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## Bach cello suite 1 prelude viola

⇒ 6 more: 1. Prélude • 2. Allemande • 3. Courante • 4. Sarabande • 6. Menuet I & II • 7. Gigue See: Transcriptions for the Young ⇒ 6 more: II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Sarabande • V. Menuet I • VI. Menuet II • VII. Gigue ⇒ 4 more: Descant or Tenor Recorder • Treble Recorder (F major) • Notes on Recorder Technique • Engraving files (Encore) Page 2 ⇒ 4 more: Complete Score • Complete Score (black and white) • Complete Score • Complete Score (monochrome) ⇒ 5 more: Suite No.2, BWV 1008 • Suite No.3, BWV 1009 • Suite No.4, BWV 1010 • Suite No.5, BWV 1011 • Suite No.6, BWV 1012 This article is taken from the March 2014 issue Bach's cello suites contain so many wonderful details that it's impossible to play them the same each time you perform them. There are so many things to consider that it's a challenge to decide which of them you want to emphasise. Before playing the suites, I strongly recommend carrying out some research of your own, so that you fully understand the decisions you need to make. It's dangerous for players to function out of habit. Just because you've heard it played one way doesn't mean that's how it should sound. Of course it's not always wrong to copy, but you need to understand the thinking behind the choices presented. Look into the context of the work, the history of the time and Bach's writing habits. What stood out to me from my own research was that nothing was strict or formulaic. The different treatises I read disagreed with each other, showing that there were myriad fashions, influences, ideas and different ways of playing the same piece. For me, the important thing about the Cello Suites is their tonality. I think Bach wanted to inhabit different sound worlds and chose his keys accordingly. The tonality of the G major First Suite feels to me like the colour blue: it suggests contentedness and feels settled and at peace, as well as fluid and light. It's not too deep but it's natural. You can feel this tone even during the dancing Courante and pesante Gigue. At the top of my score of the First Cello Suite, I've written 'calm, fluid, hope' to remind me of this. **PRELUDE** Before you start the movement, make a harmonic plan and try to understand the harmonic progression. Ask yourself: what are the colours of the dominant, the subdominant, the relative minor and the tonic? Don't get bogged down with every note or bar – think in big structures. It often helps to write the key or chord's relation over a passage. The movement should flow. I think of water. The beginning isn't complicated – it's just arpeggios – so keep it simple. Try not to articulate every note or emphasise every beat; instead, remember the harmonic journey. If you are struggling with this, try practising the movement at a very fast tempo a couple of times. This way you clearly hear the harmonic movement. It's dangerous for players to function out of habit. To work out the phrasing of this movement, I suggest looking at the available manuscripts – one by Anna Magdalena Bach and another by Johann Peter Kellner – but don't take them as absolute. They wrote the scores quickly and many things that were clear to them aren't so obvious to us now. There are also inconsistencies in passages of the same music. At the start (example 1), I slur the first three semiquavers on the first and third beats of the bar, and how the notes in between. The string-crossings can be tricky, but if you remain calm and don't overaccentuate your string-crossings it will work. Aim to play smoothly. Practise this by playing chords. This keeps your bow almost horizontal. Then you can spread the notes just by following the shape of the bridge with your bow – without drastically changing the angle of the hair for each string. There is a danger of emphasising the fourth up-bow semiquaver. To counter this, I start near the frog for the opening three notes and let the bow travel towards the middle. I then play the semiquaver in the same place and regain my place near the heel with the slur on the second beat. Try not to get stuck at the frog. For a resonant sound at the beginning, use a light, airy bow stroke – don't press and try to catch every single note. This allows the whole harmonic structure to be understood, and for the G to be clear at the start of each slur. Although I think it's important to understand the overall harmonic structure, it's also necessary to understand the smaller ones. Lots of Baroque music is built around tension and release and this is evident in the Prelude. There are some clearly tense bars, such as bars 11 and 13 (example 2), each of which releases the tension in the following bar. Aim to bring out the resolution of each of these tense bars in the following bar. The fermata in bar 22 divides the movement. After the pause, the music is based on scales rather than arpeggios and harmonic movement, and the dominant, D, is much more present. In this second half you need to change how you use your bow, and employ a variety of strokes depending on the contours of the line. The tempo of the second half can be more varied – the first half has a steady underlying harmonic tempo that doesn't allow for too much pulling around. After the fermata I try to remain in the same general tempo, but vary it depending on the contours of the music – going to the top notes and not worrying about the structure of a beat or a bar. I take this to the extreme in bars 29 and 30 (example 3). The descending semiquaver patterns are gestures and can speed up, instead of all sounding like equal notes. Don't hold the bottom D at the beginning of bar 29 for too long – you've arrived somewhere but the music demands you keep going. In the barlodge in bars 31 to 36 (example 4) bring out the bottom notes (the first and third semiquaver each time). Keep your arm on the level of the D string, only lightly touching the A string and hardly moving your arm for the string crossing. Even when the first and third semiquavers get higher, remain on the D string, and keep the open A as a totally separate voice. Practise playing only the melody notes to help understand how to phrase the passage. As the passage evolves, lengthen the bowings. Don't slow down when you arrive at bar 39 (example 5). Although it feels like you've arrived at the tonic, the chord is inverted and the dominant D is still present. It's better to wait until the end chord, when you truly finish in G major. **ALLEMANDE** Before working on any of the dances in the Cello Suites, try to read as much as you can about them. If someone says to you 'rock and roll' or 'rap', you immediately know the style of music they mean, and I think people of Bach's time had a similar understanding for the dances – even if they weren't danced at the time. During my research I consulted Baroque dancers, and this really helped with structuring the Allemande. In many dances, including the Allemande, Courante and Gigue, there is a four-bar structure: the first bar is more important than the third, then the second, and finally the fourth. Like the Prelude, this movement needs to flow. It's an Italian-style Allemande, characterised by its moving lines, and not the double-dotted French version of the dance. This helps with the tempo, as does the alla breve marking at the beginning. Whatever speed you choose (and I never tell students how fast they should play the work), it has to feel in 2/4. Allemandes were often showcases of a composer's virtuosity, and Bach shows his skill by taking us through different sound worlds, often in just one bar. Because of this you have to understand every bar, knowing when you are changing harmony or articulation, and focus on the details – but all within the context of the overall structure. When practising a challenging bit, always bear this in mind. For example, the passage from bars 9 to 11 (example 6) is quite challenging. There's a new chord in every bar, and you have to know what the feeling is like for each. Once you know this, you can move on to the details – Bach introduces a C sharp on the last beat of bar 9 to prepare for the tritone with the E on the first beat of bar 10, and then continues with the C sharp to introduce D major at the end of the bar. Bar 13 (example 7) is technically very hard – fourteen notes in one slur. It's hard to hold the notes without pressing. Try seeing how long you can hold a single note without pressing down or using force. Then try playing eight notes, then twelve, then fourteen. You can do this with any scale and build it into your routine. In terms of dynamics, it's possible to both crescendo and diminuendo – in performance I often do it one way and then change in the second repeat. As long as you showcase a feature of the music (such as the tritone at the beginning of the build-up to the next bar), it doesn't matter. The voicing of the second half is difficult. From bar 18 (example 8), for instance, there are three voices and you have to separate them and understand them – the voices' phrases are always interrupted, but have a form of continuation. In bar 18, the second beat and the first semiquaver of the third beat are one voice, which returns on the last semiquaver of the bar and resolves to the second beat of bar 19. In between is the middle voice. The bass then makes an appearance with a D on the third beat of bar 19, before the top voice comes back again. It's important to try to give the impression that the bass lasts longer than it does – you don't actually have the freedom to take more time, but it should feel as if you do. It helps to work on the voices separately and find a stroke that's quick but resonant and doesn't interrupt the flow of the rest of the passage. **COURANTE** As in the Allemande, the most important bar of each phrase is the first, followed by the third, then the second, then the fourth. In addition, courantes, especially those composed before Bach's time, have an underlying rhythm to bear in mind: a crotchet (q) followed by a quaver rest and two semiquavers before two quavers. This can be clearly felt in this particular Courante, with the semiquaver figure halfway through the second beat. This movement is quite difficult technically, both for bowing and for articulation. In the first full bar (example 9), try not to 'hit' the bottom G, otherwise the second beat becomes important instead of the third. Instead, diminuendo across the first three quavers of the bar. In bar 5 (example 10), use short bows to avoid an accent on the single semiquavers in each group of four. Play the single note lightly by lifting the wrist, with the feeling of not actually playing a note – don't use a voluntary push. In bars 14 and 15 you need to do the opposite. Here it's really important to detach that moving top note from the repetitive bass. Make the slurs short and not too important, as the notes don't change. I gradually crescendo as the changing single semiquavers get higher, increasing my bow length to do so. Work slowly on all the passages where articulation is difficult, and then gradually speed up. Often, students struggle to play the movement fast because their brains can't keep up – they need to train them. If you increase the tempo bit by bit, your brain has time to adapt. **SARABANDE** The Sarabande has the same four-bar structure as the previous two movements, but has a strange hierarchy of beats in the bar – the first two beats are both important. Some people believe the second is the most important and play the first note on an up bow, but I struggle with this idea because the first beat is still the first beat – Bach could have written an up-beat if he had wanted to. Baroque dancers tell me that in a Sarabande they have a step, followed by a 'glissando step' – a slide on the second beat, which is longer as a result. This idea works for me in this movement and it means you are free to work out your own bowing. Be careful not to play the third beat of each bar as an up-beat. It's part of the previous phrase, not the next one. I suggest getting quieter over the third beat, but still continuing in tempo so that the music doesn't stop. Practise the Sarabande without any of the chords. It's important to understand the phrases – not the beats in the bar or the four-bar structure, but the long phrases that follow the contours of the music. You need to decide which bits are tense and which aren't. Then add the chords, and then the feeling of bars and beats. In bar 9 (example 12) think about how you want to spread the notes of the chord on the second beat. You have to be able to hear all the notes, but not interrupt the flow of the phrase. Depending on the feeling you are aiming for, the chord can be heavy, with some of the notes sounding together, or light, almost like grace notes before the top one. Whichever feeling you go for, in my opinion, two groups of two notes should be avoided. **MINUET I** In this dance, the first beat of each bar is the most important, then the second, followed by the third. Then in terms of bar structure, the second bar is the most important, followed by the third, then the first and finally the fourth. The hierarchy of the beats is tricky, because naturally you want to use the third beat to lead into the next bar, but it shouldn't – it belongs to the previous phrase. I diminuendo slightly across the beat, and avoid getting louder. The second half of the minuet is difficult because of the stringcrossings, especially in bars 12 and 14 (example 13). The 11th in bar 12 is hard for intonation, and in bar 14 you have to play a chord backwards, which feels unnatural. I try to keep the movement as small as possible – I aim to settle the arm in one place, with a relaxed elbow, and let the hand and wrist do the string-crossing. You don't need to use extreme arm movements – the strings aren't that far apart from each other. It's also useful to practise slowly and to play open strings, so you understand which string you should be playing on without worrying about the left hand. **MINUET II** In the Kellner manuscript, instead of writing 3/4, he writes a large 3. I think this is important and it's a shame other editions don't do this. It means the feel of the bar is important, not the beat. I imagine a continuo underneath – the first note of each bar. In my view, this Minuet can be noticeably faster than the first one, but I tell my students they can play it at any speed they like, as long as they can feel the bar pulse. **GIGUE** This movement shouldn't be too slow because even in Bach's time it wasn't used to accompany dancers. It was a virtuosic piece, full of vitality and joy. A Gigue should be light and uplifting, which made choosing articulations tricky for me, as it's not clear on either manuscript. They both have three-note slurs in the first bar, but I find this quite monotonous and not very dance-like. I prefer a single quaver, followed by a two-note slur (example 14). Then from bar 9, when the music becomes more chromatic, I switch to one bow per beat to give extra meaning to the last four bars of the first repeat. The second bar is interesting because Bach writes dots over the first three notes (seen in both manuscripts). This is rare for Bach, and as a result I think the spiccato should be exaggerated. Imagine you are using a Baroque bow. They're much harder to control so when you do this technique, you must either stay very close to the string or really bounce – and I think the latter is more appropriate here. The dots are only marked on the first three notes, but because the following three are part of the same harmony, I continue until the end of the bar (and do the same in bar 7). In the second half, have fun with the phrasing. It's possible to see the music in lots of different ways. Experiment with it and play it differently when you repeat. For example, in bars 22 to 24 (example 15), you could phrase the passage as a simple descending sequence, which feels very natural, or you can have fun with the rhythmic elements, playing the two semiquaver-quaver motifs as if a second voice or person were playing them.





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