' This is a perfect description of the effect that Bach manages in movement after movement of the Suites as he draws out a melodic thread more and more finely, focusing on the progress from one moment to the next until, before the listener realizes it, the melodic thread has spanned the movement from beginning to end. 19th Century melodic development, with its discrete phrases and cadences, is quite foreign to this spinning-out concept. The 19th Century sublimated moment-to-moment beauties to gain the delayed gratification of structural points of arrival." [8]

Baroque composers followed very different rules when they wrote music. "The phenomenon present in the Cello Suites is something called polyphonic melody. By using a large melodic range and many leaps, Bach implies chordal structures. With a little maneuvering (omission of passing tones and the like), one can convert any of the Cello Suite movements into a choral style piece -- a series of vertical, multi-voiced chords. Most of the time a consistent number of voices will be implied in the melody -- often four or five, sometimes more. When the polyphonic melody has been converted into choral style, you will notice that the voice-leading of each line is carefully worked out. You will also often find some 'strange' chords, because he wasn't thinking of the progression of chordal roots. So, to address modern 'authentic' performance practice: it is correct for the performers to bring out the vertical structures [or harmonies], because polyphonic melody can be seen as a variation of choral style. Bach did recognize chordal types that arose from a combination of melodic lines, but not as a progression of chordal roots within a key (like I-IV-V-I). He recognized them more as figured bass structures ... All the vertical dissonances in Bach music are related to the bass note (not necessarily the root) and receive proper contrapuntal treatment in relation to the bass note. The vertical structures were by-products of the combination of multiple melodic lines. Composers were definitely taught that certain vertical structures were used best in particular circumstances [i.e. that the dominant is a good point of arrival]. Bach was aware of vertical structures (in a figured bass way), and in what context certain ones appeared, but, for him, melodic and contrapuntal considerations were more important and shaped his music to a greater degree." [9]

So now that we understand that Bach had a concept of music that is somewhat alien to our own, what do we do with this information? Do we ignore this somewhat troubling awareness, and continue to play from our 20th Century impulses? Or do we try to incorporate this knowledge into our playing? Ralph Kirshbaum thinks that to ignore this would be "inappropriate" and that it "is better to try to stay within the musical vocabulary of the time when a piece was written, as best we understand it." [10]

Dance Forms

Each Suite is composed of movements that are patterned after 16th or 17th Century dances (except the preludes), though some dance forms become more obscured in the later Suites. There are allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, minuets, gigue, etc., and each has a characteristic rhythmic feel. For example, typical Sarabandes are in a dignified three with an emphasis upon the second beat. If you haven't already, I suggest you read the descriptions of each dance form in a good music dictionary. But is one obligated to bring out the "defined" dance characteristic of each movement, or is it acceptable to play each movement with little regard for these "rules"? Does a sarabande have to be played in three beats per measure, or is it acceptable to play it in six?

Nathaniel Rosen prefers a freer approach, "People often talk about these pieces as dance movements. They're not dance movements! They are works for unaccompanied cello which have, with the exception of the Preludes, titles of dance movements Some of the movements are more dance-like, and some ... less dance-like. It isn't dance music!" [11]

Paul Tortelier thought of each suite as a whole, and how each movement relates to the other. Each dance "retains its basic rhythmic character...[and] has its distinguishing tempo.... By respecting the inherent nature of each dance, the interpreter will find the contrast of tempos which brings variety within the suite." [12] He describes a thought process that is useful for any multi-movement piece, to consider each movement's place in the overall work. Each movement should have a distinct character, otherwise the performance will be bland.

Repeats

The issue of whether to play all repeats is a perennial controversy. The safe and more pious answer is to do all repeats, since that's what Bach wrote, and it preserves the symmetry of the binary form of the dances.

There is some dissension amongst cellists, however, who consider other factors, like the overall balance between the two halves of each movement, and the average audience's attention span. Though Janos Starker plays all repeats in his recent recording of the Bach Suites, in earlier recordings he doesn't. In "some of the Bach movements, the first section is 16 bars and the second one is 32 bars, so I find that the 16 bars should be repeated while the 32 bars should not. I think it was sort of a mechanical gesture on the part of the composer to put in the repeat marks. Sometimes I choose not to repeat the second half because it's too long." [13]

Nathaniel Rosen agrees, "In the early Bach suites I took more repeats, while in the late suites I generally took fewer. They were starting to feel a little long ... For instance, ... I think the Allemande [of the D Major Suite] is like Bach's Air on the G String without the accompaniment. The absence of the accompaniment makes it a little bit long if you take all the repeats." [14]

Vibrato

We "modern" cellists need to consider the amount of vibrato we use in Bach. Many would agree that a "dead" hand is undesirable, since a certain "life" would be missed. But many cellists unleash a juicy vibrato, especially in the slower movements.

Vibrato was thought of more as an ornament in Baroque music, along with trills, turns, and mordents. "For a Baroque musician ... [it] would have seemed very silly [to use vibrato all the time]. It would have seemed as silly as eating whipped cream on everything, whether stew or strawberries," [15] or as silly as trilling every note.

How much vibrato, if any, is appropriate?

Ornamentation

Another dilemma is whether or not to add ornamentation when playing the Bach Cello Suites. Historians believe that it was common, and perhaps expected, for musicians in the Baroque era to supply their own ornamentation as they saw fit. I have heard, but not yet verified, that excessive ornamentation was one of Bach's pet peeves, so he made it a habit to indicate where he wanted ornaments, either by notating them or by writing out the notes of the ornaments so that they are part of the basic text.

Anner Bylsma believes that Bach intentionally paired down the ornaments in the cello suites:

" I believe this runs contrary to the task Bach gave himself when composing the Suites -- a study in the minimal. The great thing about his solo violin works is how he wrote three or four-voiced fugues for one instrument, leaving out notes when he had to for technical reasons. Of course, it was difficult enough for the left hand, with so many double, triple, and quadruple stops.

When Bach finished the solo violin works, I believe he was fascinated by the fact that one can leave out many notes and still be clear. The cello suites may have been an experiment to see how much he could omit, making the listener fill in the gaps of harmony and counterpoint for him or herself... The cello suites were more an experiment in the minimal, and in using bow technique to bring out the music, whereas the violin pieces are more left-hand oriented. " [16]

Does adding one's own ornaments run contrary to Bach's artistic conception?

Sometimes cellists add ornaments when playing a repeat to add variety to their performance. Is this practice merely an artistic crutch? Do musicians do this instead of digging more deeply into the notes as written, and using their creativity and artistry to find different meanings and colors without having to alter the text?

Bowings and Fingerings - The Modern Approach

Paul Tortelier said that "Searching for the ideal bowings in each passage is a lifelong challenge for every cellist," [17] which I'm sure he'd extend to fingerings as well. Bowings and fingerings vary with each player, and evolve over time, making this a very complicated issue. Musicians vary these for many reasons: to highlight certain thematic ideas, to convey a certain character or mood, to make things more playable, to be more audible, and so on. Choices in this matter also depend on whether one is trying to play in a "modern" style, or in a Baroque style, which I'll discuss later.

Janos Starker provides us with insight into his process. "Either there's something wrong with the flow, or something is wrong with the balance, or certain passages incline to simply run and become mechanical." [18] His ideas also stem from a desire to make the suites more playable, "The primary motivation is always how to play the cello better. How to make the cello a 'less in need of excuses instrument.'" [19] And his fingerings and bowings vary depending on the performance environment. "There are safe fingerings and then there are fingerings in halls where there is an echo. There are fingerings or bowings for places where you don't hear yourself. That's where you have to take more bows." [20]

Pablo Casals kept changing his bowings and fingerings too, not wanting to fall into an artistic rut. According to Bonnie Hampton, a former student of Casals, he emphasized that music:

"...is supposed to be a constantly living experience. In fact, when I heard him play the Bach Suites throughout the years, and while studying with him in the late 50's and early 60's, he was already using quite different bowings from those he had used earlier in his landmark recordings. Earlier in his life he had used much more legato bowings, which was the more Romantic style of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Then he had probably seen some of the Urtext editions, which indicate more separate bows, so he started to incorporate more of these in his own playing.

"He was constantly evolving, especially with Bach ... In fact, I remember one time in Prades, when there were several of us studying the same Suite. We'd get bowings and fingerings from each other to save lesson time. At one lesson he figured out what we were doing. So after he heard me play, he said, 'Now let's start from the beginning.' He then played it in a way that we hadn't heard before, though it still had the same structural feel and the same general character as before. In other words, the details were not as crucial as the understanding of the phrases, the understanding of where the music was

going, and the understanding of the character." [21]

In order to help you gain more insight into the various bowing and fingering approaches, I suggest you obtain several editions and compare and contrast each editor's ideas. Over time, you will come up with your own approach.

But when we alter the bowings from the manuscripts, flawed as they are, do we bury the genius of Bach, putting too much of ourselves into his music? Who are we to alter Bach? Or, if we remain slaves to the manuscripts, do we become too robotic in our approach, losing the creativity inherent in the art of music making?

Articulations - The Authentic Approach

The Early Music performer attempts to recreate the performance practice of the Baroque period when playing the Suites, which is a real challenge, since Baroque musicians had very different instruments, bows, and strings, different concepts of intonation and articulation, and different musical goals. As previously discussed, the Baroque sound world was very different from today's.

Articulation in the Baroque period was very different. For example, "Baroque performers took for granted ... [that two-note slurs] involved shortening the second note slightly - separating it, in other words, from the following note - and making a slight diminuendo from the first note to the second." [22] They tended to play notes with more separate bows, instead of slurring them together, "playing such notes fairly short and a bit separated from each other." [23] Also, chords were executed in a more arpeggiated manner, instead of being "crunched out" triple and quadruple stops.

These articulations were the result of several factors. Not only were the instruments different from today's, but Baroque musicians also had a different aesthetic, a different concept of what a beautiful sound was, and had different musical goals. These articulations are consistent with the "spinning out" compositional style, described earlier, since the music "steps" along, instead of flowing seamlessly.

The dilemma we face as "modern" cellists is that Baroque articulations are not consistent with our modern aesthetic. We have grown accustomed to more smoothly connected musical lines, which is why we tend to slur more notes together. The Baroque articulations can make a modern listener "seasick," since the music can feel very disjointed and "beat-y." When one is continually injecting gaps between notes, or emphasizing smaller divisions of each measure, it is much more difficult to maintain a sense of musical direction and the long phrase. Is it possible to create a sense of musical line with these articulations, and yet do it in a musically satisfying way for modern ears? Or do we just need to put on our Baroque hats, adjust our aesthetic, and enjoy the stepping and "spinning out" of the music?

Also, since our instruments are so different from Baroque instruments, including bows and strings, what is the use of trying to re-create the Baroque sound? It will never sound the same. Or is it our "duty" to try?

Conclusion

Many questions surface when one chooses to play Bach. Given the tremendous variety of performances on record, it should come as no surprise that there is little agreement on the answers, which probably means that there is no "right" answer. It seems that the best one can do is learn as much as one can about the outstanding issues, and then make informed choices. My hunch is that a hybrid of the two approaches is appropriate, and realistic.

If you decide to play in an 'authentic' manner, then do so with great conviction! You may annoy some Performers, but perhaps you've just tapped into their guilt about not playing more 'authentically'. And if you choose to play Bach in a "romantic" manner, then also do so with great conviction! You may anger some Scholars, but maybe you've merely accessed their self-judgment about not being more expressive players. Whatever you choose, do what's right for you. The infinity of Bach will endure.

Footnotes

[When an author is not listed below, the author is Tim Janof]

- [1] Mstislav Rostropovich, "J.S. Bach Cello Suites," EMI Classics Video, 1995.
- [2] David Blum, Casals and the Art of Interpretation, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977, p. 141.
- [3] Richard Taruskin, "Six Times Six, A Bach Suite Selection," *Strings* (January/February 1995): 117.
- [4] Carl Phillipp Emanuel Bach, 1775. H. T. David and A. Mendel, The Bach Reader, Norton, New York, 1966, p. 278.
- [5] Jeffrey Solow, "Bach's Cello Suites: A Guide to the Editionally Perplexed," *American String Teacher* (Winter 1996): 81.
- [6] Jeffrey Solow, "Bach's Cello Suites: A Guide to the Editionally Perplexed," *American String Teacher* (Winter 1996): 82.
- [7] "Conversation with Margriet Tindemans," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (July/August 1996).
- [8] David Sills, "Articulation in J.S. Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suites," *American String Teacher* (Winter 1998), 55.
- [9] Jennifer D. Milne, graduate student in music theory at the University of Washington, in an April 14, 1997 e-mail to me.
- [10] "Conversation with Ralph Kirshbaum," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (July/August 1997).
- [11] "Conversation with Nathaniel Rosen," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (May/June 1996).
- [12] David Blum and Paul Tortelier, Paul Tortelier: A Self-Portrait, Heinemann Ltd, London, 1984, p. 159.
- [13] "Conversation with Janos Starker," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (November/December 1996).
- [14] "Conversation with Nathaniel Rosen," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (May/June 1996).
- [15] "Conversation with Margriet Tindemans," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (July/August 1996).
- [16] "Conversation with Anner Bylsma," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (November/December 1998).
- [17] David Blum and Paul Tortelier, Paul Tortelier: A Self-Portrait, Heinemann Ltd, London, 1984, p. 161.
- [18] Suzanne McIntosh, "Janos Starker on Bach," *American String Teacher* (Autumn 1985), p. 50-51.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] "Conversation with Bonnie Hampton," *Internet Cello Society Tutti Celli* (January/February 1997).
- [22] David Sills, "Articulation in J.S. Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suites," *American String Teacher* (Winter 1998), 54.
- [23] Ibid.



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