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Meredith Lawrence

Cedarville University, mlawrence@cedarville.edu

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The Influence of the Unaccompanied Bach Suites

Meredith Lawrence
Music and Worship Department
Cedarville University
251 N. Main St.
Cedarville, Ohio 45314 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sandra Yang

Abstract

Bach was very influential in changing the function of the violoncello from an accompanying instrument to a solo instrument, showing the cello's potential in his writing of the unaccompanied cello suites. Throughout the cello's history, the instrument was considered to be primarily an accompanying instrument, playing the basso continuo line of most music. Through research of primary and secondary sources, it was found that during Bach's time in Cöthen, he was given freedom and the resources to compose what he wished. These resources included excellent musicians such as the gambist, played by Abel and the cellist, Linigke. It was most likely that Bach used their knowledge to compose the cello suites and through these suites, Bach helped change the role of the cello to a solo instrument. Although Bach used previous composition styles, such as the dance suite form, he incorporated elements of cello playing that had not been used before. A few examples of these elements include the scordatura tuning of the fifth suite, as well as the call for a five-stringed instrument in the six suite. More detailed elements are the ways in which Bach created different voices in one melodic line. In many of the suites, a two-level line or a theme and accompaniment can be found. Bach creates an accompanying line within the solo line, allowing the cello to display its soloistic possibilities and not to be confined simply playing an accompanying line. Another interesting element would be the different moods and emotions that can be seen in the different suites. Through different keys, rhythms, notes, and compositional styles, Bach creates a unique setting for each suite. Through these different moods, the cello was seen as an expressive and significant instrument that enabled future composers to see the potential in cello composition.

Keywords: J.S. Bach, Unaccompanied Cello Suites, Cello

1. Introduction

The unaccompanied Bach cello suites have become timeless masterpieces that are performed by cellists all around the world. Although they were written sometime between 1717-1723, they were lost to the world until Pablo Casals discovered them in the twentieth century and showed the world how essential these suites are to the cello repertoire. Because of Casals, the world has seen the beauty and intricacy of the suites and how they are unique from other instrumental pieces. According to Wilfred Mellers, the cello suites are the "ultimate manifestation of the 'humanization' of an instrument . . . Its timbre is closest of all instruments to that of a wide-ranging male voice; physically, it calls for movements of arms, trunk and shoulders, so that to play a cello is at once to sing and dance within time."¹ The cello suites were different from all other cello repertoire of his time, as Bach used his impressive skills of composition and acquired new skills to compose the music. Bach was very influential in changing the function of the violoncello from an accompanying instrument to a solo instrument by showing the cello's potential in his writing of the unaccompanied cello suites.

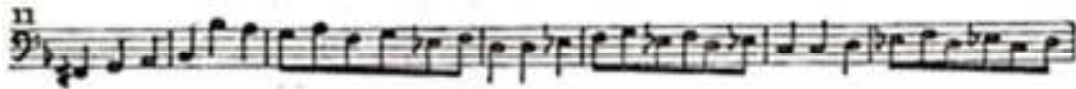
Up until the time of Bach and during his lifetime, the cello's role was primarily that of an accompanying instrument, being classified as a bass instrument. According to Pleeth, "the 'violins' spanned both worlds [religious and secular] with equal ease and from the sixteenth century onwards could hardly be dispensed within either

religious or profane spheres.”² These “profane spheres” included the accompaniment of secular activities such as dancing, processions, ceremonies, and chamber music. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the cello was to play the basso continuo line to make a stark contrast to the solo line. After 1640, the cello became the major basso continuo instrument and an example of this basso continuo playing can be seen Vivaldi’s Spring (See Ex. 1), with the cello playing the bottom line.³



Example 1: Spring, from The Four Seasons, mm. 1-3

Along with playing the basso continuo, the violoncello became popular for mere enjoyment, in the homes of all classes of people. The cello also continued to be an “indispensable member” in the church and chamber ensembles.⁴ Throughout the 1600’s, the cello remained an accompanying instrument, and when it was not playing the basso continuo line, it was played in homes and church services rather than solo performances. During this time, solo music began to be developed for the string family, predominantly in the sonata form, but mostly for the violin.⁵ Unfortunately, the cello did not yet see an increase in its repertoire because it was presumed to be a “clumsy and cumbersome instrument which could be played only in the most rudimentary fashion and . . . could have coped with nothing more taxing than the basso continuo line [the six Bach Suites notwithstanding].”⁶ Writing solo music for the cello was not fully developed until the late eighteenth century, when Luigi Boccherini demonstrated the full potential of solo virtuosity on the cello.⁵ Before the Baroque period, a few pieces for solo cello existed, composed primarily by the composers Giovanni Battista Degli’Antonii (1636-1698), Domenico Gabrielli (1659-1690), and Domenico Galli (1650-1697).⁷ An example of a pre-Bach solo work for cello by Domenico Gabrielli can be seen in Example 2.



Example 2: Ricercari, mm. 11-15

However, these pieces are not similar to Bach’s unaccompanied cello suites as his composition of the suites took the cello repertoire to a new level of literature. Bach most likely was responding to the demand of the people as “both of Bach’s sets look like aristocratic and demanded versions of solo fiddling, elevated to levels of new expressiveness by carefully considered harmonic movement and an intimate knowledge of Italian and, especially in the cello set, French characteristics.”⁸ Furthermore in *The Bach Reader*, Hans David stated, “none of these men [Baltzer, Matteis, Biber] had written unaccompanied music for a stringed instrument on any such scale as even one of the Bach works, let alone such series of them as his two sets of six each.”⁹ As a result, Bach’s cello suites invented a new role for the cello by borrowing elements from the Baroque period, but Bach did not focus solely on accompanying a solo voice, but instead made the cello the primary voice.

2. Background Of Cello Suites

In order to fully understand the function of the cello suites, it is beneficial to study the background of the composition. Although Bach was not a cellist, he still produced a masterpiece and the circumstances surrounding the writing of these suites allowed him to do this. Most scholars believe that Bach wrote the cello suites during his time in Cöthen, which was from 1717-1723. In Cöthen, Bach worked as the Capellmeister for Prince Leopold's court.¹⁰ Bach's duties were to compose music for Prince Leopold's musical soirées, direct and play for a small band of musicians, compose chamber music and teach a few pupils.¹¹ Since the church in Cöthen was Reformed and did not require weekly compositions of music, Bach focused on chamber and solo instrumental music during his time there.¹² Bach had more liberty at Cöthen to compose what he wanted, mostly due to the freedom given to him by Prince Leopold, an avid music lover, who according to Bach "both understood and loved the art."¹³ Furthermore, at the court, Bach was in charge of sixteen musicians, many of these musicians came from the disbanded Berlin Capelle, which dispersed because of the rise of the Prussian militarism. These musicians were highly skilled, which enabled Bach to compose music at the caliber he did.¹⁴ Bach most likely had particularly "warm and lasting personal relationships with some of his colleagues" as he became the godfather to a few of their children.¹⁵ The two cellists at the court were Christian Ferdinand Abel, who was the gambist and cellist and Christian Bernhard Linigke, who was the cellist.¹⁶ The musician for whom Bach wrote the cello suites, has caused disagreement among scholars, as Spitta believes that Bach wrote it for Abel.¹⁷ However, others believe that it was written for Linigke since he was the cellist at the court. Despite the controversy, Bach was well equipped with excellent musicians to assist him in composing the suites and no evidence points to the suites being written to be played only by a particular player. Instead, Bach wrote the music to be played by all cellists. According to Albert Schweitzer, "At bottom he conceived everything for an ideal instrument, that had all the keyed instrument's possibilities of polyphonic playing, and all the bowed instrument's capacities for phrasing." By combining elements of both keyboard and stringed instruments, Bach produced a polyphonic and melodic piece of music for a single instrument. Despite the debate whether Bach finished all six cello suites in Cöthen, he certainly wrote the majority of the suites there due to the "ideal time for composing chamber music."¹⁸ Bach would never have as much freedom and support again to compose solo and chamber music as he did in Cöthen.

The writing of the cello suites was extremely influential to changing the role of cello playing in Bach's time. Bach employed the suite form for this work, which was a common form in the Baroque period. Bach was mindful of the cello's limits while writing the suites, but still took a step towards making the cello a solo instrument, as "solos for cello were still unusual, brand-new territory; so it is not surprising that he sets up the suite sequence as a *Gradus ad Parnassum*, at the beginning particularly mindful of the specifics of the instrument."¹⁹ In this form, Bach followed the traditional suite arrangement by having a prelude, *allemande*, *courante*, *sarabande*, *intermezzo*, and then a *gigue*. In the *intermezzo* portion, for the first and second suite Bach used a minuet, for the third and fourth suite, a *bourrée*, and the fifth and sixth suite, a *gavotte*.²⁰ In the fifth suite however, Bach used a French overture model for his prelude as it has a "stately opening section followed by a fugue."²¹ It is thought that the last two suites were composed independently of the first four due to the higher difficulty, longer length, and different instrumentation (the fifth suite uses *scordatura* and the sixth suite calls for a five-stringed instrument).²² The sixth suite has caused some confusion for scholars regarding what instrument Bach intended. Some scholars such as Spitta believe that the sixth suite was played with the *viola pomposa*, an instrument Bach created which had five strings (C-G-D-A-E) and was slightly larger than the *viola*, played in the *da braccio* position,²³ however, others believe that the *violoncello piccolo* was used.²⁴

Despite the controversy, the cello suites are still played by musicians around the world because they demonstrate "Bach's command of performing techniques but also his ability to bring into play, without even an accompanying bass part, dense counterpoint and refined harmony with distinctive and well-articulated rhythmic designs, especially in the dance movements." Bach went to "completely untrodden musical paths" in his instrumental music as the "cello pieces create the maximum effect with a minimum of instrumental tools." Although this was only the beginning of a new thinking of cello composition, Bach, "the quintessential instrumentalist, raises and redefines the technical standards of performing by fully exploiting the idiomatic qualities of the violin and cello" allowing the cello suites to "epitomize virtuosity."²⁵ Bach's works displayed, "A linear approach to composition, as 'Bach's line never becomes bogged down in a feeble playing with harmonies.' He compensates for the chordal effects with 'increasing melodic strength.' The utmost effort to reconcile that which actually conflicts is thus characteristic not only of the polyphonic but also of the monophonic movements."²⁶ Bach used his compositional techniques to feature the cello in a different way from how it was previously used in music.

A careful analysis of the Bach cello suites shows how they changed the cello from an accompanying instrument to a solo instrument. Throughout the cello suites, Bach uses various elements and techniques to create a new

understanding of the cello and a new way of performing a previously considered accompanying instrument. In each of the suites, Bach creates a character and develops that particular emotion and mood throughout the suite using different methods. He also seems to grow more acquainted with the instrument, as the suites become progressively more technically difficult. An example of this is the fifth suite's use of scordatura tuning while the sixth suite has a "strong sense of virtuosity that comes from the use of double stops, the extended range and the variety of melodic patterns."²⁷ According to Ledbetter, from the first G major suite to the final D major suite a sense of a "more advanced playing technique, greater variety of material, and a more elaborate way of dissecting and developing it" has arrived.²⁸

3. Analysis of Cello Suites

By examining each suite, the development of the cello into a solo instrument can clearly be seen. The first suite in G major is considered less technically challenging than the other suites, possibly because Bach is becoming acquainted in writing for the cello.²⁹ In the prelude, such as in measure 24 (See Ex. 3), there are non-harmonic materials which make "striking effects" and add extra color to the melodic line.



Example 3: Suite No. 1, Prelude, m. 24

According to Ledbetter, "this Prelude is an extraordinary and classic example of Bach's ability to make his material grow from the inherent nature of an instrument, from the smallest motifs to the broadest structures."³⁰

Another interesting element, relating to texture, is Bach's use of "musical space" (See Ex. 4) which is seen in the opening four measures which have a wide range in steps, then return to normal in measures 5, 8, and 18, and then narrow in measures 6, 11, and 13-15.³¹



Example 4: Suite No. 1, Prelude, mm. 1-6

In the allemande, Bach utilizes the dotted eighth sixteenth rhythm in various ways such as a full stop (m.4), lesser punctuation mark (mm. 5, 21), concluding cadence formula (mm. 14, 23), or a beginning (mm. 15, 24), each with a different weight (See Ex. 5).³²



Example 5: Suite No. 1, Allemande, m. 14

By doing this, Bach is able to take a simple rhythm and expand on it to create a unique melodic line. Furthermore, in the allemande, Bach creates an accompaniment to the solo line in a device called “two-level” writing. This technique of writing can be seen in measures 26-27 (See Ex. 6) with the contrast between the legato melody and the staccato accompaniment that brings the melodic line out.³³



Example 6: Suite No. 1, Allemande, mm. 26-27

This similar type of “theme and accompaniment” writing can be heard in the courante, especially in the first four measures, as well as in the gigue in measures 31-32.³⁴

In contrast to the first suite, the second suite in D minor is composed in a somewhat melancholy, almost depressed mood, but is still able to retain its lyrical style. Some interesting elements of the suite are the varieties in melody and rhythm that Bach uses. An example of this is in the prelude, as measures 1-3 show an increase in rhythmic motion (increase in notes) and range (See Ex. 7).



Example 7: Suite No. 2, Prelude, mm. 1-3

Bach develops this melodic line by having a gradual growth as well as unifying the melody through the variations in rhythm.³⁵ In the allemande, Bach continues to unify the melody of that movement, by using a “sigh motive” which is a “two-note descending stepwise figure that often has a dissonance on the first note” (See Ex. 8).



Example 8: Suite No. 2, Allemande, m. 1

Nikolaus Forkel said that Bach’s melodies have “uncommon, strange, and entirely new, hitherto unheard of turns” and these dissonances found throughout the piece in accented passing tones, appoggiaturas and suspensions create a unique melody.³⁶

Another aspect of the second suite is the courante which is unique compared to the other suites courantes. This movement is made of mostly sixteenth notes and has a “running nature” to it.³⁷ This increase in notes is a striking contrast to the basso continuo line which normally accompanies the virtuosic line, showing off the instrument’s potential.

The third suite in C major in comparison to the other suites has more variety, but is less emotional and contemplative. This suite demonstrates how the cello has “a repertory equivalent to that of the violin.”³⁸ In the prelude, Bach builds the movement around scales and arpeggiations as well as “extensive use of the bariolage to keep the harmonies sounding.”³⁹



Example 9: Suite No. 3, Prelude, mm. 37-39

This example of bariolage, with the melody arpeggiating around a static note, allows Bach to create a melody within an arpeggiation showing a virtuosic aspect to the piece.⁴⁰ Bach continues to show a two-level writing in the allemande by almost creating a duet between two voices (See Ex. 10).



Example 10: Suite No. 3, Allemande, mm. 9-10

The melody-accompaniment technique in the courante’s first five measures (See Ex. 11) is according to Winold, the most extensive use of that technique in the suites.⁴¹



Example 11: Suite No. 3, Courante, mm. 1-5

Throughout this suite, Bach demonstrates that he understands the cello as he composes a suite that shows off the natural beauty of the instrument. According to David Ledbetter when explaining the use of C major chords he says, “this must be the richest and most sonorous chord on the cello, based on the combined overtone series of the two lowest open strings, and Bach has conceived a wonderfully expressive agenda to set it off.”⁴² Finally, Bach really demonstrates the agility of the cello through his “acrobatic leap” of two octaves plus a third, which crosses all four strings, in measure 52 of the gigue.⁴³



Example 12: Suite No. 3, Gigue, m. 52

The fourth suite in E ♭ major has a sense of power and strength due to the features in this suite. An interesting aspect of the Bach cello suites is their occasional resemblance to Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier.” This resemblance is noticed in the prelude which has a repeated arpeggio figure which is relatable to the “Prelude in C-Major from the Well-Tempered Clavier.”⁴⁴ Bach apparently drew upon other compositional techniques in his previous pieces when composing the cello suites. As mentioned before, the suites become progressively more difficult showing new elements to cello playing. The fourth suite is more technical than the previous suites due to the key, the “zig-zag shape of the figurations” and the bowings.⁴⁵ Bach separates himself from this fellow composers by creating an allemande that is unique. In measure 12 and 39 (See Ex. 13), Bach implements syncopation that puts “this allemande at a much higher level of sophistication and artistry than most of the mass-produced and predictable allemandes of his contemporaries.”⁴⁶



Example 13: Suite No. 4, Allemande, m. 12

Bach is able to create this sophisticated melody by only using four melodic gestures as well. An example of one of these gestures is found in measures 1-4 and 27-30 (See Ex. 14) and this particular gesture provides an opening to each section of the movement.⁴⁷



Example 14: Suite No. 4, Courante, mm. 1-4

A final element of the fourth suite is Bach's use of "continuous variation" which involves deriving continuous new gestures from previous gestures in the piece.⁴⁸ Bach develops an effective technique by creatively taking one element and composing a powerful melody from variations of that element.

The most serious of the cello suites is the fifth suite in C minor. The suite is unique in its use of scordatura tuning, which allows for additional resonance for C minor and G minor sections, an open string in the E ♭ major chord, and reduced awkwardness for A ♭ on the D string. The prelude is different from the previous preludes, as Bach uses a French overture form of the late-Baroque model. In the fugue section of the prelude "Bach manages to give the impression of a four-voice exposition" that includes a cantus (See Ex. 16), alto (See. Ex. 15), tenor (See Ex. 18), and bass voice (See Ex. 17).⁴⁹



Example 15: Suite No. 5, Prelude, mm. 27-35 - Alto Subject



Example 16: Suite No. 5, Prelude, mm. 35-43 - Cantus Answer



Example 17: Suite No. 5, Prelude, mm. 47-55 - Bass Subject



Example 18: Suite No. 5, Prelude, mm. 55-63 - Tenor Answer

Even more intricate than the four voices is the effect of the duet between voices within the subject itself. This fugue section demonstrates how virtuosic the cello can be, by playing multiple voices in one melodic line. Bach continues with this virtuosic playing in the sarabande (See Ex. 19) which contains wide skips in an "other-worldly quality."⁵⁰



Example 19: Suite No. 5, Sarabande, mm. 9-11

The final suite in D major, reaches the climax of all the suites. The suite is written for a five-stringed instrument, as Bach wanted an instrument with an extended range.⁵¹ A characteristic feature of the suite is Bach's use of bariolage, in its most effective form in measures 1-2 (See Ex. 20).⁵²



Example 20: Suite No. 6, Prelude, mm. 1-4

Within the bariolage and continuing on into the next two measures, Bach provides an echo which produces spaciousness, but it also contributes a “structural effect of isolating bars 1 and 3 as two concentrated blocks of material from which the rest of the Prelude will develop.”⁵³ This sixth suite prelude, is the only movement in which Bach notates dynamics, adding an extra effect or layer that allows the suite to display various elements of the cello. Bach continues to show off the cello in the sarabande which contains more double-stops and chords than all the other suites⁵⁴ and his use of suspensions, appoggiaturas, neighbor tones, and passing tones create movement as well as anticipation.⁵⁵ The suite ends with the gigue which is “more in the virtuosic style than any other movement in the suites.”⁵⁶ Throughout this suite, Bach illustrates the potential of the cello and soloistic playing by having a “balance of unity and variety, balance of motion and stasis, and balance of the expected and the unexpected.”⁵⁷

4. Conclusion

The Bach unaccompanied cello suites were influential in changing the function of the cello from primarily an accompanying instrument to a solo instrument. Bach explored various techniques and methods of the cello, such as two-leveling writing, chords and technically difficult material, to create unique and virtuosic melodies in each suite as well as a different emotion for each suite. These suites were unique from other repertoire being written for the cello during Bach's time, as Bach showed how the cello's role in music could change. Through the cello suites, Bach provided a foundation on which future composers could and still do refer to, in composing solo works for the cello.

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