

Bach's Cello Suites

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) - Suite No.1 in G BWV1007

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Minuets, Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach - Suite No.2 in D minor BWV1008

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Minuets, Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach - Suite No.3 in C BWV1009

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Bourrées, Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach - Suite No.4 in E flat BWV1010

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Bourrées, Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach - Suite No.5 in C minor BWV1011

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gavottes, Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach - Suite No.6 in D BWV1012

Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gavottes, Gigue

The young Johann Sebastian Bach had a rather varied career, quite different from the rather settled gentleman from his Leipzig years. The nadir was in 1717 when he was arrested in Weimar, having fallen out of favour as director of music at the ducal court. He was quickly employed by Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Köthen as his Kapellmeister; the prince, a musician himself, appreciated Bach's talents and paid well. But he was a Calvinist, so church music was not elaborate and most of Bach's music from this period is secular – music for unaccompanied violin, cello suites, the *Brandenburg Concertos*, secular cantatas.

Whilst in Weimar (from 1708 to 1717) Bach had already been studying the music of Vivaldi, Corelli and Torelli and this would have a formative influence on his orchestral and instrumental music. In Köthen the young composer also embraced dance music, and his use of dance forms is notable in the music he wrote during this period.

Not much survives in the way of manuscript material from Bach's Köthen years. For instance, the manuscript of the unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas survived, so we know they were completed by 1720. Unfortunately, no such manuscript for the cello suites survives, nor are we certain about the orchestra suites. Our view of these works is filtered through the later Bach so that our knowledge of the cello suites is based on a manuscript copy created by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach (whom he married in 1721) around 1728 by which time they were living in Leipzig.

Whilst this manuscript gives us an accurate view of the suites, presumably one endorsed by the composer, it leaves a few questions (there was even a controversy, now refuted, that Anna Magdalena wrote the music). Commentators disagree about the articulations used, with some arguing that it is deficient but others saying that the unconventional slurring works with the harmony. Similarly, the dating of the suites is problematic, do they come before or after the solo violin music. At the moment the general agreement is that the cello suites came first.

There are also queries over which instrument the works were written for. Many cellists use a five-string cello for the sixth suite, and some argue that imprecise terminology has caused confusion and that the works were written for a small cello which was played on the shoulder (violoncello da spada). Such instruments have been reconstructed and players have successfully done recordings of the suites on them.

We have little or no knowledge about the works' original performer. Bach conducted regular rehearsals with the Köthen court instrumental ensemble, whose repertoire would have been ensemble pieces and sonatas, but presumably, the music for solo cello (and for solo violin) was for specific performers in the group and would, we assume, have been performed at court.

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But the very lack of a strong performing tradition in the suites means that cellists can come to them without too many historical pre-conceptions. The works' modern revival dates from the great Catalan cellist Pablo Casals who discovered them as a teenager and would make something of a speciality of playing them in public. Before Casals, the works had never really been thought of as concert works.

All the suites are in six movements, and all have the same structure – Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Galanteries (two minuets, or two bourrées, or two gavottes), Gigue. This consistency (almost unique in Bach's suites) leads commentators to believe that the suites were conceived as a cycle. The majority of movements in the piece use chords rather than a single melodic line, for instance, the prelude to *Suite No. 1* is almost entirely arpeggiated (spread) chords.

610 words