



Johann Sebastian
BACH

Cello Suites • 2

Nos. 2, 3 and 6

Arranged for theorbo and performed by
Yasunori Imamura



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Cello Suites Nos. 2, 3 and 6 in arrangements for theorbo

In his interpretations of the rich music of J.S. Bach's *Cello Suites*, lutenist Yasunori Imamura has chosen to present the works performed on the theorbo, a long-necked Baroque instrument similar to the chitarrone. When performing Bach's *Cello Suites*, Imamura did not want to lose the deep, rich, and soulful resonance of the cello. Therefore, instead of the lute, which has a higher range, he chose the theorbo, which has a similar range to the cello. Incidentally, the cello's lowest open string is C2 and its highest open string is A3, while the theorbo's lowest note is G1 and its highest open string is B3. This imparts to the music unique timbres and resonances, bringing us into a new relationship with this wonderful music.

The *Cello Suites* were hardly known even among professional musicians for a century and a half after their composer's death. It was the great Spanish cellist, Pablo Casals, who discovered (on the day his father purchased for the young prodigy his first full-size cello) a copy of the *Six Suites for Violoncello* 'at an old music shop near the harbour' in Barcelona.

Casals studied and worked at these pieces every day for the next twelve years and waited until he was 25 years old before he dared to perform them in public. As Casals explained in his autobiography:

Up until then no violinist or cellist had ever played one of the Bach suites in its entirety. They would just play a single section – a Sarabande, a Gavotte or a Minuet. But I played them as a whole: from the *Prélude* through the five dance movements, with all the repeats that give the wonderful entity and pacing and structure of every movement, the full architecture and artistry. They had been considered academic works, mechanical, without warmth. Imagine that! How could anyone think of them as being cold, when a whole radiance of space and poetry pours forth from them! They are the very essence of Bach and Bach is the essence of music.

(*Joys and Sorrows, Reflections by Pablo Casals*, as told to Albert E. Kahn, London: Macdonald, 1970, pp.46–47)

Bach is believed to have written the *Cello Suites* while at Cöthen, a town in Saxony some 19 miles north of Halle, where the composer was employed as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, between 1717 and 1723. The original manuscripts for these have been lost and the earliest source is in the handwriting of Bach's wife, Anna Magdalena.

Structurally, each of the six *Suites* contains six movements, beginning with a prelude and ending with a gigue, while in between are old court dances: allemandes, courantes and sarabandes. Following the old dances Bach brought into the suite a more modern dance, either a minuet, a bourrée, or a gavotte.

The allemande was a popular dance form originating in Germany in the 16th century, and by the 18th century had become a stylised concept well removed from dancing. The pace of the dance is quiet and steady. The courante is invariably rigorous and rapid, providing a contrast to the allemande. With the courante's title derived from the French verb 'to run', this is a bubbling, effervescent movement of a brilliant kind. The sarabande, a slow, stately dance which originated in Spain, is the emotional centre of the suite, with enormous depths of stillness, sadness, and expressiveness. Its characteristic feature (similar to the Polish mazurka), is that with three beats to a bar the middle beat is the accented one.

Minuets, bourrées and giges remind us of the rhythmic momentum of the original dances. The minuet (*Suites Nos. 1 and 2*) is a graceful movement with three beats to a bar, sometimes followed by a second minuet, the first minuet then being repeated. The bourrée (*Suites Nos. 3 and 4*) is another French dance, similar to the gavotte but quicker, followed by a second bourrée and then the repetition of the first. The gavotte (*Suites Nos. 5 and 6*) is bright in mood and starts halfway through the first bar providing an energetic rhythmic pulse.

Suite No. 2 opens with an extended *Prélude*, building up to a magnificent finale of arpeggiated chords. An *Allemande* and *Courante* lead to a *Sarabande* of considerable variety both melodically and rhythmically. *Menuet I* is repeated to frame *Menuet II*, before the final vigorous *Gigue*.

Suite No. 3 presents a powerful *Prélude* that covers almost the entire range of the instrument. A very intricate *Allemande* is paired with a *Courante*. A magnificently expressive *Sarabande* leads on to a pair of well-known *Bourrées*, with their unforgettable melodic inventiveness. The concluding *Gigue* is a virtuosic work with both momentum and contrapuntal complexity.

Suite No. 6 was written for a cello with five strings (the extra one being above the top string). For the modern cellist the suite therefore poses acute difficulties. That this work was composed for the higher registers of a five string cello paradoxically makes it an appropriate medium for theorbo, in fact taking in the range of the fingerboard in an idiomatic way.

The *Prélude*, an extended movement with a deep sense of inner structure, begins with the alternation of unisons on two strings. Dramatic use is made of pedal notes and contrasts between adjacent strings. The constant quaver triplets create a momentum which finds its climax in rapid semiquavers and sudden energetic chords.

The *Allemande* is characterised by rich ornamentation and intricate melodic progressions over a slow pulse. In contrast the *Courante* is vigorous and exuberant with a catchy rhythm. The *Sarabande*, with many intervals of the sixth and a variety of bowed chords in the original, provides a perfect vehicle for the guitar's harmonic expressiveness.

Gavottes I and *II* are lyrical dances of unforgettable charm. *Gavotte II* is quieter and in the style of the musette, the drone imitating the music of the hurdy-gurdy or bagpipe. The *Gigue* begins with a short quasi-military fanfare or perhaps echoes of the hunt, the rhythmic quavers of the opening quickly evolving into brilliant semiquavers reminiscent of the *Prélude*.

Graham Wade

Yasunori Imamura



Photo: Patrick Lüthy

Yasunori Imamura (b. 1953) studied lute with Eugen Müller-Dombois and Hopkinson Smith at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, where he received his soloist's diploma. He subsequently focussed on interpretation and thoroughbass with Ton Koopman and Johann Sonnleitner, and composition with Wolfgang Neining. Today, Imamura is recognised as one of the prominent figures of the lute, as a soloist as well as a continuo player. He is professor of lute at the Conservatoire et Académie Supérieure de Musique, Strasbourg, as well as at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, and regularly gives masterclasses across Europe and the Far East. His solo recordings have been awarded numerous accolades, including a Diapason d'Or for *Weiss: Lute Sonatas, Vol. 1* (Claves) in 2006, and a Crescendo 'Joker' for the second volume in the series in 2008.

He received the Cultural Achievement Award from the Canton of Solothurn (Switzerland) in 2010. Besides his activities as a soloist, Yasunori Imamura has collaborated as a continuo player with artists including Cecilia Bartoli, Teresa Berganza, Núria Rial, Marc Minkowski, Michael Schneider, Maurice Steger, Martin Gester and Alan Curtis, and has made over 150 recordings. In 1997 he founded Fons Musicae, performing throughout Europe and the Far East. To date, the ensemble has made six recordings, and has received various international awards and commendations.

www.yasunoriimamura.com

Yasunori Imamura presents the second instalment of Bach's *Cello Suites* arranged for theorbo (Volume 1 is available on 8.574617). The theorbo is the most important plucked instrument in the lute family, with a range very similar to the cello. Certain technical elements, such as the playing of arpeggios are, in fact, easier on the theorbo whose unique timbres bring a new sonic quality to the performances heard here. These elements are most evident in *Suite No. 6*, composed for a cello with five strings, but which sounds totally idiomatic when played on the theorbo.



Lotteriefonds Kanton Solothurn

SWISSLOS

Johann Sebastian

BACH

(1685–1750)

Cello Suites • 2

**Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor,
BWV 1008 (c. 1720)**

19:42

- 1** I. Prélude
- 2** II. Allemande
- 3** III. Courante
- 4** IV. Sarabande
- 5** V. Menuet I–II
- 6** VI. Gigue

3:54
3:52
2:21
3:58
3:05
2:34

**Cello Suite No. 6 in D major,
BWV 1012 (c. 1720)**

28:11

- 13** I. Prélude
- 14** II. Allemande
- 15** III. Courante
- 16** IV. Sarabande
- 17** V. Gavotte I–II
- 18** VI. Gigue

4:25
7:30
3:58
4:06
3:56
4:07

**Cello Suite No. 3 in C major,
BWV 1009 (c. 1720)**

22:24

- 7** I. Prélude
- 8** II. Allemande
- 9** III. Courante
- 10** IV. Sarabande
- 11** V. Bourrée I–II
- 12** VI. Gigue

3:45
4:04
3:38
3:49
3:38
3:22

**Arranged for theorbo
by Yasunori Imamura, 2021**

Yasunori Imamura, Theorbo

Recorded: 20–27 July 2022 **1**–**12** and 17–25 July 2023 **13**–**18** at the Roman Catholic Church,
Oberbuchsitzen, Switzerland • Producer, engineer and editor: Jan Žáček (Acustica Studio)

Booklet notes: Graham Wade • Edition: from manuscript

Theorbo by José Miguel Moreno **1**–**12**, Hendrik Hasenfuss **13**–**18**

Sponsored by the SOKULTUR – Lotteriefonds Kanton Solothurn, Switzerland

Cover: *Allegory of the Five Senses* (detail) (1632) by Theodor Rombouts (1597–1637)

© & © 2025 Naxos Rights (Europe) Ltd • www.naxos.com