


SONO  
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SL|Editions



**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
**Six Cello Suites**

BWV 1007-1012

Richard Narrowway  
*violoncello*

DISC 1

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 1**

**IN G MAJOR** BWV 1007

- 1 1. Prélude 2:35
- 2 2. Allemande 4:45
- 3 3. Courante 2:58
- 4 4. Sarabande 3:22
- 5 5. Menuet I-II 3:46
- 6 6. Gigue 1:50

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 3**

**IN C MAJOR** BWV 1009

- 1 1. Prélude 4:06
- 2 2. Allemande 4:55
- 3 3. Courante 4:00
- 4 4. Sarabande 4:45
- 5 5. Bourrée I-II 5:12
- 6 6. Gigue 2:47

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 6**

**IN D MAJOR** BWV 1012

- 13 1. Prélude 3:35
- 14 2. Allemande 4:20
- 15 3. Courante 3:43
- 16 4. Sarabande 4:55
- 17 5. Gavotte I-II 4:14
- 18 6. Gigue 3:33

DISC 2

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 2**

**IN D MINOR** BWV 1008

- 7 1. Prélude 4:59
- 8 2. Allemande 4:06
- 9 3. Courante 2:10
- 10 4. Sarabande 5:32
- 11 5. Menuet I-II 3:02
- 12 6. Gigue 2:58

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 4**

**IN E FLAT** BWV 1010

- 7 1. Prélude 6:24
- 8 2. Allemande 6:27
- 9 3. Courante 2:17
- 10 4. Sarabande 3:58
- 11 5. Bourrée I-II 5:33
- 12 6. Gigue 2:31

**SUITE FOR CELLO SOLO NO. 5**

**IN C MINOR** BWV 1011

- 13 1. Prélude 4:54
- 14 2. Allemande 8:26
- 15 3. Courante 4:06
- 16 4. Sarabande 5:19
- 17 5. Gavotte I-II 4:22
- 18 6. Gigue 4:13

DISC ONE TIME 1:15:10

DISC TWO TIME 1:15:52



## BACH'S SIX CELLO SUITES

There are a few iconic works in the core repertory with a special quality that makes them instantly recognizable, even after hearing just a few notes. The first G major Cello Suite is one of them. I like to think of the opening measures as a kind of entrance into the sound world of the cello; the open strings lift our spirits, resonating with the quintessential voice and depth of sonority we all know and love. It is so simple in its design, but so far-reaching in its vision, almost as if Bach is on a quest to discover the true potential of this instrument that has for too long been left in the background. As such, a feeling of birth and youthful discovery permeates the mood of this opening suite—a blissful disregard of any trials to come. And yet at the same time one gets the sensation that this is just the beginning of a larger journey.

There is so much mystery surrounding the cello suites that it is difficult to know where to even begin. What is it about these works that has garnered such lasting and universal interest? Perhaps the ratios of notes and harmonies are so perfect in their organization that they align exquisitely with our human senses and offer the most ideal kind of aesthetic pleasure. Or perhaps the rising and falling of the phrases is so natural in its evolution, like the flow of currents in the ocean or the ever-changing rate of our heartbeats. Some just find the suites soothing and therapeutic to listen to. Others admire the way Bach is able to outline a polyphonic sound world on an essentially single-lined instrument. There are also plenty of people who find this music mathematical and boring. In fact, during his lifetime, most people (even his children) viewed Bach's music as too complicated and distasteful!

Whatever the case, there is something truly remarkable about the way Bach was able to conjure a complete, multi-layered, sound world with the most minimal of musical materials. Underneath its simple exterior, the

music reveals a compositional language of striking intellectual and expressive depth. And much like his *Well-Tempered Clavier* or his violin sonatas and partitas, the pursuit of perfection of these masterpieces is a task that provides endless gratification to performers and listeners alike.

When performing or listening to the six suites as a collective set in its entirety, it is difficult to escape the palpable sense of an unfolding journey that underscores the increasing complexity of Bach's harmonic language. One can sense a true process of evolution from the purity and simplicity of the G major suite to the searching introspection of the second in D minor; from the celebratory and virtuosic C major suite to the earthy and arduous E flat; from the darkness and profundity of the C minor to the triumphant chordal gestures and intricate inner-workings of the final D major suite. In fact, looking at the set of six suites from this holistic vantage point, one gets the sense that Bach was truly experimenting with—and pushing the limits of—what the cello could do as a solo instrument; in each respective suite he expands the tonal and technical scope, making the *scordatura* of the fifth suite seem like a logical step in the process and, indeed, the extra E string in the sixth, an inevitable culmination of his compositional exploration.

## HISTORY OF THE SUITES

The exact date of composition of the cello suites remains unknown. It seems likely, however, that Bach was occupied with them between 1717 and 1723, during his years as *Kapellmeister* at Prince Leopold's Court in Cöthen. This is reasonable to assume in view of the fact that the suites were originally handed down in a copyist's manuscript collection together with the unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas, which we know were completed in 1720. In addition, this was the only period in Bach's life during which he had a highly capable ensemble of string players at his disposal; as a result, he

was free to experiment with various instrumental forms. In fact, many of his monumental string works, including the Brandenburg concertos, were written during this time.

Not only is it a mystery *when* these suites were written, it is also unknown *for whom* Bach composed them. It is possible that he may have had in mind Christian Ferdinand Abel, a gambist at the court, or perhaps even Christian Bernhard Linike, who worked there as a cellist. But just as feasible is the notion that he simply wrote them as a kind of personal endeavor, to explore what the cello could do as a solo instrument. (Keep in mind that up until the early eighteenth century the cello was considered primarily a background instrument, providing bass lines and simple accompaniment patterns. And so to write six suites of such expressive breadth exclusively for this instrument must have been a groundbreaking accomplishment, especially in Germany where nothing of the sort had been written before). Whatever the case, there is no question that with these suites, Bach truly pushed the boundaries of what was then considered possible on the cello as a solo instrument. To this day, they are considered the centerpiece, the Mount Everest, of the cello literature.

This is not to say that they were always held in high esteem. To be sure, the suites were virtually never heard for almost two centuries after they were composed, except within inner circles of professional musicians. And even those who knew them saw these works as nothing more than a collection of technical exercises! It wasn't until the legendary cellist Pablo Casals discovered the suites in 1890 and began performing them around twelve years later, that the music began to gain mass appeal. We cellists owe so much to Casals, who with his unwavering commitment to popularizing these suites, secured them the treasured place they deserve in our core repertoire.

## THE MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

Unfortunately, Bach's autograph fair copy has been lost. This fact alone makes any cellists' journey with the suites a complicated one, since it forces us to try to decipher Bach's compositional intentions through the lenses of four eighteenth-century copies: one in the hand of his second wife, Anna Magdalena; another in the hand of Johann Peter Kellner, a cantor, organist and personal acquaintance of Bach's; and two manuscripts prepared by anonymous copyists.

Luckily there exists a surviving manuscript in Bach's own hand of a lute transcription of the fifth suite, which despite its alternate instrumentation, gleans some invaluable insights.

While our lives would certainly be easier if Anna Magdalena's manuscript was an immaculate copy of Bach's autograph, unfortunately this is not the case. It is inarguably full of inconsistencies in articulation and slur markings, to the point that it is at times impossible to determine where some slurs begin and end. Kellner's manuscript, too, seems rather hastily copied, with several wrong notes, incorrect rhythms, and even complete omissions of movements such as the fifth suite Sarabande. On the other hand, the two anonymous copies, completed in the latter part of the eighteenth century, appear to be the most careful and consistent in terms of articulation and slur placement. Due to their temporal distance to the composition of the suites, however, as well as to the anonymity of the scribes, these sources cannot be considered as equally authoritative as the two above-mentioned manuscripts. Nevertheless, they provide us with great insight into the performing traditions and tendencies of the time, and as such, deserve special attention.

Thankfully, the most recent Bärenreiter urtext edition of the suites includes

all four manuscript copies, as well as a blank score on which cellists can mark in their own solutions after careful consideration and comparison of the different versions. Of course, the lack of consistency amongst the various sources leaves much for players to decide. My own solutions are based on a combination of all four manuscripts, as well as close comparisons with Bach's autograph of the lute transcription and the violin sonatas and partitas. The lute transcription was particularly helpful in terms of clarifying any questions regarding the over-dotting of certain rhythms in the prelude and allemande of the fifth suite. It seems that in this lute version, Bach has edited the notation of some of the notes, making them even more dotted than in the cello manuscripts. For passages that contain identical patterns such as sequences, I have tried to maintain consistency in slurring, as this is what Bach generally indicates in his violin works.

## QUESTIONS OF INSTRUMENT (FOR SUITE VI)

Evidently there are many questions surrounding the genesis of these suites. But it doesn't stop there. We still don't even know which instrument suite VI was written for! None of the sources seem to indicate anything concrete in this regard, aside from the fact that it had five strings (an extra E string). This leaves a few possible candidates: a violoncello piccolo (a smaller five-stringed instrument that Bach called for in several of his cantatas written in 1724 and 1725); a viola pomposa (another smaller sized instrument, which Bach is credited with having invented around 1724); or even a normal-sized five-string violoncello, which according to various instrument descriptions of the time, did in fact exist in the early eighteenth century, despite becoming obsolete later on. Personally, I find it a little odd to think Bach may have suddenly abandoned the cello in favor of a viola-like instrument for the last suite. Since we know that five-stringed cellos did actually exist at the time,

does it not make reasonable sense to assume that all six suites may simply have been written for cello, and nothing else?

In any case, we are dealing here with nothing more than probabilities and likelihoods; in the end, I don't think it really matters so much. Nowadays it has become rather common practice for cellists to perform the last suite on a four-stringed modern cello. Despite the added technical difficulties of traveling into the upper registers, the four-stringed setup allows for a kind of brilliance, a reaching for the stars if you will, that wonderfully captures the climactic character of the suite. I am certain that Bach himself would have been delighted to hear his last suite performed this way! Perhaps it was simply inconceivable to write something so difficult back in the eighteenth-century. It seems that today, however, cello technique has advanced to such an extent that absolutely anything is possible.

That being said, I must say that hearing the sixth suite performed on a five-stringed instrument is in itself a unique and unforgettable experience. There is such a seductive crispness and resonance in the sound, which is unattainable on a four-string cello. Perhaps this is the next step!

## THE SUITE AS AN INSTRUMENTAL FORM

The Suite was one of the most popular forms of instrumental music in the eighteenth century. Although nowadays the term can be applied rather flexibly to describe any ordered set of pieces designed to be performed in one sitting, in the Baroque period the term was used more specifically to denote a collection of dance movements in the same key. These dances followed a fixed sequence—Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue—with other dances often interpolated between the Sarabande and Gigue, such as a Minuet, Bourrée or Gavotte. Around the same time it also became rather standard practice to include an introductory prelude that preceded the dance movements.

While there is no question that these suites originated from the world of dance, by Bach's time they functioned independently as an instrumental genre rather than as music that was actually danced to. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the distinguishing features of each dance movement, particularly in regard to character and rhythm, for this has undoubtedly shaped my current interpretation.

The *prelude* serves a preparatory function, establishing the key and mood of the suite. It is characterized by an improvisatory quality and a subtle flexibility of tempo, often containing patterns, sequences, pedals or various open string effects that outline the closely related key areas.

The *allemande* (French for "German dance"), is the first dance movement of the suite, characterized by a duple meter and a moderate walking tempo. It begins with a short upbeat followed by a pattern of alternating strong and weak beats. Johann Mattheson, in his *Vollkommener Kapellmeister* (1739), describes the allemande as a calm, orderly dance that evokes "the image of a content or satisfied spirit."

This is followed by the *courante* (derived from the French *courir* and the Italian *correre*, meaning “to run), a lively dance in triple meter. It is worth noting a distinction between the Italian *corrente*, a fast dance usually in 3/4 or 3/8, and the French *courante*, a slower, more majestic dance, usually in 3/2. Although the French term is used in all the manuscript sources of the cello suites, most of these courantes are unequivocally in the Italian style (with the exception of suite V). Mattheson fittingly describes the courante as a cheerful dance of “sweet hopefulness.”

The *sarabande*, which originated in Spain, forms the emotional and spiritual center of each suite. It is in a slow triple meter, usually 3/4 or 3/2, with a characteristic emphasis on the second beat of each measure. Funnily enough, during its heyday in Spain, the sarabande was a fast, lascivious dance (so lascivious in fact that it was eventually banned for its obscenity)! By Bach’s time, however, it had mellowed to become one of the most sublime and tranquil of movements.

For the fifth movement of each suite, Bach interpolates an additional dance - either a minuet, *bourrée* or *gavotte*. These so-called *galanterie* movements are presented in two repeated pairs, with the first section being repeated once the second has been played. The *minuet* (suites I and II), originally from France, is the only movement in the suite that was still danced during the eighteenth century. It is distinguished by a triple meter, a moderate stately tempo, divisions of bars into pairs, and a cheerful affect. In the cello suites, the second minuet of each pair is presented in the relative key (the tonic minor in suite I and the tonic major in suite II). The *bourrée* (suites III and IV) is another popular French courtly dance, marked by a lively tempo, duple meter, symmetrical four-bar phrases and a short upbeat opening. Mattheson describes the *bourrée* as an “easygoing” dance that expresses “content-

ment and pleasantness.” The *gavotte* (suites V and VI) is yet another French dance characterized by a duple meter and moderate tempo, beginning with an upbeat of two quarter notes. The affect is joyful and graceful —“true jubilation,” in the words of Mattheson—though the second *gavotte* of the fifth suite is notable for its unconventional haunting triplets. Collectively, these *galanterie* movements tend to be the most charming and memorable in terms of melodic material. They exhibit a certain lighthearted buoyancy, particularly in the major-key suites, that lends them a contagiously joyful character.

The final movement of each suite is a *gigue* (from the English “jig”), perhaps the quickest and liveliest of the dances, usually in 6/8 or 3/8. It was originally used for fiddling rather than dancing, a notion that aligns well with its speedy tempo and jaunty, high-spirited character.

## MY APPROACH

For this recording, I use a modern setup: specifically a 1930 Carl Becker cello made in Chicago, and a modern bow. I admit that such a setup is quite far off from the sound world that Bach must have imagined when composing these suites. I have done my best, however, to balance this modern setup with a thorough understanding of Baroque stylistic principles, particularly in regard to sound production, bow strokes, vibrato, slurring, voicing, and ornaments. I think nowadays, our performance decisions tend to be too black and white; one either performs with total commitment to historical performance practice (by using gut strings, a baroque bow, lower tuning and no endpin) or one forgets all about it. I don’t think it is so simple! There is plenty of room, I think, to *combine* an understanding of historical stylistic principles with current trends in modern performance practice. It is by no means as simple as choosing one way or the other. I think ultimately, regardless of what kind of





setup one uses, how much one vibrates and so on, the most important thing is that the spirit of the music comes to life, which is often more a matter of phrasing, sound, character, tempo and attention to harmony, than of specific issues of Baroque tuning and style. The very fact that Bach's suites can still reveal their secrets through so many varied approaches is a testament to the genius of this music.

This is not to say that one should disregard any helpful musicological research that sheds light on performing traditions of the time. On the contrary, I think this is absolutely essential! There is nothing wrong with informing ourselves if the goal is to become more convincing, thoughtful artists. The information is there; why ignore it? At any rate, this kind of knowledge should not be confining. Rather, it should liberate us, for it offers an opportunity to open our minds and creative palettes to more colors and possibilities.

While there have been many attempts by cellists and scholars to delve deeply into the works in order to identify some kind of narratological sequence that ties together the six suites, I believe that first and foremost they are simply what they are - pure dance suites - and it is my goal to play them as such.

Richard Narroway





## **RICHARD NARROWAY**

Recognized for his stylistic versatility and wide-ranging musical interests, Australian cellist Richard Narrowway has proven himself to be equally at home with repertoire both new and old. He has appeared as a soloist with the Grand Rapids Symphony and the HanZhou Philharmonic Orchestra, and in recital on Chicago's WFMT *Dame Myra Hess* Series and the *Keys to the City* Piano Festival at Chicago's Symphony Center. In addition he has given performances in Australia, China, Germany, Canada and the United States, in prestigious venues such as the Kennedy Center, Chicago Symphony Center, Preston Bradley Hall and the Sydney Opera House.

Richard has garnered top prizes in numerous competitions, including the Third Beijing International Cello Competition, the Samuel and Elinor Thaviu Competition in String Performance and the Gold Medal in the 2010 Stulberg International String Competition, where he was also awarded the Bach Award for the best interpretation of a Bach

solo work. Festival appearances include the Piatigorsky Cello Festival in Los Angeles, the Kronberg Academy Cello Meisterkurse, Aspen Music Festival, Sarasota Music Festival, Castleton Music Festival, Norfolk Music Festival and Pinchas Zukerman's Young Artists Program in Ottawa. In the Summer of 2013, Richard attended Music@Menlo as an International Program Artist and returned in March 2014 as an artist for their annual Winter Residency, which included presentations and performances for various academic classes at Menlo School as well as fundraising and benefit events for the Menlo program. More recently, he performed as part of the resident contemporary ensemble at the Aspen Music Festival, premiering dozens of new works.

Born in 1991, Richard pursued his cello studies from an early age, enjoying tutelage from Hans Jensen, David Finckel, Susan Blake and Takao Mizushima. A graduate of the Juilliard School, and the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University, currently he is pursuing a Doctoral degree with Richard Aaron at the University of Michigan.

Deeply committed to community engagement and innovation, he takes a particular interest in devising projects that bring classical music to a wider audience. Currently he is working on a video project involving the twelve Piatti Caprices, periodically uploaded for the public on YouTube. He is also

co-founder and artistic director of Chamber Music Michigan, an organization that is committed to bringing high-quality chamber music to various communities around the state of Michigan. In 2015 he collaborated with the Mark Morris Dance Group's Dance for PD (a project offering dance classes for people with Parkinson's disease) to produce a recording of the Bourrées from Bach's Cello Suite no. 3 as part of a global repertory project to be used by the 100 Dance for PD classes around the world. In the same year, Richard embarked on a multi-state tour around Australia performing and presenting the complete Bach suites as well as a selection of contemporary Australian compositions in an effort to share the music through concerts, educational workshops and various events. Aside from the artistic and educational components of this project, Richard was also interested in bringing attention to Australia's natural landscapes and cultural history. He highlighted this perspective by recording distinctly Australian works in unique settings around the country. This album of Bach's suites was recorded at the culmination of his tour, in the Shelmerdine Studio at Melbourne Grammar School.

[richardnarroway.com](http://richardnarroway.com)

## THANKS

I must give special thanks to my team—Marissa Olegario, Mark Edwards, Lilly Perrott and Joshua Anderson—for believing in my vision and standing by my side throughout every step of my Australian tour. The folks at Melbourne Grammar School were very kind in allowing me to record in their wonderful Shelmerdine Studio, and for that I am grateful. I am also enormously indebted to the generous assistance of the following people, without whom my project would not have been possible:

My parents—Yoko and Simon— and siblings

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Lavinia Johnston

Wu Han and David Finckel

Takao Mizushima

Faye & Onofre Olegario

Sue & Peter Lee

Hans Schroeder and the Australian Bach Society

Geoffrey Tunbridge

The Charles Darwin University Centre for Youth and Community Music

And to all the other backers of my 2015 Bringing Music to Life tour, I am forever grateful for your support.

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## Johann Sebastian Bach Six Cello Suites

BWV 1007-1012

Richard Narroway

**Session Producer:** Mark Edwards

**Recording, Mixing & Mastering:** Mark Edwards

**Editing and Post-production:** Mark Edwards, Richard Narroway

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