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INTERPRETING THE MYSTERY
Playing the Bach Solo Suites for Cello

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ABSTRACT: This thesis explores the practice and preparation undertaken before a series of concerts featuring all of Bach Solo Cello Suites. It includes some information and background to Bach and the Suites and then discusses the musicians general approach to performing the works. It then addresses various issues within each of the Suites including interpretation, recordings, overcoming technical issues, sacred versus secular approaches. After reflections and evaluation it discusses possible projects for the future.

Key words: Bach Cello Suites, performance, practice, preparation, reflection, interpretation, Severnside Festival, interpreting the mystery, playing the Bach solo Suites for Cello

INTERPRETING THE MYSTERY



THE 6 SUITES FOR SOLO CELLO:

BACH

RUTH
SPARGO

AS PART OF THE SEVERNSIDE FESTIVAL 2013

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Introduction and Overview:

In June 2013 I performed all 6 of the Bach Solo Suites for cello at a ten day festival called the Severnside Festival in Gloucestershire, England. Within the area known as the Severnside there are 6 churches, and I performed one of the Suites in each church, some in collaboration with other events and artists.

I have written my Master's thesis about this project; the preparation and practice involved, the way I learnt the works and my experience of performing them. I have particularly focused on the artistic and technical process behind my musical interpretation of the various Suites. As examples, I have examined each of the Suites with a slightly different focus. The aim of this was to deepen my own understanding of the Suites, and so improve my performances of the Suites as well as perhaps create some kind of working method for my future self.

Before I started this project I had previously studied the 1st 2nd and 3rd Suites only. I studied the 4th Suite during the Autumn 2012, and performed three of the movements (Prelude, Sarabande and Bourées) amongst a program in a solo recital at one of the Severnside churches. I studied the 6th Suite throughout the spring of 2013, and the 5th Suite later on in this semester. I performed the 6th Suite in Gothenburg in May, but my first performance of the 5th Suite was at the Severnside festival.

The title "Interpeting the mystery" is inspired by Steven Isserlis's suggestion that these could be given the subtext the "Mystery Suites". The poster design (Gaianeh Pilossian) is inspired by that title, as well as the location of the festival. The drawn outline of the cello that divides the page is a reflection of the placing of the Severnside villages alongside the river Severn, amongst a large looping meander of the river and above the river/cello is a collage of the churches that the Suites were to be performed at.

Interpreting the Mystery: festival program

- Monday 3rd June 9.30 pm: Suite No.1
Candle light Opening Concert at Saul Church
- Tuesday 4th June 8pm: Suite No. 4
Art Exhibition Preview Concert at Frampton Church
- Wednesday 5th June 2pm: Suite No. 2
Cream tea Concert at Frampton Chapel
- Thursday 6th June 6pm: Suite No. 5
Fretherne Church, Followed by supper at a pop-up restaurant
- Friday 7th June 2pm: Lakefield Primary School: short concert
Suite No. 3, Bourées 1 & 2
- Friday 7th June, 7.30pm: Suite No. 6
Concert with photographic film to be designed by local photographer (Karen Skeats) at Framilode Church
- Saturday 8th June 11 am Visit to The Old Vicarage (dementia care centre)
Various repertoire including movements of Bach
- Saturday 8th June 2pm Visit to Wisma Mulia (Elderly peoples home)
Suite No.1, and various other works
- Sunday 9th June 10am: Suite No. 3
Arlingham Church: as part of a communion service

Preparation and interpretation; my approach

It is important to consider my general approach towards practising and performing the Suites. I think that in general my approach to the Bach Suites during this project was based more on how I don't want them to sound. For example: although I see the value in historically informed performances, I don't want to play them in this way, with a baroque instrument/bow and at a lower pitch etc. This is because I think the instruments are limited and some of the "rules" in historically informed playing can often (though not always) limit the possibility of artistic expression, instead of liberating them. However, I also dislike overly romanticized versions of the Suites, with lots of vibrato, audible shifts and huge amounts of rubato. I feel it is tasteless and not remotely true to the nature of the music.

My approach is to find a balance between being stylistic and tasteful, but still extremely expressive and free. Mainly when I practice the Suites I think about my sound and intonation, and focus on highlighting the harmonic changes for the listener. I also consider the implied lines of the phrase, as well as the implied melodic and harmonic voices in the score. I play with only a little vibrato and I try to keep my tempos quite strict and without too much rubato.

I hoped that this project would help me to explore and discover the way I really wanted to interpret them so I could make a convincing interpretation. Although most of my work on the Suites was in the practice room, I think there is a lot of value in the work I did away from the cello, and in researching around them.

There were many issues to be considered whilst preparing these works. These include: text sources and editions, practice and preparation process, recordings, performance practice, analysis, interpretation, performance focus, previous performance experience, audience and venue, memorization, and more. There were different issues that naturally came up with the preparation of each Suite, or that I have actively decided to approach with a particular Suite. Over the rest of this thesis, I have taken each Suite one at a time, and discussed some of these more individual issues.

Suite 1: Which version is my version?

Suite 2: Reflections on a recording of a live performance

Suite 3: Sacred or Secular

Suite 4: The practice and preparation process

Suite 5: Performing using Scordatura

Suite 6: Overcoming the technical challenges

The 6 Solo Bach Suites for Cello

We don't know much historical fact about the composition of the Suites. Like the 6 solo violin sonatas and partitas that preceded them, Bach wrote, or at least started writing them in 1720 while he was employed as the chapel master for Prince Leopold in Cöthen. Here, he was responsible not only for music at church, but also for that at the court, and this gave him the opportunity to experiment with various forms of instrumental music. However, there is no evidence to suggest that they were written for a special occasion, or for a particular performer, and probably, they were never performed publicly in his lifetime.¹

We have to consider why he might have written these works. In the early 1720, before they were written, his first wife died. Bach was a deeply religious man and one can speculate that this major loss would have resulted in an inward turn to his God for comfort in his grief. Perhaps as well as a personal project, it was also a technical challenge for him. It was a new genre, and perhaps something of an experiment for Bach. To write music for a solo voice, the cello, in a way to give the impression that there are actually several voices in polyphony is a challenge for the greatest of composers. In these Suites, Bach introduces and develops many different musical voices in amazing complexity.

The original manuscripts of the works have not been found, and only copies of the original exist. Much of the preparation for playing the Suites is in looking at the different copies, understanding them and making choices about what Bach's musical intentions actually were. The copies made are varying in their clarity and it is often difficult to decipher even which note is intended, let alone the differing slurrings.

The Bärenreiter's Scholarly Critical Performing Edition includes 5 different sources of Bach's manuscripts as well as a 'blank' copy (it has no bowings at all and also shows the various options of when there are discrepancies between the 5 different sources. This way you can refer to the sources and make your own choices with bowings, phrasings and tempo markings.

The sources provided are

- A: Anna Magdalena Bach, manuscript copy (1727-1731)
- B: Johann Peter Kellner, manuscript copy (1726)
- C: anonymous copy (second half of the 18th century)
- D: anonymous copy (late 18th century)
- E: First Edition, Paris (1824?)

Source A is almost definitely copied from Bach's original manuscript, but Source B is closer to Bach's autograph in terms of time. These are the 2 editions that I refer to the most.

As applied to instrumental music, the term Suite in the 18th century was used to describe a collection of dances in a loosely structured series. Each of these dances,

¹ Isserlis, 2007

although now separated from its function as dance music, still held characteristic features from the original dance, with particular regard to rhythm. The sequence of dances could originally be altered at will but Bach used a fixed sequence of 4 contrasting dances: the Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and then the Gigue with some other optional dances placed between the Sarabande and Gigue. In Suite's 1 and 2, he uses a pair of Menuets, in Suites 3 and 4, a pair of Bourées and in Suites 5 and 6, a pair of Gavottes. Each Suite begins with a Prelude, before any of the dances, a practice that had spread from Germany to France².

The Prélude (the term comes from the French) was originally wholly improvised by the performer, but later became composed. It kept its free and improvisatory style. The role of the Prelude was to establish the key and also the mood of what would follow. The Preludes in these Suites (particularly the 1st, 3rd, 4th and 6th) emphasize the element of virtuosity of the instrument with arpeggiation, barriolage and artful figuration. Compared to the dance movements, the préludes offer greater freedom to the player in choices of tempo and rubato to enhance the musical expression³.

The Allemande (french for 'German' dance) was a serious dance in duple time. It is one of the more complex dances characterized by a short upbeat leading to a strong first beat, weaker second beat, and the third and fourth beats leading back to the first⁴. The allemandes in Bach's Suite fall into 2 types: fast and cheerful, and slow and restrained⁵.

The Courante (from the French *courir* and the Italian *correre*, meaning 'to run') is a triple time dance. The french dance was usually slow and dramatic, where as the Italian version is faster in tempo and more lively. All the Courantes in these Suites, with the exception of the 5th seem to be more representative of the Itallian version⁶ despite that in 4 manuscript sources Bach consistently uses the French term as a title⁷.

The Sarabande is dance in triple time characterized by its emphasis and expressive use of the strong second beat. It is a serious and slow processional dance. The distinctive rhythm of the sarabande is comprised of a dotted crotchet followed by a quaver⁸.

The Gigue (from the English *jig* and Old French *giguer*, possibly meaning 'to gambol') originates from the British Isles. The Italian *giga* which emerged towards the end of the 17th century has a 12/8 meter and proceeds with regular quaver movement in regular 4 bar phrases. The French *gigue* was usually in 6/4 or 6/8 and

² Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

³ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

⁴ Isserlis 2007

⁵ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

⁶ Isserlis, 2007

⁷ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

⁸ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

characterised by dotted rhythms, passages of imitation and irregular phrase lengths. Despite the French titling Bach uses the Italian setting of the gigue in his cello Suites, except for in the 5th Suite which is French in style⁹.

Additional and optional movements in these Suites include the Menuet, Bourée and Gavotte. The Menuet is a French dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. The name refers to the small steps taken during this dance, they have a steady tempo and a stately, elegant character. The Bourée is a duple time French dance in a moderate tempo with a crotchet upbeat. The Gavotte, like the Bourée is also French. It is in duple time, but starts on the second main beat of the bar.

⁹ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

Suite No.1 in G major: Which version is my version?

My performance concept for the 1st Suite and opening of the Suite was to perform the work as the sun is setting with only candlelight in the church. I had hoped to perform the work from memory, but with time constraints on my preparation this wasn't possible, and so I arranged a small light for my music.

The concept turned out to be more effective than I had anticipated, as during my performance the sun was setting in the church window behind the stage at the top of the church. Audience members commented on this being quite special. Many of the audience were members of this local church. I think this was a special and unique experience for them to hear live music in 'their' church.

Reflections on my performance:

3rd June, 2013

It is a relief to be on stage. I have felt tense and stressed throughout day, as I am organizing printing of the programs at the last minute and trying to practice other suites for the week ahead. My biggest worry is that the audience will be bored, even though I have recently played this suite to a friend who is a cellist, who has said this is not a problem, and to just be comfortable and do more of what I do. However, knowing that the majority of this particular audience are not trained in music, and have not been exposed to so much live classical music in the immediate local area (small rural villages) I am worried about the accessibility of the genre to them.

Anyhow, on stage, I am struck with the realization that the audience really wants to be there and they also really wants to enjoy it. It is a very positive atmosphere and not remotely intimidating. There are many familiar faces from the local area.

I run through the Suite in the church a couple of hours before hand. There is no separate room with a door to be back stage, only a space that is separated from the main body of the church with a curtain so its not really possible to play "back stage" as the audience can hear really hear you. So I mainly do some light warm ups away from my cello, and only tune my cello. In the end the most nerve wracking part is speaking a short welcome to the audience, and then my nerves and stress mainly disappear.

The darkness and the only focus of light on my stand was great for my performance focus. I had a real sense of being the focal point of the busy church; audience and the displays of art created by local school children. It is dusk as I begin and the sun is setting in the church window behind me.

This is definitely the Suite that I feel most comfortable with, but it also the most well known and this has its challenges. The hardest movement for me is the Prelude. There are so many different interpretations and opinions on how this should be played. In my preparation it was useful to explore these various "versions" and possibilities by listening to recordings and seeing the tempos, bowings and phrasings used by other cellists.

As an experiment, I listen to several different recordings of the Suite. I took the Prelude and compared the tempo and bowings (as best as I could tell!) with the first

bars of the Prelude. It was interesting to hear the range of "versions" which exist within the opening bars.

Figure 1: Suite I, Prelude bars 1-6

BWV 1007

Prélude Johann Sebastian Bach

E: All^o. Moderato

Frans Helmerson	Crotchet=74 Though, of all the recordings, his feels the most like it is in 2, not 4. He seems to be slurring 8 notes to each bow so it is very legato.
Pierre Fournier	Crotchet=53. He starts with huge rubato over the first 3 notes. He seems to be slurring the first 3 notes, and then the remaining 5.
Truls Mørk	Crotchet=70. He slurs the first 3 notes together, and separates the remaining 5.
Ralph Kirschbaum	Crotchet=71. It sounds very legato, and I think hes slurs 3 notes and the 5 after, like Fournier.
Emma Ferrand	Crotchet=64 She seems to use a variety of slurrings, sometimes 3 slurred and 5 separate, other times 1 alone and then 3 slurred followed by 4 separate.
Yo Yo Ma	Crotchet=70 He slurs the first 3 notes, and the the remaining 5 are separate.
Rostropovich	Crotchet=92 This is the fastest recording I have heard. He slurs the first 3 and separates the remaining 5 semiquavers.
Casals	Crotchet=56 Like Fournier he uses a lot of rubato. It often doesn't sound like regular semiquavers at all, it is nearly dotted in its unevenness! He slurs all 8 notes to a bow, even in this slow tempo!
Steven Isserlis	Crotchet=88. He slurs 3 notes and the remaining are separate.

Robert Cohen

Crotchet=56 He plays with all separate bows. It is slow, even but very full¹⁰

There is a wide range of tempo choices, use of rubato, and choices of slurrings. My version was at crotchet=75 and as you can see from Figure 1, I slurred the first 3 notes together and separated out the remaining semiquavers. This seems to be a standard choice amongst cellist and I think this helps emphasises the feeling of 2 in a bar. I find that playing it all separate bows interrupts the implied line of the phrase, and slurring it all seems to "paint all the notes with same brush" as well as being much more difficult. I tried not to use too much rubato, especially in the opening bars, and tried to create a feeling of 2 in a bar, rather than 4.

3rd June, 2013

I instantly know that I have chosen a too slow tempo and the opening of the Prelude. However, the sound speaks and I just try to focus on the musical line within this tempo. My thoughts thereafter are reminding myself to remain focused, and really try to concentrate/focus the characters of each dance. I find this is one of the biggest challenges; to remain focused and not be distracted throughout the work. This is of course always a challenge, but here as a Solo instrument, there is no room for faltering.

The Allemande and Courante go well but I am less satisfied with the Sarabande, feeling that I cant make it calm enough from the start at least, it takes a few bars to settle.

I feel very aware of my movements and page turns etc in between each of the movements, I think because I am in the spotlight! My teacher from when I was studying at the Royal Northern College of Music (Emma Ferrand) often talked about how the importance of timing between movements; it is also part of the music and that the time should be a carefully chosen so it is appropriate to what has happened and what will come next. The Menuets both feel good and also feel in control during the Gigue.

20th March, 2014

It is interesting for me to read back on my performance notes now and consider this issue of control that was a big focal point for me during this project. I have recently addressed my bowing technique, and as a result I don't have this feeling of 'losing control' that I experienced a lot previously.

I feel quite self-conscious on the first performance with taking the applause. There is a really nice reaction from the audience, and people are more taken with the music than they expected to be. Many people comment positively on the ambience created by the music with the setting sun and candlelight.

Unfortunately the recording didn't work in its entirety. (I realize I should have had some practice runs with the person in charge of the video!)

¹⁰ For recording details, see discography

Suite No.2 in D minor: reflections on a recording of a live performance

I spent the morning prior to the performance warming up and playing through. After the nerves of the previous evening I felt slightly more ready in my mind for this performance. It was an afternoon concert, and so I didn't have the whole day to worry and become more nervous. I decided to play through completely in the venue. The venue was a new chapel, with a really generous acoustic. Unlike the other churches which at most offer the alter step they have a stage for concerts and so for once I'm raised above the audience. I felt really comfortable and focused. I felt that the performance went really well. I was in control technically and felt able to express myself musical and with a strong warm connection to the audience. It was the third concert and there were audience members from the previous performances returning to hear more. It isn't so often these churches have concerts at all, and if they do it is rarely classical music, so I think the locals were making the most of the opportunity.

I listened back to the recording in December which was nearly 6 months after the concert. I wanted to reflect on my performance objectively so I would be able to identify issues for improvement in future performances.

Generally I was quite pleased with the recording of this live performance. However, I found many issues with my basic cello technique that I was less satisfied with. Since completing the series I have been studying with a new teacher, and taken a new approach to my technique. So I could hear things in the recording that I knew to be simple technical issues, and not issues of interpretation. I was instantly certain that if I performed the Suite again now, many of the problems I heard on the recording would no longer be an issue. It was both interesting and frustrating to listen to myself 6 months ago, but with new knowledge, and understand the limitations I had at this time.

There are several technical issues I had been working with between the performance and listening back to the recording 6 months later. For example, I had been working a lot with improving the point of contact between my bow and the string, improving and increasing sound production along the whole bow, during bow changes and between string crossings. I had adjusted my bow hold, and right arm technique so that the weight of my arm is directed to the stick through my first finger and the movement of the bow is coming from one simple movement not several different ones. I had also been looking at the exact mechanics of the technical preparation required before and after string crossings and bow changes. I had also been adjusting and economising my left hand technique to reduce tension and improve agility and security. Previously, I was concerned with the weakness of my 4th finger. However, since the festival, the altering of my approach with my left hand had helped with this. It was actually not that it was weak, but more that I had been using the rest of my hand ineffectively. I was often using only my 4th finger to hold down the string, instead of supporting it with the rest of the hand being down on the string behind the 4th finger, as if ready to play. Therefore it was difficult to have a relaxed hand and also, more unnecessary movement was required to move even by step to another note.

Besides these issues with my very much changed technique, I was quite happy with my interpretation and felt I captured the character and mood of the various movements of the Suite well. Below are my reflections on the recordings.

20th March, 2014

Prelude from Suite No. 2 in D minor ([link to recording in appendix.](#))

Generally the sound is warm, clear and resonant. The character is calm and melancholic and it has good steady tempo. I can clearly hear the intention in the shape of the lines, and I bring out the different voices well. I feel like this could be even more obvious but it is quite nice with its understated simplicity.

The technical issues are that some of the semiquavers seem starved of sound, and I can hear that the contact on the A string is not always good. Every now and then I hear a weird tense vibrato and the intonation in the higher register (bars 44-47) isn't perfect.

Allemande

It begins well, with a strong contrasting mood to the Prelude. I think I capture the character I intended well; it is proud, and serious and strict in tempo.

The technical issues are some small intonation issues usually on the A string and that the string crossings aren't always clean.

Courante ([link to recording in appendix](#))

I wanted this movement to have more forward energy than the Allemande, with a feeling of being more positive, and wanting to move on to something new. With this in mind I am now surprised about how off the string I decided to play it. I remember experimenting with this in my practice, but on hearing it now I feel that this character would be better achieved if it had been more on the string. My last note dies before it should, as if doesn't resonate properly, or perhaps I am already thinking about the page turn or starting the Sarabande too early.

Sarabande

When I play the Sarabande, I wanted to create a picture of great beauty but one that is tinted with sadness and regret. The tempo is good and it feels calm and expressive, though it could be exaggerated even more. It's interesting to listen too and the mood is completely different to that of the Allemande and Courante.

The technical issues I can hear that the sound and resonance of the double stops is not always as ringing and open as they could be.

Menuets 1 and 2

The Menuets sound light in character after preceding movements. The second Menuet has a particularly gentle lilting and sweeter feel. The return of the Menuet is stately and feels more sure than the first time around. The pulse seems more steady and secure than the first time, which seems a little slow to start with, and then rushed every now and then.

Gigue

It has a similar lightness, and elegance of the preceding Menuets but it is also serious and resolute like the earlier movements. The opening sounds well, I have a strong pulse, good contact with the string

and I like the spirit and character. However, often the third beat comes slightly earlier than it should, resulting in a slightly panicked feeling, especially during the awkward double-stopped semiquaver passages. This improves after the repeat and the shapes of the musical lines are much clearer as a result.

Overall, I feel that musically my playing was very free and expressive with clear intentions in the direction of phrases and mood. It is interesting to listen to and the sound is generally good. The problems come with the small technical issues that I have, and am now currently solving. I remember doing a lot of practise with the metronome to try and keep the faster movements under control, but in fact my pulse is not bad, it was just some small technical limitations with contact, and tension than mean I wasn't completely in control.

Suite No.3 in C major: Sacred or Secular

Bach spent his entire life in Germany working as church musician. Bach echoed the convictions of Luther, claiming that "Music's only purpose should be for the glory of God and the recreation of the human spirit"¹¹.

The Solo Suites are the subject of much discussion as to whether or not they are secular or sacred works. Although they were not written directly for a religious purpose, much of Bach's music was, and so I think it is interesting to consider that these might have a religious subtext. The British cellist Steven Isserlis writes in the sleeve notes of his CD of the Suites:

So, despite the abstract purity of the music—and in no way undermining that quality—I have always felt instinctively that there was a story behind the suites. The profound sadness of the fifth, for instance, has always made me think of the Passion of Christ, the loneliness of the Sarabande—that inexplicable movement, without chords, with no real melody, and with no particular rhythmic events, which has nevertheless become the most famous movement in all the suites—seeming to depict Christ's darkest moments on the Cross. And then the sonorous bells at the beginning of the sixth suite have always brought to mind the joy of the Resurrection. Gradually this feeling began to expand, particularly after I'd read some of the pioneering works of Professor Helga Thöne, who has detected references to Lutheran Chorales in the partitas and sonatas for solo violin; I am sure that they are embedded in the cello suites as well. Furthermore, Professor Thöne has suggested that the works for violin are tied to specific Christian festivals; again, I feel that this could apply equally to the cello suites. The idea of expressing religious devotion through dance is certainly not unusual in baroque music; many of the movements of Biber's famous 'Mystery Sonatas' for violin, for instance, are dances—and Bach himself constantly uses dance-forms in his cantatas.

In fact, I have come to think of the suites as 'Mystery Suites', representing the three kinds of 'Sacred Mystery': the Joyful, the Sorrowful and the Glorious. Perhaps this is too Catholic a concept for the Lutheran Bach (although his first settings of Latin texts do date from just after the end of his time in Cöthen); but it fits the expressive journey of the suites perfectly. It would need a proper Bach scholar (which I am most certainly not) to prove this—if indeed it could ever be proved. There are a few suggestions of evidence: the arpeggiated figures of the first Prelude, for instance, are very similar to those—also for cello—in a movement of Bach's Cantata No 56, where they represent the rocking of a ship entering the voyage of life; the Sarabande of the fifth suite is quite strongly reminiscent of a much later work, the tragic 'Et incarnatus est' from the B minor Mass; and so on. But as I say, this is a feeling, not a theory, and I am sure that any evidence I could offer would be questioned, to put it mildly. Furthermore, I endeavoured not to let this feeling affect any of my purely musical decisions. (The only exception came with the chords at the end of the Prelude of the second suite: these are curious—five unadorned chords, lasting a whole bar each, with no question of ornamentation in any of the four manuscripts, and no established pattern that could be continued from earlier in the movement. There is nothing like them in any other suite, and many performers—including myself, in the past—have played broken chords or improvised a melodic line to fill up the sparse texture. Once I had read of the symbolic importance of the

¹¹ Kavanaugh, 1996

Five Wounds of Christ, however, I decided to play them just as they are written—five stark, uncompromising chords.)¹²

Isserlis suggests the following subtext for the Suites:

- “No.1 Joyful Mystery: The Nativity- with its innocence, and a gentle sense of journey
No.2 Sorrowful Mystery: The Agony in the Garden, A tender and lonely meditation ending with a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion
No.3 Glorious Mystery: The Descent of the Holy Spirit. The joyous descending passage of the opening bars is followed by a hymn of praise, exulting in the ‘pure’ key of C major. Perhaps the scales and arpeggios, travelling through almost all related keys, represent the violent winds from heaven that accompanied the appearance of the Holy Spirit?
No.4 Joyful Mystery: The Presentation in the Temple. The arch-like arpeggios seem to suggest a great edifice. This suite as a whole seems to be the most down to earth- perhaps as if portraying Christ’s adoring followers.
No.5: Sorrowful Mystery: The Crucifixion: The arresting narrative opening leads to the only fugue in the suites (albeit only an implied fugue, since there is never more than one voice heard at any time) ending with a powerful ‘tierce de Picardie’ – a concluding transformation from minor to major mode. This suite is the most dramatic of the six- and the closest in spirit to Bach’s two monumental settings of the Passion story.
No.6: Glorious Mystery: The Resurrection. A peal of bells announces that Christ has returned from the dead to bring redemption to mankind. After dark textures of the scordatura lowering of the top string in the 5th Suite, the extra range of the upper fifth in this suite is all the more radiant, ending the suites in a blaze of light”¹³

Isserlis stresses that this subtext is merely a suggestion, and only there for those who might find the images inspiring, as he does. Although I doubt Bach had this exact subtext in mind, I can easily relate the Suites with the different “moods” of Isserlis’s suggested stories/imagery and so I decided to explore the possible sacred aspects and interpretation of this Suite within the context of communion service.

I discussed the placing of the movements within the service with the vicar. We decided that the service should begin with no introduction, only music, the Prelude of course and that the movements be placed in order throughout the service. Then after the greeting and some prayers, I played the Allemande, and before the reading of the gospel; the Courante before. In the space reserved for personal prayer and reflection I played the Sarabande, and whilst people received Communion, the Bourées. We decided the service should end with the music, and not words and so I played the Gigue after the final blessing and dismissal.

As I knew in advance that the Suite was going to interspersed through the service, I felt that in terms of focus this performance might be easier. However, it was a challenge in a different way; to maintain the connection between each of the movements and also in trying to complement or perhaps implement a mood within the church service setting. The service was a communion service, and because of the

¹² Isserlis, 2007

¹³ Isserlis, 2007

time of year, it was also focused on Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit. As Isserlis had chosen this as his subtext for the 3rd Suite, this seemed to be the right Suite for the service.

Acts 2:1-4 New International Version of the Bible.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.¹⁴

My aim with my performance was to embrace the text of the service and try to reflect the emotions the story in the bible evokes. My reflections below are based on the outcomes of this aim, successes and thoughts on how it could have been better. In the end, to me at least, it doesn't matter if Bach intended these Suites as sacred works or not. I think these Suites can reflect and enhance the setting they are played in, and so in this performance context the Suite is a sacred work, but in another, perhaps it isn't

9th June, 2013

One of the first challenges I think about is the time of day! The service is at 10 am, so in order to be warmed up and have had time to relax a little before the service requires an early start. This is tough after a long semester and hard week!

As discussed earlier, I open the service with the Prelude. This feels very natural as the opening descending C major scale is such a statement to draw in the listener. I am sitting at the very top of the church at the alter, which feels quite grand and appropriate for at least the Prelude of this Suite, but at the same time a long way away from congregation/audience.

This particular Allemande has always had to me a feeling of telling a story, or of a journey. It feels natural to play this a starting point in the service, before some prayers and a reading.

The Courante comes just before the gospel. It is a declamatory, celebrating movement, full of joy and it seems perfectly fitted to this context of being "filled" with the holy spirit. I think though on reflection this should have come after the gospel, so that the text is with the congregation as the music plays.

The Sarabande fits perfectly into the church service in a moment of reflective prayer. It is not the first time I have played a Sarabande at a church service. The nature of the Sarabande is reflective, yet strong and calm. Playing this I feel strange to be so far away from the congregation but have to hope that the acoustic carries the sound through.

The Bourées are perhaps the lightest movements in the Suite. In a normal performance I like to play with the timing between the Sarabande and the Bourées, to break the still silence left by the Sarabande with the lighthearted music of the Bourées. However, this is not possible here. I play whilst members of the congregation receive communion. I end up playing extra repeats on the

¹⁴ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+2:1-21> (accessed 2014.03.24)

return of first Bourée, so that there is enough music. This feels a little strange, but it is not the usual concert setting.

Playing the Gigue as the service ends is a lot of fun, especially as I realize whilst playing that I have completed the cycle of the Suites for the week!

Suite 4 in E flat major: The practice and preparation process

During the early stages of my preparation in July 2012 I kept a diary of notes about my practice and preparation. I have now read back over these and reflected on this process, including some extracts from my notes.

1st July, 2012

I begin by looking at the various editions of Bärenreiter's Scholarly Critical Performing Editions to see the possibilities of Bach's intended bowings. I also make a note to look up my DVD copy of Rostropovitch's performance of the works. I listen to Ralph Kirschbaum's recording of the Prelude¹⁵ and am struck by his great sound. It is very free and expressive, with long lines.

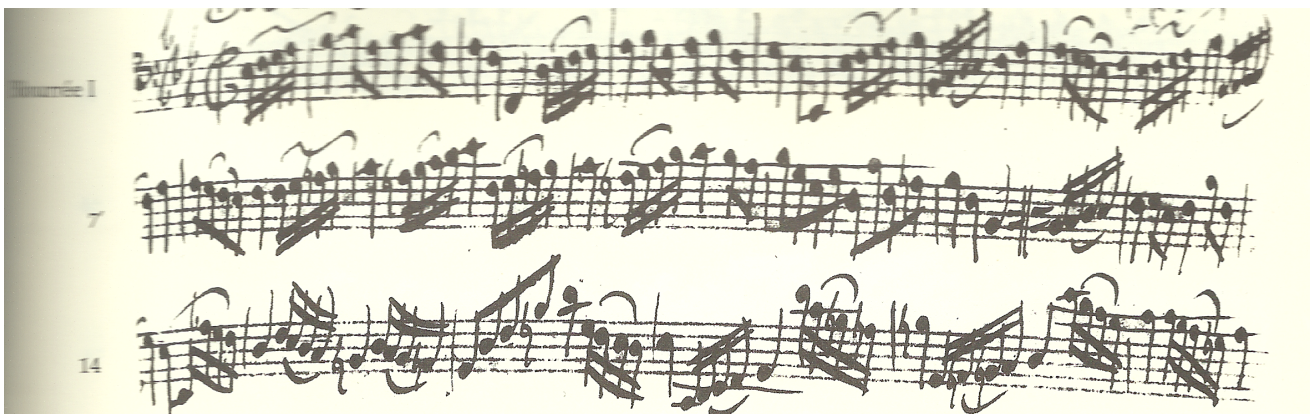
I put in fingerings for the opening of the Prelude, and think about how I could memorise it. I look mainly at the chord sequences; I think that I will use those as mental triggers to aid my memory, beyond finger memory. In general I find memorisation very difficult and so I am unconvinced by my methods!

I used Sources A and B from Bärenreiter's Scholarly Critical Performing Edition when I decided on bowings for the Bourées. When there was a discrepancy between the editions, I usually chose bowings based on edition B because they seemed to make more musical sense to me. I think this could have been a subconscious decision from hearing and liking recordings of interpretations that use these bowings, or perhaps that they suited my playing at the time best.

It can be difficult to read the editions. Although Source A seems clearer to read on first glance, it is often difficult to tell whether a slur is intended to go over 4 semi quavers, or be divided into 1 and 3, or 3 and 1. For example, the last beat of bar 6 in *Figure 3*.

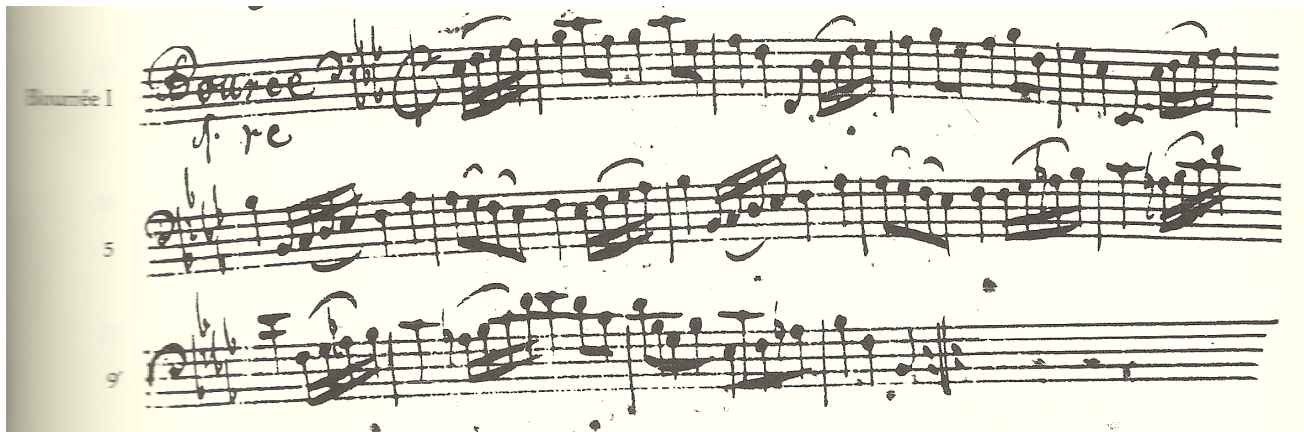
I found the Bourées fun to practise and play, but thought that because of their repetitive nature I would have difficulty in memorising them.

Figure 2: Opening of Bourée No. 1 from Source B, Kellner's edition



¹⁵ See discography

Figure 3. Opening of Bourée No. 1 from Source A, Anna Magdalena's edition



It was a few days before I got a chance to go back to the Suite and I had a frustrating time with the Prelude. My notes read as follows.

10th July, 2012

Don't distort rhythm. Improve bow changes. Think about the impetuous. Make the notes, ring, consider voicing and the different sounds, what about tempo and space! Opening semi-memorized. Looked at chord patterns, phrases. Free improvisatory section: experimented with bowings, and understanding the music, looked for patterns.

However, I was surprised by the success of my previous work on the Bourées, and even worked on memorizing them a little.

I continued to listen to many different recordings of the Suite and found them to all be so different in tempo and style. I really liked the recordings made by Torleif Theeden, Ralph Kirschbaum, and Robert Cohen. I also liked to listen to my previous teacher's recording, Emma Ferrand. Later on, during the writing of this thesis, my favorite recording is Truls Mørk's. It doesn't surprise me that many cellists make several recordings of these works.

Soon after this I began the Sarabande. I had difficulty with the style in deciding whether there should be much separation between the notes or if it should be quite sostenuto and connected.

11th July, 2012

I feel like it is probably more stylistic if I play in a more separated released way. I compare it with the 3rd Suites Sarabande, which I know much better, but actually it seems very different. I'm trying to place the impulse on the 2nd beat as it should be but find it difficult. I don't know how the chords should be played, there are some big double-stopped stretches. I'm changing my mind about the bowings all the time and the intonation is so hard in this key of E flat major. Suddenly the task I have set myself seems very daunting to do alongside my many other projects

One can see from *Figure 4* below that there are lots of options and decisions to be made in every bar. For example, Source B suggests that the last beat of bar 1 should be tied to the first beat of bar 2. However, the first beat of bar 2 is a 3-note chord, and the tied note is at the top of it. It would be usual to play chords from the bass upwards. However with the tied note from bar 1 at the top of the chord, I had to make a decision at how the chord should be played. There are some options; 2 and 2 (ignoring the tie, playing the bottom 2 notes quickly followed by the upper 2 notes so the middle voice is constant), arpeggiating the chord upwards from the bass (again ignore the tie) or alternatively arpeggiating downwards from the tied over note and then back up again, which seemed a little more unusual but perhaps the best solution. Then after this decision, I tried out various bowings and planned out what would work best. This is only within the first 2 bars. As you can see from my part in *Figure 4*, I changed my mind several times, and continue to do so each time I return to it.

Figure 4: Sarabande, my part

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Sarabande". The score is written on a single page with a yellowish background. It features a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked "E: Adagio" and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into systems, with bar numbers 6, 11, 17, 23, and 28 clearly visible. The music is heavily annotated with handwritten notes, including chord symbols (D, E, B, C, A), trills (tr), and various performance markings like "esp" and "V". The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The overall appearance is that of a composer's working draft.

Figure 5: Suite IV, Prelude- the opening bars

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Prelude of Suite IV, BWV 1010, in E major, 4/4 time. The score is written on four staves of music. The title "Suite IV" and "BWV 1010" are printed at the top. The piece is identified as "Prélude" in "E Allegro non troppo". The score is heavily annotated with handwritten notes and fingerings. At the top left, there are notes: "spruce movement: time before strings crossing" and "W bows". At the top right, there are notes: "rest of the album" and "V bows". In the middle left, there are notes: "C/A clefs." and "elbow anticycles". At the bottom left, there are notes: "Pons" and "R/R". At the bottom right, there are notes: "B: - b" and "IV". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines. There are also some numbers and symbols written above and below the notes, such as "x4", "4", "1", "2", "3", "4", "5", "6", "7", "8", "9", "10", "11", "12", "13", "14", "15", "16", "17", "18", "19", "20", "21", "22", "23", "24", "25", "26", "27", "28", "29", "30", "31", "32", "33", "34", "35", "36", "37", "38", "39", "40", "41", "42", "43", "44", "45", "46", "47", "48", "49", "50", "51", "52", "53", "54", "55", "56", "57", "58", "59", "60", "61", "62", "63", "64", "65", "66", "67", "68", "69", "70", "71", "72", "73", "74", "75", "76", "77", "78", "79", "80", "81", "82", "83", "84", "85", "86", "87", "88", "89", "90", "91", "92", "93", "94", "95", "96", "97", "98", "99", "100".

I attended the Aurora course in Trollhätten in August 2012, where I had lessons with Robert Cohen. Whilst I didn't play any Bach to him I did talk to him a little about the tempo/freedom in the Prelude of this 4th Suite. His opinion was that it should be really strict, so that the interesting rhythms Bach creates with the harmonic changes are

brought to the foreground. Therefore, the first 2 notes of each of the opening bars, which are often distorted on many recordings, perhaps due to the large (and expressive) interval between the notes, shouldn't be. After this, I used my metronome in practice to ensure that even if I eventually chose not to, that I could play the opening in tempo.

19th August, 2012

In my lessons he talks a lot about improving posture in order to free the sound (I tell him I am really unhappy with my A string sound). We work a lot with positions, of my arm, the cello, and feeling in the left hand. We talk a lot about sensation and using that for memory, and to use sensation in practice to help your muscle acknowledge when something is wrong, so as to associate it with a bad sensation... and therefore not repeat it! Later we talk about left hand rhythm in shifts, and knowing when each hand should be the one leading.

I practiced the Prelude, very much working on memorization. I found that although I wasn't able to memorise it very successfully, my analysis of the chords and researching the technicalities of playing them definitely improved my playing.

When I returned to Gothenburg in September I played the Prelude for my new teacher, Hampus Linderholm. We talked mainly about technical adjustments to do with preparing string crossings better and adjusting my elbow arm height to help with this. We decided to have a technical overhaul of my playing, and Hampus helped me create a warm up routine, with bow work, shifts, and finger strengthening/agility exercises. To help me with this I also bought *The Essential Warm-up Routine for Cellists*, (CelloLid.com CL116I) written by cellist Mats Lidström. I decided that if Bach is going to take up a lot of my practice time, I needed to make sure that the rest of my repertoire really complemented my technical progress and stretched me in other areas of my playing; for example playing studies in higher positions, as (apart from the 6th Suite) the Bach doesn't really cover this. I started this by selecting *Piatti's Caprice No. 3*, which is a study that uses lots of double stopped octaves in higher positions and is really technically demanding on the thumb. I

Later in September I made a start on the Allemande.

26th September, 2012

I think it seems quite straightforward. I consider sound, bow weight, and arm height for string crossings from all the master classes I've had this summer. I look for a free sound, looking for and trying to remember the physical sensations (Robert Cohen). I really consider my posture as I have some tension in the right side of my neck. After 2 weeks of intensive orchestral playing I feel like I need to make more adjustments than normal.

I bow the Courante, and try to make some of the difficult decisions that need to be made!

Figure 6: my Courante bowings

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Courante" in E major, Allegro, 3/4 time. The score is written on a single staff in bass clef. It consists of four lines of music, with measure numbers 4, 8, and 11 indicated. The score is heavily annotated with handwritten notes and symbols. Above the staff, there are various bowing directions: "V" for downbow and "v" for upbow. Some notes are marked with an asterisk and "C.D." (Crescendo/Decrescendo). There are also notes like "C.D.E: tr" and "B: tr". In the second line, there are markings "1 2 3 4" above a group of notes. In the third line, there is a note marked "A:" and another marked "B:". In the fourth line, there are markings "2", "3", and "4" above notes. The handwriting is in black ink on a yellowed paper background.

I arranged a lesson with my teacher Johan Stern as I felt I wasn't moving progressing quickly enough. We spent some time on the Prelude with the bow crossings, and he questioned many of my bowing choices in the Allemande. We then spent the most time on the Sarabande talking about the style, which was really useful. He helped me with the playing of the chords: suggesting they could be more spread (like a lute), starting at the bass and going up and then also back down again. Although I wasn't well warmed up for the lesson and I didn't feel I play well, it was good to play to someone and experience how they sounded under the pressure of nerves. I found that if I can't find the sound I want, it is difficult to focus on anything else and problems come up that normally don't. The lesson gave me a lot of things to think about in the next stages of my preparation.

I performed the Prelude, Sarabande and Bourées at a concert in November 2012. It was a concert at Frampton on Severn Church (one of the 6 Severnside churches) and I played a mixed program of light repertoire as well as the Bach.

3rd November, 2012

It is a friendly audience but it feels quite stressful still. I feel like there is nowhere to hide, and I find myself constantly scrutinizing my performance throughout which makes it twice as difficult and impossible to enjoy. I have about 5 seconds during the Sarabande where I feel like I am really managing to communicate and play exactly how I want it to sound, but the instant I recognize that, I am back to scrutinizing my playing. Despite this, I know the performance is ok and the reception from the audience is good, but I want to hear the recording in order to be truly objective.

I listened back to my recording briefly. It is much better than I experienced on stage. The excess noises from the cello, during string crossings etc are not heard at all and I don't look remotely stressed. This in itself surprised me, with my knowledge of my emotional and psychological state at that point! I looked like I'm enjoying performing a lot in the Bourées when in fact I was in constant fear of tripping up over the runs. My main criticisms of the performance were of my intonation (though less so in the Sarabande) particularly in the Prelude during the chord sequences. It seemed like I am often economizing too much in the shifts and at the cost of the intonation. My other feeling was that although it was interesting musically, the overall musical direction and line of each movement wasn't clear enough; I can't hear a strongest moment or an emphasis of a climatic point amongst the complexity of the implied melodic and harmonic lines. Perhaps this is because I hadn't fully decided on this yet or hadn't fully understood the music yet. It could also be that the music doesn't need to have a strongest moment/climatic point, but my impression of the recording is that my interpretation wasn't quite convincing and I feel it lacks direction of some kind.

My next step in the process of learning this Suite was to revisit the Courante and Allemande; consolidate and further my understanding of the Prelude, Sarabande and Bourées, and then learn the Gigue.

Suite No.5 in C minor: Performing using Scordatura

In this Suite, Bach has chosen to employ Scordatura, which is the alteration to the standardized tuning of a string instrument. Here the highest string, the A is tuned down one tone to a G. It's not certain why he called for this here, but there is a special dark timbre created by the lower string, and there are many different possibilities for chordal playing created. Scordatura was frequently used in violin repertoire in the 17th and 18th centuries, but was much rarer in cello repertoire. Another theory is that this Suite is based on an earlier composition for an instrument tuned C-G-d-g, perhaps a lute¹⁶.

The scordatura was actually less of a problem than I anticipated. My cello resonated in a different way and it seemed to respond well. The biggest problem was in preparing the work. There were 2 options with scores. I could either use a part written with the real pitches, or a part that writes notes as if the upper string was still an A, even though it sounds as a G. I decided to take the second option. I think this was the best option for the time I had available though it often felt a little weird when reading chords as on paper it looked like a dischord, but in reality it was actually an open resonate chord. Although I don't have perfect pitch, occasionally my ear was also disturbed by hearing a different note to the one I have anticipated from reading the score. However, it was not a huge problem and I think would have been far more difficult and time consuming to read the other part, especially when swapping back to normal tuning for the other Suites immediately after.

For me, this is the darkest and most dramatic of the Suites. The emotional intent in the writing seems so clear, intense and extreme, almost in a romantic style but within the strict structure and form of the Baroque dance styles.

The Prelude is in 2 parts, a free and expressive introduction followed by a fugue. The composition is simply astounding, in that he has managed to write a fugue with many voices, for a solo instrument.

For me, the poignant Allemande seems to be a voice calling out, with pain and desperation, and the Courante that follows is equally dark and turbulent.

The Sarabande is unique in that Bach uses a single melodic line, with no chords. It is so pure, yet extreme emotionally, full of love and pain.

The Gavottes have a committed air of resolve and the Gigue that follows seems to be resigned, and accepting of its fate as it dances to a close.

10th June, 2013

This is the 'freshest' suite i.e the one I had never played in public at all. But I really love it and have loved practicing it. The cello resonates in a completely different way. So, I was excited to play, even though I was worried that I didn't know it well enough.

I played through at home, and then just tried small segments at the church. My arms and hands were very sore on this day. I knew it was just because of the huge volume of playing I had been doing, as well as being under stress, and perhaps with not quite enough preparation.

¹⁶ Schwemer & Woodfull-Harris, Bärenreiter Preface, 2000

I was perhaps over obsessed with tuning my cello. I wanted to make sure its completely settled at the scordatura pitch and wasn't going to alter too much, as it would have been difficult to retune on stage. This was the first time I used scordatura and so I didn't have any previous experiences to relate to.

It was a really sunny evening, and the weather doesn't seem to match the mood of the Suite, even though this church is the darkest and most ornate of the six, which I had felt fitting to the Suite. Anyway, the performance goes well, especially considering it is a first performance. To me, it seems to be one of the most openly expressive, dark and brooding in character, and in this respect it is easier to focus on the interpretation and not get caught up in the technical difficulties. Perhaps the most difficult movement is the Sarabande. It is so simple, and short, it is hard to create the sound and line I want from the very beginning.

Suite No.6 in D major: Overcoming the technical challenges

This is by far the most technically challenging of all the Suites in terms of its virtuosity. The high register alone is unusual; the other Suites rarely go above the neck position. It is thought that this Suite was written for a 5 stringed instrument closer in size to the viola and known as the violoncello piccolo. Bach called for the violoncello piccolo in several of his cantatas written in 1724 and 1725, so it is more than likely that this Suite was also intended for that instrument¹⁷. The violoncello piccolo has an extra string, an E, a 5th above the normal A string of the cello. Many cellists use a 5 stringed instrument when performing this work, but equally many do not. To play the work on 4 strings is much more technically demanding as it requires the cellist to play a lot in thumb position across all strings, with lots of contrapuntal writing and chords. The highest note is in the Prelude, an F sharp, two above middle C, which is extraordinarily high compared to the rest of the Suites. In preparation for this high register thumb position playing, I warmed up with lots of scales in thumb positions, including scales in 3rds and 6ths and octaves.

Another challenge is the bariolage bowing which features in the Prelude. Bariolage bowing is an instrumental technique that involved quick alternation between a static note and a moving note. In the opening of the Prelude Bach alternates moving notes with the open D string to create a tonic pedal. Later, in bar 12, when he jumps up a fifth in pitch, the player should use thumb position to be able to cross the string and avoid shifting up and down the A string (difficult in such a quick tempo). Later in b.22, the static note in the bariolage is an E, a fifth above the A string. On a 5-string instrument this would be an open string and so more straight forward but on a 4 string instrument it is more difficult. It is a long movement, with strong rhythmic impetus and no moment to pause. Bach used bariolage bowing before in earlier Suites, for example in the Gigue of *Suite No. 3 in C major*, but never to such an extent as this. It is a challenge to maintain the separate voices for such a long time, especially when neither of the notes is an open string. I worked a lot under tempo with the bowing patterns, experimenting with the height of my right elbow to find the best position for both strings, and ensuring that I kept good contact. I also practised the passage as if it were double stopped chords, and carefully planned out the fingerings in my left hand, so that I was preparing the notes before playing them as much as possible. (Figure 7)

The biggest challenge in the Allemande was to maintain the pulse, and find the phrases in the highly complicated notated ornamentation and series of double and triple stops which creates contrapuntal moving parts. I worked a lot with a metronome at different tempos, and sometimes with a semiquaver, quaver and crotchet pulse so I became more aware of the whole bar structure. In the score, a whole bar can take up a whole line of music, because the music is so complicated. I also simplified the music to find what I felt to be the main melodic line, and then tried to replicate this again with all multiple stops. I also worked a lot with keeping my bow changes legato and with economy of movement in my left hand especially so as to minimise disturbing the music with technical issues. (Figure 8)

¹⁷ Schwemer and Woodfull-Harris, *Bärenreiter Preface*, 2000

Figure 7: Suite VI Prelude. Bars 1-25

and - elbow
lower lines!

Prélude
E: Allegro

A cinq cordes

1 3 6 9 12 15 18 21 24

more slow
rhythm
voicing
timbre
balance weight

elbow over!

f *p* *cresc.* *relax* *voicing* *rhythm* *timbre* *balance weight*

3 3 4 2 A: 1 3
4 1
3 1 3
3 1 4
3 1 2 4
3 1 2 3
3 1 2 3

A: *B:* *E:*

**) Vgl. zu diesem Satz die in den Quellen A, C, D und E überlieferten dynamischen Angaben. / See also the dynamics found in sources A, C, D and ment.*

Figure 8: Suite VI Allemande. Bars 1-4

The Courante is perhaps the most straight forward of the movements as it doesn't have the issue of multiple stops. However it has a quick tempo and there are lots of quick shifts up and down the A string (these would be across to the E string on a violoncello piccolo). My biggest problems with this movement was control of the tempo, and I worked a lot with metronome, examining the use of my bow and the speed of my shifts to keep both hands as relaxed as possible.

The Sarabande is made up of entirely multiple stops (2,3, and 4 notes) which creates several continuous contrapuntal moving parts. There are always 2 or more parts, and often quadruple stops in the higher register which means one must use the thumb a lot. This is technically awkward and it is difficult to emulate the resonance of the chords that use open strings, for example in bar 9. It also takes a careful consideration to figure out the different voices and work out how to split some of the chords. In my preparation I often played only the main implied melodic line, so that I was really clear with how I wanted to phrase the music. I took all of the multiple stops individually and researched the best approach with my bow (how to divide the stop: arpeggiated, 2 and 2 and etc) and also to find the most released position for my left hand. Again I worked a lot with my metronome, to help find the calmest shifts and bow control within a strong steady pulse.

Figure 9: Suite VI, Sarabande bars 1-10

The Gavotte has the same technical issue with multiple stops as in the Sarabande. The quick tempo also means it is even more difficult to produce a warm resonant sound on every note. However, the second Gavotte is comparatively easy and a light relief to play amongst the rest of the Suite. As with the Sarabande, I investigated each of the multiple stops and how best to play them. I played the implied melodic line alone, and also the bass line so I could be clear with the phrasings in each of the voicings. I worked a lot with keeping my left hand relaxed and light, especially for the stops where I was using the thumb.

The Gigue is in a quick tempo with many semiquaver passages. Like the other movements in the Suite the high register means there are a lot of awkward shifts, and multiple stops in unusually high positions that require use of the thumb. I worked with this movement in the same way as the rest of the Suite; under tempo with the metronome, analysing the stops and the best technical approach to them, marking out the phrases and exploring the different implied melodic lines, then trying to find as much space and time as possible within the fast tempo.

This Suite was my penultimate performance of the week and I performed it alongside a slideshow of photos taken by my friend Karen Skeats. Examples of the photos can be found in the Appendix, alongside her artistic aims and background to the photos which are in the program notes for the concert.

10th June, 2013

This Suite was my main practice focus for the spring semester and I performed the work at a lunchtime concert in Gothenburg, as well as the Sarabande and Gavottes on a separate occasion earlier in the semester. I felt like I knew the Suite very well, but yet it was still a huge technical challenge and test of stamina. If I didn't focus well, or had taken a too fast tempo I could go really badly and I was also quite exhausted by this point in the week. I spent the morning doing slow practice, as well as mentally looking over the part, thinking about what I should remember when performing. On the same day, I went to the local school for a short concert, and then straight to the church to meet Karen the photographer. We tried a run through to ensure that the progression of photos lasted about the right time, and that she could control the technology surrounding it. We had a few problems with the computer that controlled the projector, but it is now fixed. It goes well, but I was very aware that I was then exhausted and nervous about the performance later in the day.

The audience seemed to enjoy the performance though I am not hugely pleased. I felt that the dress rehearsal went much better and that I should have had the dress in the morning and then rested in the afternoon. However, I know it has gone as well as it could have in the time I have had, and that the audience enjoyed the collaboration of the music with the photos.

Evaluation and Reflections, looking forward

I knew the project was a huge undertaking, but felt with careful planning and time management I could achieve it. Certainly in the final months I felt extremely stressed to simply learn even just the notes of the 5th Suite, and feel I could have done planned my preparation much better. However, this is was a point of learning of me in itself. Now, I know the notes, and what is required for a performance on one level. If and when I perform these works in the future, I feel that I now know exactly what is required in terms of preparation and would be able to plan my schedule much more effectively. Since completing the concerts, I have often been required to play a solo item at various events. These Suites are indispensable for this purpose: movements from the Suites stand well alone, and they are all incredible music that can touch and move an audience. It is good to feel that this project has had provided me with useful repertoire and performance skills for the long term

I really learnt from this project that the practice and preparation process needs time, not just for practice but also for performance, reflection, and discussion so that their is time to experiment with the interpretation choices and allow them to settle properly and become my own.

Since the festival I have performed the movements on numerous occasions. Mainly I have used the first 3 Suite as I am most comfortable with these. I would like to revisit each of the works, and become as comfortable with performing the 4th, 5th and 6th Suites as I now am with the first 3.

Performances since the Festival:

5th September, 2013	Suite No.3: Bourèes, Freemasons Concert, Gothenberg
12th October, 2013	Suite No.2: Sarabande & Gigue, Freemasons Concert, Gothenberg
3rd November, 2013	Suite No.2: Sarabande, Alla helgons dag Concert, Västerås
23 November, 2013	Suite No.3: Bourèes, Foyer concert, Västerås Konserthuset
26th January, 2014	Suite No.3: Courante, Allemande & Gigue, Västerås Slott
22nd March, 2014	Suite No.1: Courante, Sarabande, Menuets & Gigue Foyer concert, Västerås Konserthuset
27th March, 2014	Suite No.'s 1, 2, 3, and 4, Solo Mingle Gig
4th April, 2014	Suite No.1: Courante, Sarabande, Menuets & Gigue, Library Concert, Västerås
20th July, 2014	Collaborative Project with Mälardalens Högskola's medical and computer research departments, creating a performance using sensors (triggered by muscle movement from myself, the cellist) to manipulate a video of images, during a performance of Suite No.1 at Norberg Festival.
13th September, 2014	Suite No.1: with the same collaborative video project at Västerås Culture Night.

The research and experimentation I have undertaken with this project has really helped to form my own interpretation. I would like to take this further and experiment and research more around the Suites.

For example I would like to explore memorising the works, make a recording, perform further for different types of audiences i.e school, hospital, prison, outdoor concerts, children, the elderly, teenagers. It would also be interesting to explore the context of the Suites amongst Bach's other works. It would be interesting to make a performance, or series of performances according to this. It would also be interesting to combine these solo works amongst other solo repertoire, for example the solo repertoire by Britten, Kodaly, Vasks, Hindemith and others.

Although I expressed that my interest doesn't really lie in historically informed practice, I now have the feeling that to explore one or more of the Suites with a baroque specialist would be very enlightening. I would gain a lot of knowledge and experience the repertoire differently and this could only be good for my interpretation. I hope I will have this opportunity in the future.

The other area I would really like to explore further is this idea of collaboration. I really enjoyed working with the photographer on the 6th Suite, and seeing how the music inspired her work and vice versa. I have also enjoyed working on a collaborative project using sensors on my muscles to manipulate a film that accompanies my playing. This was with the Medical and IT research departments in Västerås, using the first Bach Suite. It would also be interesting to work with artists, dancers, circus artists, filmographers, or perhaps musicians from non classical backgrounds to create new and interesting projects using this music.

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Appendix

Recordings (not for general publication)

Requests for recordings via a dropbox link can be made to rspargo85@gmail.com

Suite 1 Prelude

Suite 2

Suite 4

Selection from Karen Skeats's Photos and her artistic intention



Karen Skeats is a photographer who grew up in Saul and now lives and works in Bristol. She studied Photographic Art at the University of Wales, Newport.

Interpreting the Mystery - Karen Skeats

This photographic series explores derelict and abandoned buildings, historical and monumental. Once central to our society, all of them functioned as hospitals caring for the sick and unwell. These buildings have stood the test of time, serving their purpose while wars raged and communities changed.

A beacon of safety, relied upon and trusted, they had huge relevance and value to the society of the time. But now they

stand disused, neglected and forgotten, deemed no longer fit for purpose by our fickle nature. Dereliction has set in.

Unoccupied and unseen, here time stands still. Corridors and rooms that were once were a hive of activity, which once held people safe; spaces which bustled with energy and were rife with emotion, now silent and empty, hidden in a state of collapse.

Neglect and decay began on the first day the doors closed for the final time. Slowly, time will take more from these rooms and structures will fall.

There is evidence here within these images, evidence of human activity and the forces of decay. The events and stories of these rooms are unknown to us, their history perishing along with the buildings - we are invited to create our own narrative.

Alongside Ruth Spargo performing Bach's 6th cello suite, these images accompany and complement the rise and fall of the music, the changing pace and mood.

Web: www.karenskeats.co.uk

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Program Notes Cover page and introduction surrounding the Suites

Interpreting the Mystery...

The 6 Solo Suites for Cello

J.S. Bach



The Solo Suites for Cello by Bach are unique works amongst the classical music repertoire. They are both technically and artistically demanding but the biggest challenge of all lies in their interpretation.

We don't know much historical fact about their composition. Like the 6 solo violin sonatas and partitas that preceded them, Bach wrote, or at least started, writing them in 1720 while he was employed as the chapel master for Prince Leopold in Cöthen. Here, he was responsible not only for music at church, but also for that at the court, and this gave him the opportunity to experiment with various forms of instrumental music. However, there is no evidence to suggest that they were written for a special occasion, or for a particular performer, and probably, they were never performed publicly in his lifetime.

We have to consider why he might have written these works. In the early 1720, before they were written, his first wife died. Bach was deeply religious man and undoubtedly this major loss would have resulted in an inward turn to his God for comfort in his grief. Perhaps as well as a personal project, it was also a technical challenge for him. To write music for a solo voice, the cello, in a way to give the impression that there are actually several voices in polyphony is a challenge for the greatest of composers. In these Suites, Bach introduces and develops different musical voices in amazing complexity and then suddenly but inevitably pulls the complexity altogether with a cadence. They are works of genius.

The original manuscripts of the works have not been found, and only copies of the original exist. Much of the preparation for playing the Suites is in looking at the different copies, understanding them and making choices about what Bach's musical intentions actually were. The program cover shows an extract from a copy by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, our closest source to the original material.

The term Suite is used to describe a collection of instrumental dances in the same key. Traditionally, there are usually 4 interrelated dances: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue and then some other optional dances. These are always preceded by a Prelude. The Prelude was originally a

wholly improvised introduction that later became a freely composed introduction. The role of the Prelude was to establish the key and perhaps also the effect of what would follow. The Preludes here emphasize the element of virtuosity of the instrument with arpeggiation, barriolage and artful figuration. Compared to the dance movements, the Preludes offer greater freedom to the player in the use of tempo and rubato to enhance the musical expression

Each of the Suites is different; in their character, story, and mood and I hope to capture the essence of this in my playing. The combination of the music in the space and calm of the church, amidst summer in the beautiful Severnside seems to be so fitting. I'm excited to be performing them for you and I really hope you enjoy my interpretation.

Program Notes from Suite No.1

Monday 3rd June 9:30pm
Candlelight Concert

St James the Great, Saul

Suite No.1 in G major

Prelude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Menuet 1 & 2

Gigue

Probably the most famous of the Suites, the first is simplicity itself. The G major tonality within the writing of the Suite communicates purity and innocence to the listener. The Prelude is a simple, but beautiful statement, and then the Allemande afterwards seems to open up a conversation, or tell a story. The Courante (from the French *courir* and the Italian *correre*, meaning "to run") is lively and joyful. The Sarabande is a little more serious, and slow in tempo but still in the open spirit of the Suite. The pair of Menuets are spritely in rhythm, reminding us these are dance forms, and the second of the pair is the only movement of the Suite not in G major, instead we are in D minor. The Gigue is athletic and brief dance in 6/8 that moves smoothly to the finish.

Program Notes from Suite No. 2

Wednesday 5th June 2pm
With cream teas amongst the Flower Festival
Congregational Church, Frampton-on-Severn

Suite No. 2 in D minor

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Menuet 1& 2
Gigue

Suite No.2 has a sad and mournful feeling to it, perhaps due to its minor tonality.

The Prelude opens in a melodic way, and the music seems to be exploratory, searching in which direction it should go. The Allemande is also serious and dark in character, whilst the Courante is more brilliant. The calm and pure Sarabande has the typical emphasized 2nd beat, moving serenely through to the Menuets. The second Menuet is one of the rare movements that is composed of a single melodic line with no chordal writing. It is also the only movement of this Suite in the major key. It is perhaps a moment of relief from the sad serious nature of the Suite. The Suite ends with a rigorous Gigue.

Program note text from the Order of Service (Suite No.3)

Sunday 9th June 10am

Communion Service

St Mary's Church, Arlingham

Suite No.3 in C major

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Bourée 1 & 2
Gigue

The cellist Steven Isserlis suggests that the expressive journey through the entirety of the 6 Suites marks them as 'Mystery Suites', travelling from the nativity (No.1) to the agony in the garden (No.2), the descent of the Holy Spirit (No.3), the Presentation in the Temple (No.4), the Crucifixion (No.5), to the Resurrection (No.6). Whether one agrees with this theory or not, it is an interesting take which is worth exploring.

The opening descending C major scale puts us firmly in the C major tonality. The choice of means the Suite is notable for its broad, heroic character, and it also allows Bach to make ample use of the Cello's lowest string, the C, and the resonance of the lower strings echoes throughout the Suite.

The Prelude is built on a virtually non-stop sequence of semiquavers, through to the end where there is a series of declamatory chords that draw the music to its climax

The Allemande is an old dance of German origin. Bach emphasizes the pulse here with lively turns, chords and flourishes.

The Courante races past, built virtually non-stop quavers, whilst the reflective Sarabande is extremely slow, moving with dignity and grace.

Bourée no. 1 is jovial and fun in character, whilst no.2, in the minor, is more wistful and reflective. The Suite then culminates in a lively Gigue which dances to a finish in high spirits.

Program Notes from Suite No.4

Tuesday 4th June 8pm

Art Preview

St Mary's Church, Frampton-on-Severn

Suite No.4 in E flat major

Prelude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Bourée 1 & 2

Gigue

The E flat major Suite is perhaps one of the more technically demanding of the Suites.

The Prelude opens proudly, consisting of moving quavers interrupted by an improvisatory cadenza, before returning to the original theme. The various voicings within the theme create different rhythmic emphasis, which gives momentum and life.

The Allemande is a simple and open rhetoric, persuading the listener this way and that. The Courante follows, jovial and rich in sound.

The peaceful Sarabande is more complex than the Sarabandes from the Suites that precede it. It is almost always chordal, with flourishes and embellishments.

The Bourées that follow are lighter in character, dancing throughout, and the Gigue is celebratory, always moving to the end.

Program Notes from Suite No.5

Thursday 6th June 6pm

Pre-summer dinner concert

St Mary's Church, Fretherne

Suite No. 5 in C minor

Prelude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavotte 1 & 2

Gigue

In this Suite, Bach has chosen to employ Scordatura, which is the alteration to standardized tuning of a string instrument. Here the highest string, the A is tuned down one tone to a G. It's not certain why he called for this here, but there is a special dark timbre created by the lower string, and there are many different possibilities for chordal playing created.

For me, this is the darkest and most dramatic of the Suites. The emotional intent in the writing seems so clear to me, intense and extreme, almost in a romantic style but within the strict structure and form of the Baroque dance styles.

The Prelude is in 2 parts, a free and expressive introduction followed by a fugue. The composition is simply astounding, in that he has managed to write a fugue with many voices, for a solo instrument.

For me, the poignant Allemande seems to be a voice calling out, with pain and desperation, and the Courante that follows is equally dark and turbulent.

The Sarabande is unique in that Bach uses a single melodic line, with no chords. It is so pure, yet extreme emotionally, full of love and pain.

The Gavottes have a committed air of resolve and the Gigue that follows seems to be resigned, and accepting of its fate as it dances to a close.

Program Notes from Suite No.6

Suite No.6 in D major

Prelude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavotte 1&2

Gigue

The Sixth Suite was originally written for the violincello piccolo, a slightly smaller cello, with an additional upper string tuned to a fifth above the modern cello's highest string. As performance technique has developed, today it is almost always performed on the standard cello. However, this means it is technically the most challenging of the Suites.

The tonality of the Suite, D major, naturally evokes emotions of joy and triumph, and the cello resonates openly in this key, with the harmonic overtones from the open D and A strings. The form of this Suite is much more free than in the others, with much more virtuosity and cadenza like passages. Even with this virtuosity, the Allemande and Sarabande have the most open feeling of space, beauty and timelessness.