

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top, is playing a cello. She is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The background is a simple, dark interior with vertical lines, possibly a window blind or a wall panel. The lighting is soft and focused on the musician.

BACH CELLO

Zoe Knighton

The complete
cello suites

BWV 1007-1012

move

CD one**Suite No. 1 in G major,
BWV 1007**

- 1** Prelude 2'18"
- 2** Allemande 5'28"
- 3** Courante 2'35"
- 4** Sarabande 3'18"
- 5** Menuet 1 and 2 3'42"
- 6** Gigue 1'46"

**Suite No. 4 in E flat major,
BWV 1010**

- 7** Prelude 4'10"
- 8** Allemande 4'01"
- 9** Courante 3'51"
- 10** Sarabande 4'46"
- 11** Bourée 1 and 2 5'58"
- 12** Gigue 2'34"

**Suite No. 5 in C minor,
BWV 1011**

- 13** Prelude 7'00"
- 14** Allemande 7'12"
- 15** Courante 2'03"
- 16** Sarabande 4'09"
- 17** Gavotte 1 and 2 4'56"
- 18** Gigue 2'19"



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

THE CELLO SUITES

Zoe Knighton

Recorded at Move Records studio

Editing: Vaughan McAlley

Mastering: Martin Wright

Photos: Pia Johnson

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CD two**Suite No. 2 in D minor,
BWV 1008**

- 1** Prelude 3'32"
- 2** Allemande 3'48"
- 3** Courante 2'20"
- 4** Sarabande 5'23"
- 5** Menuet 1 and 2 3'13"
- 6** Gigue 2'55"

**Suite No. 3 in C major,
BWV 1009**

- 7** Prelude 3'21"
- 8** Allemande 4'05"
- 9** Courante 3'23"
- 10** Sarabande 4'02"
- 11** Bourée 1 and 2 4'10"
- 12** Gigue 3'22"

**Suite No. 6 in D major,
BWV 1012**

- 13** Prelude 4'57"
- 14** Allemande 8'19"
- 15** Courante 4'02"
- 16** Sarabande 5'03"
- 17** Gavotte 1 and 2 4'36"
- 18** Gigue 4'50"



he debate still rages about the origins and intention behind these suites. Were they written for the cellists of the court (Christian Ferdinand Abel and Christian Bernhard Linke) where Bach was employed at the time? Were they written for a strange instrument called a violoncello da spalla? (an instrument larger than a viola designed for those unfamiliar with playing a gamba and played horizontally supported by a strap) or were they essentially a set of exercises for Bach himself to practise his skills, getting more complicated as the suites progress? Without the surviving original manuscript or documentation, there is so much speculation and hearsay but as little bits of information come to light, one thing is mostly constant – the notes that are on the page.

But which page?! Are we to trust the Anna Magdalena transcript, his student, Kellner's manuscript or the first printed edition? Dealing with these decisions and playing these suites comes with it a great education in understanding and coming to terms with one's own aesthetic. In effect, the performance of these suites become a musical signature of each cellist.

Since our beloved Pablo Casals brought these works to public attention and presented them in their

entire form, these six suites have formed the backbone and engine room of musical understanding for every modern cellist and indeed all lovers of Bach's music. The notes themselves in the early suites are relatively simple but the decision on how to play them can be crippling.

Suite 1: G major – Innocence and joy of childhood

Suite 2: D minor – The antithesis of innocence teenage/early adulthood anguish of self discovery

Suite 3: C major – Triumph of adulthood, self satisfaction, grown ups having fun

Suite 4: E flat – The responsibility of coming of age – having doubts over one's chosen path

Suite 5: C minor – The despair of aging, regret, longing

Suite 6: D major – The joy of relinquishing responsibility, the joy of a full life and the intense wisdom that comes with age – the sheer delight in having time on one's hands

Rostropovich articulates every cellist's dilemma: "The hardest thing to achieve in interpreting Bach is the necessary equilibrium between human feelings – the heart which undoubtedly Bach possessed – and the severe, serious and profound aspect of interpretation ... It's hard to

find something the heart responds to and which is not artificial to one's own nature."

Boris Pergamenschikow refers to "the rules of the game of which many have been passed on while retaining a 20th century point of view. Feelings and emotions, moods and sentiments

unite us human beings of different eras. This makes music universal and gives us the courage to tackle these imposing works."

Peter Wispelwey writes so eloquently: "Above all it is magical music and possibly biblical in

the sense that it narrates stories in a comprehensible language, from the archaic to the refined, about the immeasurable dimensions and variations of the human experiment."

Pablo Casals says it most poignantly: "How could anyone think of Bach as cold when these suites

seem to shine with the most glittering kind of poetry?”

Thinking of these suites not as individual movements or even as individual suites, but as an entire package has become more and more common. I often muse over the idea that a journey through life can be mirrored through the suites.

After playing these suites in chronological order, at the conclusion of the D major suite there comes an overwhelming urge to just quietly slip from the dominant (D major) to the tonic (G major) and begin the cycle again. It mirrors so much of the cyclical nature of life and death.

In talking about these suites, one of the most interesting (and obvious) things to do is to compare them against each other. Whether or not Bach conceived these six suites as one unit, they have moulded together. The common understanding is that the later suites were written at a later date but they still carry one the thread of consciousness from the earlier ones. This is also supported by the fact the fifth suite is written



scordatura (the A string is to be tuned down to a G) and the sixth suite is written for an entirely different instrument with 5 strings – most likely a violoncello piccolo or viola pomposa or viola da spalla. Many attest that Bach himself invented this 5 string instrument and it definitely increased the technical capabilities of the player.

One can also compare the movements against each other. The preludes invariably set the scene for each chapter being told in the suite. The ominous and angst ridden second prelude is countered by the gay abandon of the sixth.

The allemandes range from the delightfully courteous first to the astoundingly beautiful and prayer-like sixth.

The courantes are by far the most playful movement with the first almost sounding like a child’s guessing game, the second flitting past like a disturbed memory, the fifth holds immense power and the sixth embodying all the fun that has come before.

Of the sarabandes, the standouts are the fourth and fifth. The sublime simplicity and implied complexity of the fifth sarabande makes it one of his greatest movements.

Of the fourth movements, perhaps the most loved is the third suite bourées but if I had to pick one, it is the second bourée of fourth suite. It never fails to make me smile, like a much loved older relative.

Of the gigue, the second seems to have a foreboding sense of foretelling the future while the sixth acts like a closing curtain finale to the entire set and one has a sense of a series of reminiscences.

Of all the works that I play, these seem the most changing in my own perception of them. They grow with me and allow so many different angles of understanding. I think most cellists feel the same.

ZOE KNIGHTON



