
Bach
Weilerstein

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

CD I

Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007

1	I. Prélude	2. 38
2	II. Allemande	5. 48
3	III. Courante	2. 55
4	IV. Sarabande	3. 38
5	V. Menuets I & II	3. 34
6	VI. Gigue	2. 04

Cello Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009

7	I. Prélude	3. 45
8	II. Allemande	4. 43
9	III. Courante	2. 56
10	IV. Sarabande	5. 09
11	V. Bourrées I & II	4. 06
12	VI. Gigue	3. 19

Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012

13	I. Prélude	5. 50
14	II. Allemande	9. 03
15	III. Courante	4. 23
16	IV. Sarabande	5. 27
17	V. Gavottes I & II	4. 31
18	VI. Gigue	4. 42
	Total playing time:	78. 43

CD II

Cello Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008

1	I. Prélude	4. 36
2	II. Allemande	4. 03
3	III. Courante	2. 07
4	IV. Sarabande	6. 15
5	V. Menuets I & II	3. 23
6	VI. Gigue	3. 06

Cello Suite No. 4 in E-flat Major, BWV 1010

7	I. Prélude	4. 34
8	II. Allemande	4. 49
9	III. Courante	4. 15
10	IV. Sarabande	5. 25
11	V. Bourrées I & II	5. 48
12	VI. Gigue	2. 59

Cello Suite No. 5 in C Minor, BWV 1011

13	I. Prélude	7. 40
14	II. Allemande	7. 19
15	III. Courante	2. 08
16	IV. Sarabande	5. 28
17	V. Gavottes I & II	5. 11
18	VI. Gigue	2. 51
	Total playing time:	82. 07

The Bach cello suites present the player with infinite possibilities. Each note, each phrase, carries abundant varieties of expression and musical nuance. The suites are too rich with ideas, too full of subtleties, and too dense with the burden of history for any particular interpretation to be exhaustive, any particular choice definitive. All great pieces of music carry with them this sense of contradiction — they must be played, yet they can't be played. Every expressive gesture both realizes and limits the intentions of the composer.

With their delicacy and nakedness, their strength and restraint, the cello suites present a unique and humbling challenge. After many years telling family, friends, and myself that I would attempt a recording only when I was much older, I decided that what had seemed like prudence was, in fact, a misunderstanding of the suites' nature. The intrinsic impossibility of this music is the very source of its freedom.

I have been living with these suites since further back than memory can reach, and I have grown with them throughout my life with the cello. Great music is a reflection of life as it is lived, and this recording is a reflection of myself, in 2019, at 37 years old, steeped in and still discovering Bach's unparalleled accomplishment. I recorded this album in my current home, Berlin, where I could have breakfast with my husband and daughter before heading out for a day at the studio, working through the material with my wonderful producer Friedemann Engelbrecht and the team at Teldex, and with the tremendous support of my friends at PENTATONE. The joy of this music — vibrant, contemporary, unquestionably alive — is the joy of discovery. I invite you to join me on this infinitely inspiring adventure.

- Alisa Weilerstein -

Alpha and omega of a cellist's art

The Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello by J. S. Bach (1685-1750) loom larger than any other works in the genre. They are the veritable Alpha and Omega of a cellist's art. In these suites, technical challenges are not so overwhelming as to deter a budding professional. Yet once those hurdles are overcome, infinite decisions regarding tempo, articulation, ornamentation, and phrasing keep even a master musician engaged for life. Like the works for solo violin or solo keyboard, Bach's cello suites endeavour to synthesize diverse trends and elevate an instrumental genre to its highest level of perfection. Essentially without direct precedent, Bach crafted a body of solo cello music that forever defined the genre and brought the Baroque cello on par with its more popular cousin, the viola da gamba.

Questions continue to surround these suites. *Exactly when were they written?* Surviving only in a handwritten copy by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, the pieces are dated to about 1720; in other words, during his tenure in Köthen (1717-1723) and contemporaneously with the related Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. *Why were they written?* This is both easier and harder to answer. We do not know of an external commission or request, though the presence of gamba virtuoso C. F. Abel, Bach's colleague in Köthen, more than hints at a causal connection. Even absent such a link, Bach was clearly bursting with ideas for instrumental music at the time, and his penchant for comprehensiveness was already quite evident. But *why the cello?* Compared to viola da gamba, the cello was a newcomer with no substantial body of existing works. This newness may have been attractive to Bach, offering something akin to a blank canvas. Yet the presence of an altered tuning in Suite No. 5 and possible five-stringed instrument for Suite No. 6 highlight the transitional moment in which Bach and the cello found themselves.

The Baroque suite's core components (allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue) were established well before Bach. In general, an allemande was a slower, weightier dance, whereas a courante frequently bristled with energetic arpeggios and rhythmic élan. The sarabande originally connoted a somewhat libidinous dance in 17th-century Spain, but for Bach it has become stately, reserved, and endearingly poignant. All of the suites close with gigues, which are often experiments in counterpoint — no easy feat for an instrument originally designed for purely melodic expression. Into this framework Bach adds an opening prelude and diverse "modern" dances, including minuets (suites 1 and 2), bourrées (3 and 4), and gavottes (5 and 6). None are danceable, strictly speaking, though the dances' original steps help to establish each movement's typical meter and character.

Suite No. 1 in G Major

Classical rhetoric teaches orators to begin with their strongest argument. In similar fashion, Bach launches Suite No. 1 — and thus the entire collection — with a superlative prelude, both elegant and rapturous. The famous arpeggiated theme undulates hypnotically in and around G major until an arresting chromatic progression (C-sharp to C-natural in the bass) initiates a prolonged cadenza. During the ensuing allemande, Bach's sinuous lines almost imperceptibly connect melodic peaks with supporting bass notes, creating hints of polyphony. This technique, called *compound melody*, takes advantage of an effect similar to Gestalt psychology. We parse pitches of alternating high and low register into distinct strands, creating the mental impression of two simultaneous melodies despite the literal disjointedness from one pitch to the next. The G-major courante offers a study in economy of means and fullness of expression. Our ears are drawn to the folk-like charm of the dance, which steps forward with a balance between heavy initial beats and a more lithe continuation. In the sarabande Bach recalls the prelude's opening chord progression, setting out an arching B-C-B figure over pedal tone on G. Yet the effect is deeply altered here by sonorous triple-stop chords and slow tempo. Before the final gigue, Bach inserts two minuets. The first minuet paints a picture of an emerging *stil galant* and is marked by clarity and verve. The second, based on the iconic "lament bass" progression, is more harmonically adventurous. Both are swept aside by an exhilarating gigue noteworthy for its structural clarity, rhythmic interest, and carefully placed dramatic twists that enliven things just before they become predictable.

Suite No. 2 in D Minor

The prelude to Suite No. 2 dwells in brooding austerity. With a nod to the sarabande's rhythmic profile, Bach uses durational emphasis to focus attention on the second beat in 3/4 meter. Rising to a sustained note, then descending in faster rhythms, he creates a wave-like gesture indicative of breathing. Once again a critical low C-sharp signals the imminent arrival of dominant prolongation. Bach closes the prelude with five block chords whose rhythmic realization is left to the performer's discretion. Some of that improvisatory feel carries over into the allemande. In particular, note how Bach evades an expected cadence into the dominant key (A minor) and slides instead into a flurry of 32nd notes — rhythmic values not heard elsewhere in the movement. The nuance contained in such minor diversions conveys a larger, metaphorical significance that Bach deftly reveals. During the courante, incessant 16th notes add an unsettling intensity in need of resolution. The following sarabande, with its slow tempo, plodding eighth notes, and pungent chromatics, is thus well-placed to occupy the suite's center of gravity. After it come two delightful minuets — one in minor, the other in major — and a brilliant polyphonic gigue. This suite may be one of the shortest in terms of clock time.

But what Bach manages to capture is an intensity of expression and control of our inner, psychological time. In that way, it is far from being a lightweight companion to the larger suites.

Suite No. 3 in C Major

In Bach's hands a prelude has outgrown its original function, which was to check tuning and "warm up" in the key. The preludes for the six cello suites range from simple pattern preludes redolent of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (suite 1) to a full-scale prelude and fugue with hints of French Overture (suite 5). It's not uncommon for a prelude to overshadow the following dances in sheer aesthetic appeal. Consider Suite No. 3 in C Major, whose prelude opens in complete simplicity: a falling scale and arpeggio that define the key. From there Bach gradually widens the focus via undulating contours and skip-wise motion until the climactic dominant pedal, where the cellist oscillates between low G and various harmonies high above. The prelude's very last gesture mimics its first, creating a satisfying sense of completion even before the dances have begun! The allemande starts with a more florid version of the prelude's opening measure and continues with an infectious combination of long and short rhythms. Athleticism drives the courante from start to finish, while the sarabande turns inward with an initial deflection toward the subdominant key. Both bourrées are fleet and full of simple charm, though in those two aspects they are upstaged by the gigue. Beyond just filling the final position, this gigue summarizes much of what thrills us in the suite as a whole, including virtuosity, rhythmic contrast, chromaticism, and tense phrases built over pedal tones.

Suite No. 4 in E-flat Major

Suite No. 4 shows a very different side of Bach's creativity. From the outset, with a deflection to subdominant harmony, he strikes an expansive tone. Each harmony is played twice, giving us time to process every chord change and even to anticipate the next move. Does such breadth feel assured and restful, or does it slow our inner time so much that our minds want to race ahead of the music? On a related note, this prelude includes a parenthesis (mm. 45-62) that serves no structural purpose. That does not mean those measures are unimportant; quite the contrary, in fact. We are given a rare chance to hear how Bach *plays*, simply plays, as if he were unexpectedly given recess in the middle of a busy day. Some of his favorite "toys" are dissonant seventh intervals, which occur often during the quickly changing harmonies of the allemande and courante. Particularly poignant is his use of a chromatic seventh (D-flat) at the start of the sarabande, which directly mimics the prelude's opening and underscores how important sevenths are to this suite overall. The following bourrées strike a buoyant tone. The second bourrée is even more carefree in its appeal: no chromaticism, hardly a single dissonance — Bach at his most relaxed. The gigue sprints toward its ending in continuous 16th notes. But Bach cannot resist the occasional diversion and, at the last moment, a reprise of the opening theme in order to conclude with a rhetorical summation.

Suite No. 5 in C Minor

The powerful Suite No. 5 has many details worth noting. Some will know this music as a suite for solo lute, BWV 995, which may predate the cello version. There is no escaping the music's dark allure, amplified by Bach's use of an altered *scordatura* tuning. Detuning the cello's highest string from A down to G adds an additional open string to sympathetically resonate in the C minor tonality. Already in the prelude's opening phrases, Bach hints that polyphony will play an important role. This makes the eventual transition into a three-voice fugue feel logical, organic. A single pitch pivots from the fugue into the allemande, which continues the prevalence given to polyphony and passes it to the following

courante. All of these movements are noteworthy for their use of three- and four-voice chords, perhaps a lingering connection to the lute version mentioned earlier. By contrast, the sarabande — barren in texture and with no chords at all — sounds utterly alien. It is as if Bach sought to pare down harmony to a skeleton structure, bereft of any ornament or decoration, naked before the eyes of God. The following gavottes remain firmly earth-bound by their forceful upbeats. The concluding gigue features angular melodic gestures and more hints of compound melody. Apart from thoroughgoing dotted rhythms, one may note a few curiously sustained pitches, particularly the emphatic C and F that come just moments before the end as if in protest of the dance's headstrong momentum.

Suite No. 6 in D Major

The final suite fittingly closes the collection with evocations of rapture, brilliance, and ascent. The key of D major, long associated with moods of celebration and fanfare, sounds radiant when juxtaposed against the preceding C minor. Bach may have written the D-major suite for a five-string instrument that would significantly widen the available range. Excited by such possibilities, Bach composed the grandest suite of the six, on par with his great D-minor partita for solo violin. The prelude gets off to a rollicking start with a pattern of loud-soft echoes. Rising and falling gestures seem calculated to convey a spiritual interpretation, culminating with the attainment of high G—a full three-and-a-half octaves above the lowest note heard—that sparks a gradual, twisting descent across the prelude's second half. After this impressive opening, Bach places a florid, gestural allemande in which he has carefully notated every turn figure, every scale run and connecting flourish. Though the ensuing courante passes in a flash, listeners may catch echoes of the prelude's main theme (wedging outward and upward), as well as an exhilarating sense of rising motion that leads into structural cadences. In striking contrast to Suite No. 5, the D-major sarabande uses nothing but chords, ranging from antique sounding parallel sixths in two voices, to more exultant four-note harmonies. The two minuets are miniatures in the overall scheme, but they help to set up features (such as a musette topic) that spill over into the spirited gigue. The net effect is a gradual evolution from prelude to gigue over the course of 25 minutes. One moment inspires the next, and the whole structure gradually ascends by virtue of accumulated energy.

Scholars have long wondered why some of Bach's works survived while others did not. One compelling reason is sheer uniqueness: Nothing like this collection of six suites for unaccompanied cello seems to have existed before Bach created them. Past musicians preserved them even if they did not regularly play them until a moment of serendipity — Pablo Casals stumbled across a dusty score in Barcelona in 1890 — brought them onto the world stage. Each cello suite amply demonstrates the breadth of Bach's genius. At nearly every turn there is so much to admire, so much to comment upon, so much to hear and take away from this music. Bach certainly built upon the groundwork and forms laid out by his predecessors. But to say this much is about as meaningful as saying that Sainte-Chapelle is functionally on par with a village church. The cello suites are transcendent. Listening to them, we relish the joy of an unencumbered aesthetic experience: at times inspiring and robust, at others times austere and almost crystalline in their transparent beauty.

Jason Stell

Acknowledgments

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Sit back and enjoy