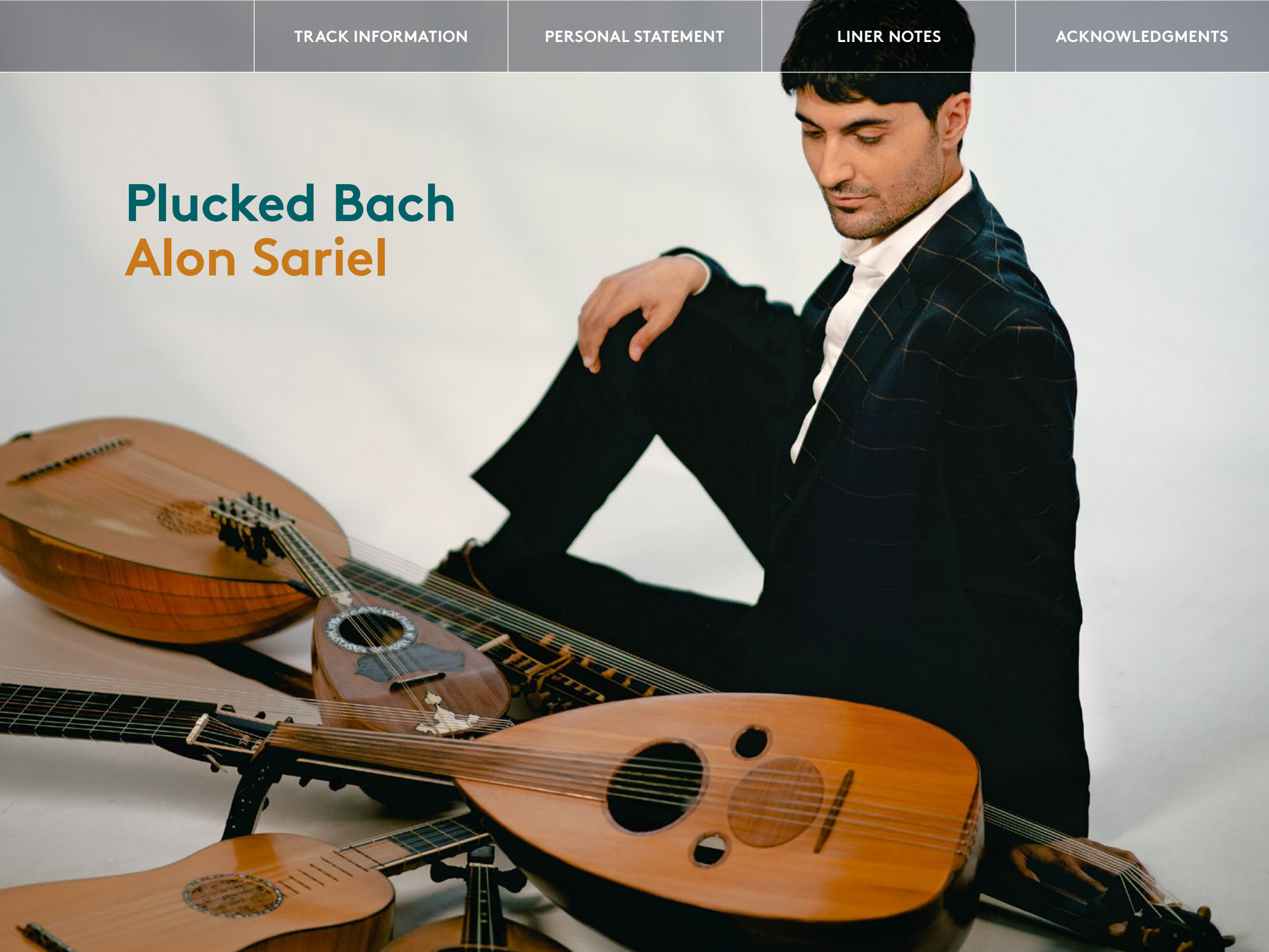
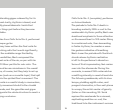


Plucked Bach

Alon Sariel





PLUCKED BACH

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

1	Cello Suite No. 5, BWV 1011: I. Prelude (cremonese mandolin)	6. 03
	Cello Suite No. 1, BWV 1007 (archlute)	
2	I. Prelude	3. 32
3	II. Allemande	5. 31
4	III. Courante	3. 25
5	IV. Sarabande	2. 36
6	V. Menuets I & II	3. 52
7	VI. Gigue	1. 55
8	Cello Suite No. 6, BWV 1012: V. Gavottes I & II (baroque guitar)	4. 04
	Cello Suite No. 2, BWV 1008 (liuto attiorbato)	
9	I. Prelude	4. 18
10	II. Allemande	4. 04
11	III. Courante	2. 37
12	IV. Sarabande	4. 03
13	V. Menuets I & II	2. 50
14	VI. Gigue	3. 20
15	IV. Sarabande (oud)	4. 17

Alon Sariel (b. 1986)

Mandolin Partita (neapolitan mandolin)

16	I. Prelude	2. 10
17	II. Allemande	1. 43
18	III. Courante	1. 47
19	IV. Sarabande	1. 45
20	V. Menuets I & II	1. 50
21	VI. Gigue	1. 24

Total playing time: 69. 00

Alon Sariel, baroque guitar, archlute, cremonese mandolin, neapolitan mandolin, oud, liuto attiorbato (as displayed on booklet cover image, from the left side counterclockwise).



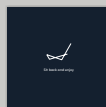


Before this journey began, I have had occasional chances to record works by J. S. Bach, and when I found them, I took them with pleasure.

Never yet have I made my attempt with “the cellist’s Bible”, music which has been accompanying me for decades and certainly will do further until my last day.

A lot has been said and written about Bach’s Cello Suites and about whether they were meant explicitly for the cello. For me, as Bach himself transcribed so much of his (and others’) music for different instruments, that search after a certain “original” or “intentional” instrument becomes rather pale and almost irrelevant. I prefer to explore the things which make this music so unbelievably timeless and universal. It touches us all immediately, yet does remain full of secrets untold. Each of my instruments featured here brings its own unique voice and contributes a certain colour or pattern to this kaleidoscope that I’ve called “Plucked Bach”.

The tracklist is finally a sonic interplay of light and dark, represented by the first and second suites accordingly. I must admit that placing my own partita next to these suites, all sharing the same structure, is an idea that came very sudden and I’ve never questioned it. I’ve composed this work during the pandemic lockdown of 2020, 300 years after Bach composed these suites, as a homage to this magnificent work of art.



It came so natural and happened so fluently, that it felt almost as if it was dictated to me from some unknown source inside. Why did this source keep so silent throughout all this time?

Both existing portraits of Bach which made it to our day (both made by Hausmann) show an old man with a rather grumpy expression. This music, however, was written by a much younger Bach, years before all the Passions. We do know that this young fellow drank the best beer, stayed in the best hotels and consumed the best tabaco. In fact, if musicologists and historians aren't completely mistaking, Bach would have been exactly my age while composing these "Cello Suites", testimonies to the highest artistic beauty that kept me going during the last couple of years.

Not that I'm trying to draw some Potterian connection to Bach on a mystical level, but after all, Bach hadn't left us expressive letters like Mozart had, or detailed diary entries like Beethoven's. All we have is his divine music, and it speaks to me like no other music does. This music, dear listener, is what I wish to share with you.

Enjoy the plucked journey!

Alon

Bach and the art of adaptation

If the last two years have taught us anything, we hopefully understand better how to adapt our lives — in some cases, from top to bottom — in order to meet new challenges and opportunities. That is hardly a novel observation, of course, but the severity of the global coronavirus pandemic has made it feel more real, more immediate. There have been things we could retain and things that needed to be let go; there have been constraints imposed that, surprisingly, opened doors to new perspectives.

In very small ways, this kind of adaptation has always been natural to music. Centuries ago, music was often written with no direct, specific connection to an instrument or group of instruments. Outside the sacred realm (in which music was exclusively vocal and nearly always performed by male voices), music generally took shape in the Renaissance

and Baroque with a more catholic nonchalance. A piece worked out at the organ will often work just fine on a harpsichord or, eventually, a fortepiano; a sonata for two treble parts with continuo support can easily be played by violins or oboes or perhaps even trumpets, depending on the key.

Bach, for example, was not at all averse to adapting in order to suit changing circumstances. Early in his career, he transcribed a handful of Italian (mostly violin) concertos to be performable by one player at a keyboard. These arrangements served at least two purposes: pedagogical and practical. Pedagogical needs were important to Bach, who often had his own children and a few boarders to instruct in the basic principles of composition, extemporization, and tasteful interpretation. Of course, Bach's keyboard arrangements lack the textural brilliance of the full string ensemble and the dynamic interplay between soloist and the larger



group. But these were tradeoffs worth making at the time. Similarly, Bach would recycle music written for entirely different situations in order to create chamber works for the Collegium Musicum of Leipzig, a standing gig that he organized for several years at Zimmermann's Kaffeehaus. Bach may have had a temper that got him into trouble, but he seems not to have been a stickler over instrumentation when live music-making called for flexibility.

In that sense, later arrangements of Bach's instrumental works have a strong foundation upon which to stand. Consider the cello suites. As Mr. Sariel's accompanying statement points out, we are not always certain about what specific instruments Bach had in mind when composing the six suites. Furthermore, the "standard" violoncello has itself evolved since 1720, meaning one can hear very different interpretations even from such authorities as Anner Bylsma (historical setup) and Mstislav Rostropovich (modern). And while we can

debate issues of historical accuracy and its place in modern performance, we ought never to lose sight of an important caveat: does the music still move us, does it deepen our spiritual pleasure, regardless of the instrument upon which it sings forth?

The Cello Suites

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. 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. Compared to the related 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.

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 giges, which are often experiments in counterpoint — no easy feat for instruments like the cello, originally designed for purely melodic

expression. Into this framework Bach adds an opening prelude and diverse "modern" dances, including minuets (suites 1 and 2), bourées (3 and 4), and gavottes (5 and 6). None are danceable, strictly speaking, though the dance steps determine each movement's typical meter and character.

Bach on plucked strings

Prelude from Cello Suite No. 5, performed on cremonese mandolin

The present recording opens with the Prelude from Suite No. 5. Some will know this music in its version 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 in the cello original. 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 connection that builds further in later movements of the suite.





Cello Suite No. 1 (complete), performed on archlute

Classical rhetoric teaches orators to begin with their strongest argument. In similar fashion, Bach launches Suite No. 1 with a superlative prelude, both elegant and rapturous. The famous arpeggiated theme undulates hypnotically in and around the tonic chord until an arresting chromatic progression in the low register initiates a prolonged cadenza. Our ears are drawn to the folk-like charm of the following dances, from the sinuous lines of the allemande to the economical courante. In the sarabande Bach recalls the prelude's opening chord progression, setting out an arching melodic figure over pedal tone. 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.

Gavottes from Cello Suite No. 6, performed on baroque guitar

Bach may have written the final suite for a five-string cello 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 two gavottes are miniatures in the overall scheme, of course, but they help to set up features (such as a musette topic) that spill over into the spirited final movement. The entire suite is a careful study in momentum, as early movements build to the chordal sarabande, and the gavottes and gigue re-invigorate the whole structure to reach a satisfying conclusion.



Cello Suite No. 2 (complete), performed on liuto attiorbato

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. 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. 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. (Later on this recording, Mr. Sariel reprises this sarabande for a visceral, captivating rendition on oud, the traditional lute-like instrument common

in Arabic and Asian cultures.) After the sarabande 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.

Mandolin Partita by Alon Sariel (complete), performed on neapolitan mandolin

This album closes with an original suite by Alon Sariel, redolent of Bach's many examples in the genre. Movement designations alone make clear the extent of Sariel's homage (allemande, courante, menuets, etc.), but musical echoes are equally compelling. The opening pattern prelude offers an update on that familiar gesture, deftly combining the sonic world of 1720 with harmonic turns

more at home a century later. Ironically, by breaking the rhythmic pattern more often than Bach might, Sariel's prelude actually hints at older traditions, namely the unmeasured preludes of Louis Couperin and the fantasia style of Buxtehude. The following movement openly quotes from the allemande of Bach's Violin Partita No. 2, also in D Minor. Sariel's lively rhythms yield the feeling of an improvised "variation on the theme," showing deep respect for his model while striving to insert new ideas. Similarly, the suite's courante is mirrored on Bach down to the last detail: binary repeats, a mix of running scales and arpeggios, and a brilliant clarity of harmonic structure. The sarabande maintains the D-minor key and ushers in a more tender, introspective mood. Two delightful minuets capture the charm of that dance, and the closing gigue would find a welcome place in any of Bach's violin partitas.

Sariel's grasp of Bachian pacing and harmonic formulas, built upon so many years of performing such repertoire, allows this Mandolin Partita to dovetail seamlessly with his arrangements of Bach's actual music. As such it fittingly caps the entire scope of the current recording: to vivify the Baroque instrumental suite across a range of less-traditional, perhaps even less-familiar, plucked instruments. Mr. Sariel has demonstrated how wonderfully Bach's cello suites work on lute, oud, and mandolin. At the same time, we can offer him high praise by turning this point on its head: Sariel's own Mandolin Partita would sound brilliant and completely at home when performed on Baroque cello.

Jason Stell



Acknowledgements

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Liner notes **Jason Stell**

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All Bach pieces arranged by Alon Sariel, Mandolin Partita by Alon Sariel (GEMA).

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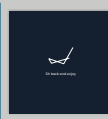


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