

# BACH CELLO SUITES FOR THE BASS: THE STATE OF THE RESEARCH

## SUITES DE BACH PARA CONTRABAIXO: O ESTADO DA PESQUISA

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**Abstract:** J.S. Bach's Six Suites for Violoncello, BWV 1007-12 (c. 1720), are not only key violoncello repertoire, they have become so for the double bass as well. Indeed, bassists have performed, transcribed and published to such an extent that it seems time to summarize the state of the research and to air some of the issues involved. These issues include tessitura, transposition, editorial decisions of transcription (especially revoicing of chords), performance practice, and the integrity of the suites. This discussion is accompanied by a bibliography including all recordings, editions, and articles specifically addressing the performance of these works on the bass and a checklist of more general items. This paper is a revision of a paper read at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Bass Conference, Wrocław, August 15, 2008.

**Keywords:** Bach; Violoncello; Suites; Bass; Transcription.

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**Resumo:** Os “Seis Suítes para Violoncello” de J.S. Bach, BWV 1007-12 (c. 1720), não são apenas repertório essencial para o violoncello mas para o baixo duplo também. Alias, baixistas tem os executado, transcrito e publicado tanto que está na hora de resumir as pesquisas feitas e identificar os assuntos tratados. Estes assuntos incluem tessitura, transposição, decisões editoriais de transcrição (especialmente a revisão e adaptação de acordes), ensaio para performance e a integridade dos suítes. Esta discussão se complementa por uma bibliografia citando todas as gravações, edições e artigos tratando especificamente da execução destas obras no baixo duplo e uma lista de itens mais gerais.

**Palavras-chave:** Bach; Violoncello; Suítes; Baixo; Transcrição.

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Bassists have been transcribing, performing, and writing about the Bach cello suites to such an extent that it seems valuable to summarize the state of the research, including exploring some specific issues involved.<sup>1</sup> We will consider only “published” research: books, periodical literature, editions, and commercial recordings.

### Surveying the Territory

First, though the available literature is vast, at least some recommended background reading and listening is in order. As source material for the musical text, Schwemer and Woodfull-Harris (2000) assumes priority. To perform this music on bass involves decisions of editing and per-

formance practice. One could therefore start by reading Emery’s valuable essay on editors’ pitfalls (1958). As an introduction to performance practice concerns, Donington (1982) is still basic. Efrati (1979) specifically addresses Bach’s unaccompanied string compositions. Bylsma (1998) considers the first three suites through the provocative framing question, “What if the articulations in the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript were clear, complete, and authoritative?” Winold (2007), while analyzing each movement *in toto*, also summarizes a wealth of analytical strategies, serving as a veritable textbook of music analysis for the baroque; his historical introduction is also excellent. Solow (1996 & 2002) gives a valuable introduction to cello editions. Among cello recordings, it would seem minimally necessary to listen to Casals, to a “period” performance (among which Bylsma’s 1979 recording has now become of “historic” status), and a “modern” performance, of which the possibilities are legion. These notions of “period” and “modern” will require later scrutiny.

The history of these suites and the bass is quite different between the different media of editions, recordings, and writings. After all, editions began long before any recordings and the writings only appeared after a critical mass of recordings were available. A summary history of editions and recordings is presented in Examples 1 and 2, with more information in Examples 7 and 8, as well as complete listings in the Bibliography.<sup>2</sup> Activity has exploded beginning in 1995.

Early:	Simandl; 1 mvt., before 1912.
Stix:	24 mvts. arranged as 4 suites, 1915 (1942, [1960?]).
Nanny:	17 mvts. Published individually, 1921-23.
Middle:	Sterling, 1957. First attempt at complete set. Zimmerman, 1966. 1 mvt. Widely distributed. Rabbath, 1982, 1986. First coordination of edition with recording. “At pitch.”
Recent:	Bernat, 1995. Various transpositions. Drew, 2007. 10 mvts, various transpositions. For student use. Ellison, Robinson, Vance (n.d.). Continuation of Rabbath’s work. Rizzi, 2007. Influenced by gamba performance practice, tessitura considerations.

Example 1: History of the Most Important Bass Editions.

Pioneering efforts:	Gary Karr, 1968. 1 mvt. on pedagogical LP. François Rabbath, 1971. 1 mvt. Live performance on LP. Lucas Drew, c. 1976. 2 mvts. on pedagogical LP.
Complete individual suites:	François Rabbath, 1982. Suite 1. Rerecorded, 1995. Michael Cameron, 1996, 1997. Suites 4, 5. Bernard Salles, 1998-2000. Suites 1-5 complete, 1 mvt. of 6. Edgar Meyer, 2000. Suites 1, 2, 5. Keizo Mizoiri, 2000. Suite 1. Ovidiu Badila. 2001. Suite 2. Live performance. Owen Lee, 2001. Suites 3, 5. Teruhiko Saito, 2006. Suite 1.
All suites, complete:	Mark Bernat, 1995. Richard Hartshorne, 1997. At original pitch; uses special scordatura. Gerd Reinke, 1998. Gary Karr, 1998/2005 François Rabbath, forthcoming
Other styles:	Ron Carter, 1985. 11 mvts., pizzicato. Some multi-tracking. Barry Green, 1996. 3 mvts. With jazz trio accompaniment. Mini Schultz, 2001. 10 mvts. As duos with jazz pianist. Ruben B. Daryen, 2004 (DVD). 1 mvt. as duo with vibraphone, inc. bass improvisation.

Example 2: Selected Bass Recordings.

## The Issues

All transcriptions present certain issues related to transferring music to a different instrument with its own characteristic register, tone quality, and technique. These suites present other issues as well: articulation, key, chords and style.

### *Articulation*

There are two broad approaches to articulation. The first holds that a repetition should generally have the same articulation. This is the way one typically plays later music, including the standard orchestral repertoire. The second way holds that repetition means change the phrasing, sometimes including changing the articulation. According to this view,

stated by BYLSMA for one (1998, p. 137), the differences in articulation within our most authoritative source, the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript, are not necessarily due to carelessness (though in some cases they might be); they also are purposeful instructions to change the articulation. Arguably, they even stipulate specific slurs. These different approaches can be seen in various editions. Example 3 shows the opening of *Suite 1* in the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript.



Example 3: Opening of *Prelude, Suite 1*, Anna Magdalena Bach Manuscript.

Note that the articulation is different in each measure. Example 4 shows a consistent articulation with short slurs based on the first measure of Anna Magdalena Bach, beats 1 & 3, preferred by Pelczar (1974).



Example 4: Opening of *Prelude, Suite 1*, ed. Pelczar.

Example number 5 shows a consistent and long slur, preferred by Bernat (1995).



Example 5: Opening of *Prelude, Suite 1*, ed. Bernat.

Example number 6 shows changing articulations that attempt to interpret Anna Magdalena Bach's notation as literally as possible, preferred by Ellison (n.d.).



Example 6: Opening of *Prelude, Suite 1*, ed. Ellison.

It should be noted, however, that the way this music is performed and recorded often obscures such decisions. In a performance that uses a post-classical legato stroke (such as that of Gary Karr [1998, 2005]) or that is recorded in a live acoustic (such as that of Bernard Salles [1999, 2000]), it can be difficult or impossible to tell what bowing is being used.

## Key

The choices of key and transposition are summarized in Example 7 and 8.<sup>3</sup> Numbers in parentheses show, in cases where less than the entire suite was included, the number of movements. In Example 8 solo tuning is indicated with *S*; other scordatura is indicated with *sc*. Note that *Suite 6* is left out of the charts because almost all editions and performances are in D and are divided in various ways between original pitch and *ottava bassa*.

Keys, published	Suite 1	Suite 2	Suite 3	Suite 4	Suite 5
Down 8v	Homenko (5) Stix	Homenko (3) Stix	Homenko (5) Stix (4)	Stix (2)	Stix (2)
Down m7		Sterling	Rizzi	Sterling	
Down m6				Drew (1) Homenko (3) Novosel Pelczar Rizzi Salles	Daryen (1) Drew (1) Homenko Pelczar (5) Rizzi
Down P5	Drew (1) Nanny (2) Novosel Pelczar Rizzi Sterling	Drew (1) Nanny (2) Novosel Pelczar (5) Rizzi Rohe Salles			
Down P4	Borém (2) Drew (2) Krasnopolsky Nanny (2) Rohe	Pelczar (1)	Bernat DeWitt (1) Drew (2) Ellison (1) Nanny (3) Novosel Pelczar (5) Rohe Salles Sterling Zimmerman (1)	Nanny (2) Rohe	Delmas- Boussagol (1) Novosel Rohe Salles Sterling
Down m3		Drew (1) Nanny (1)		Bernat Nanny (1)	
Down m2				Vance	
Original	Bernat Bradetich Ellison Hurst (1) Nanny (1) Rabbath Robinson (1) Salles	Bernat Ellison Murray (1) Rabbath	Ellison (1) Vance	Vance	Bernat Ellison (1) Ostland (1)

Example 7: Keys used in bass editions.

Keys, recorded	Suite 1	Suite 2	Suite 3	Suite 4	Suite 5
Down 8v		Badila			
Down m7		Carter (2) Reinke (S)		Carter (2) Reinke (S)	
Down m6			Un'Ottava (1, S)	Salles (S)	Daryen (1)
Down P5	Carter (3) Drew (2) Ferraris (S) Reinke (S)	Salles (S)			
Down P4		Froloff (1, S)	Bernat (S) Carter (2) Karr (S; 1 mvt. 2x) Lee (S) Mizoiri (1) Reinke (S) Salles (S) Schultz (2) Ueda (1, S)	Karr (sc) Salles	Carter (1) Reinke (S) Salles (S)
Down m3				Bernat (S)	Cameron (S) Lee (S) Meyer (S)
Down m2				Cameron (sc)	
Original	Bernat (S) Bradetich (S) Green (3) Hartshorne (sc) Karr (S) Meyer (S) Mizoiri Rabbath, 2x Saito Salles Schultz (2)	Bernat (S)  Hartshorne (sc) Karr (S) Meyer (S)   Witt (1, S)	Hartshorne (sc)	Hartshorne (sc)   Schultz (2)	Bernat (S)  Hartshorne (sc)   Schultz (3)
Up M2					Karr (S)

Example 8: Keys used in bass recordings.

We see historically that, after the early publications of Stix and Sterling, very low keys have been rare (note that Carter and Reinke used Sterling). The lowest keys are generally in former communist countries, perhaps showing a regional taste for tessitura and timbre. Rizzi, also tending low, notes that the suites lie in the cello's middle-lower register with ample use of open strings (2007, p. 6). We also see that certain suites show strong key preferences: most notably, Suites 1 and 3 in G.

The issues connected with key contain three components. First, must the suites be played in their entirety, or perhaps even all six suites be performed as a set? This implies a related question, the value of arrangement for more than one instrument, since these are often of single movements; this shall be addressed under the topic of style. Second, what do we mean by “original pitch”? Third, what then takes priority, the tessitura of the works as they lie on violoncello (that is, the lower half of the string), or ease of performance, or specific technical requirements, or “original” pitch?<sup>4</sup>

The bibliography suggests freedom to play single suites and even single movements from suites. Clearly, this is what is already being done, and the sheer vigor demonstrated concerning partial suites, including both new editions and new recordings, suggests that editorial solutions to single movements remain valuable. It should also be noted that there are no convincing demonstrations based on internal formal musical necessity that the suites require that all the movements be played; nothing is lacking formally in one movement that is completed by the other movements. Indeed, apart from the first suite there are no demonstrated parallels or connections between all movements of a suite apart from key.<sup>5</sup> This suggests one needn’t play all movements of a suite in the same key. This would seem most apparent when one plays different movements on different occasions.

The opposite end of the spectrum would be an integrated performance of all six suites. The key issue, so to speak, is whether there is a tonal pattern among the suites, as proposed by Bartman (1998).<sup>6</sup> The editions that transpose each suite differently are, according to this view, essentially a succession of fragmentary solutions. A more integrated approach has been approached three times: by Stix (1915), who proposed playing 24 movements down an octave; by Hartshorne (1997), who recorded all six “at pitch,” and by Salles (1999, 2000, 2004), who recorded and published the first five suites all with a tonic of G. Vance’s de-edited texts (n.d.), in conjunction with Rabbath’s heavily edited texts (1982, 1986), provides helpful material to arrive at a solution, but not the solution itself.

But the question remains, especially when playing an entire Suite, should it be “at pitch”? The impetus behind this is to make it sound the way Bach would have wanted it. This, however, is a chimera. For one thing, we’re being more rigorous than Bach himself, because when Bach



transcribed, he also freely transposed. Moreover, Bach never heard solos played on the bass. The bass has no original solo repertoire before the time of Dittersdorf, and the only chamber music from the time of Bach that went beyond playing continuo seems to be a set of duets by Saggioni.<sup>7</sup> To play this solo Bach on the bass at all means we must use a dynamic, active approach to transcription.

Recall also that Bach's secular chamber works often used a lower pitch than the modern A440: *Tiefkammerton* (now artificially standardized at A = 415). This difference is compounded by modern bassists' widespread use of "solo tuning" scordatura, a whole-step higher than orchestral tuning. That means that "original pitch" can be about a minor third higher than Bach was thinking, and on a lower-pitched instrument. These factors render it problematic to justify so-called "original pitch," at least as now applied.

The third part of the question, that of the priority of tessitura, ease, technique, and original pitch, can be engaged by noting that, while some bassists play these works at "original pitch," others play this music in a low tessitura because it lies low on the cello. We see this in recordings by Badila (2001) and Reinke (1998), for example.

An alternative would be to look for any key in which we can best preserve the distribution of the material across the strings in a way similar to what cellists do: especially, preserving those techniques known as *batterie*, *ondeggiando*, and *bariolage*. The *bariolage* section of the *Prelude from Suite 1*, mm. 31-38, for example, works well in G, in D, and in C. We therefore see it published in each of those keys (cf. Ex. 7). This suggests that there can be more than one good answer.

Put another way, one might consider Bach's original intentions in terms of string choice. Clearly, Bach imagined these suites being played in low positions with much use of open strings and string crossings. We see this in the manuscripts of *Suite 5*, in which, because of the scordatura, we can easily tell which of the top two strings Bach had in mind. Bach therefore expected a level of contrapuntal clarity to be achieved through string color. The opening of the *Suite 1*, for example, has three contrapuntal lines, each with its own string—that is, *ondeggiando*. This feature can be captured in a fingering such as that sketched in Example 9.<sup>8</sup> Many passages benefit from such an approach.



Example 9: Sketch of Fingering for Opening of Prelude, Suite 1.

## Chords

How should awkward chords be negotiated? Should notes be left out? May notes be added? Should chords be arpeggiated? Should scor-daturas be devised to resolve the problem, as exemplified by Hartshorne?<sup>9</sup> A good simple case in point is the *Sarabande* from *Suite N<sup>o</sup> 3*: good because we have a model analysis of linear and harmonic implications by Heinrich Schenker (1996) and simple because there are only a few points at which there are choices to be made. We shall use the Sterling edition (1957) as a point of reference.<sup>10</sup> The first issue the removal of the tonic in the lowest register at the beginning and end. Although Sterling's octave transposition of the roots on the downbeats of mm. 1 and 2 along with the removal of the root, m. 1, beat 2, results in a good bass line within mm. 1-8, the descent to the low A in m. 6 requires ultimate resolution in the same register, and this resolution is best prepared by an earlier use of this low tonic pitch as the root of tonic harmony. Sterling provides neither, Example 10.



Example 10: *Sarabande*, *Suite 3*, mm. 1-6, ed. Sterling.

Karr (1968, 1998) provides a good solution to the opening by including the low tonic in m. 3, Example 11.



Example 11: *Sarabande, Suite 3*, m. 5, as recorded by Gary Karr.

The final chord is a separate problem; all three registers should be resolved to tonic, but no editions or recordings do so. In a fast active movement such as the *Prelude*, an arpeggio could work, Example 12.



Example 12: A Final Cadence to the *Prelude, Suite 3*.

Here, however, the rhythmic character might best be combined with conclusive voice-leading chordally, Example 13.



Example 13: A Final Cadence to the *Sarabande, Suite 3*.

The chords in mm. 17 and 18 are quite a different matter: as shown in Schenker's analysis, the voicing and register of the chords is of considerably less hierarchical importance. One can therefore use Sterling's solution, Example 14, or, like Salles (2004), open m. 17 with the tritone G-C#, retaining Bach's E-C#-G in m. 18.



Example 14: *Sarabande, Suite 3*, mm. 17-18, ed. Sterling.

The complex issue of style, including performance practice, must be addressed.<sup>11</sup> This includes confronting the conflicting aesthetic ideals behind such decisions, accompanied by their value-freighted terminology. This discussion shall shy away from such terms as “historically informed,” with its implied opposite of historically ignorant. Instead, let us pose two sets of options. The first set can be imagined as an axis, one pole of which is what has been called historical verisimilitude, the attempt to recapture what an idealized performance at the time of Bach might have sounded like. Obviously no bassist can apply this with full rigor, as noted above. At the other pole of the same axis is the vitalist approach, holding that all of history is summed up in the present and that music must be performed with full knowledge of its historical significance – in this case amounting to almost three centuries of reception history. That is, we play Bach in the knowledge that he was the root of a tradition encompassing Beethoven, Wagner, and Schoenberg. In this light, the only bassist to record a strong approach to performance practice in the direction of verisimilitude is Salles (1999, 2000). Similar concerns are expressed in the Salles’s editions as well as in those of Vance, who presents “unedited” editions, Ellison (n.d.), whose following of Bylsma’s literalistic view of the Anna Magdalena Bach copy is noted above, and Rizzi (1997), whose decisions also reflect his experience with the gamba (which uses an upbow for emphasis and, when played lyra-style, prefers very full chords); Borém (1992) provides a stimulating exploration of the subtopic of varied repetition. One trend that seems to be increasingly moribund is the performance of this music as salon music with piano accompaniment; despite considerable inertia, this is apparently no longer a viable “vitalist” view. However, vitalism survives in the recently-emerged trend to view Bach, the great improviser, as a precursor of jazz, as documented in Ex. 2. The chamber music arrangements of the *Sarabande* from *Suite 6* by Salles (1998) and Schuller (1979) also suggest the value of further work in recasting Bach. The future of stylistic reinterpretation promises to be fruitful.

Intermediate positions also abound. These include taking a more restricted approach to the history of performance style, such as positioning oneself within the tradition of “modern” string playing. Another strategy

cites not all of intervening music history but rather specific changing performance circumstances, such as the change in venue from the chamber to a larger concert hall, suggesting the advisability of performance techniques intended for such acoustic spaces.

This ineluctably draws us to the options of performance tradition—perhaps best imagined not as an axis but as a hand of cards. There is no choosing where one was born or how large one's hands are, those were dealt by life. But one can exercise some control over with whom one studies or what one reads or listens to: one can draw some new cards from the pack. So it can be attractive to think of different performances as being like playing different hands, or even different games. We each of us have our unique fistful of influences: some as intimate and concrete as our teacher and our regional upbringing, others as philosophic as whether art should be calming or exciting, however glossed. To such lofty categories must be added our technical preferences, habits, and even faults.

## Conclusion

Where do we go from here? First, the wealth of material currently available suggests that we already have quite enough of certain things, such as recordings of the first suite fingered in G. However, an examination of current material suggests we would do well to continue to reconsider key and tessitura in light of counterpoint and the technical expectations of the music as played on cello, as discussed above. In the case of *Suite 4*, for instance, there is a preference for keys using a maximum of open strings and harmonics, despite Bach having chosen a key in which the first six measures have none. Perhaps Robert Rohe (1977) was right: try it in Bb, tuned all in fourths. Finally, as noted above, the analysis of voice leading and counterpoint should help avoid unnecessary stylistic awkwardness. One might consider the very difficult task of transcribing the *Sarabande* from *Suite 6* and the relative advantages of the implicit lower lines to the opening as variously transcribed for bass, Example 15.

Bach

Bernat, recording (1995)

Karr (2005)

Neidlinger (n.d.)

Novosel (1988)

Rohe (1977)

Schuller (1979, transposed)

Sterlin (1957) , Reinke (1998)

Zhang (2002-2003)

Example 15: Bass Line, *Sarabande, Suite 6*, by Bach and others.

These demonstrate that, while Bach's bass line might not be retainable short of such heroic efforts as Hartshorne, several other options exist. These can be evaluated in light of counterpoint. Bach's cello suites have drawn high artistry from bassists; let us hope that the vision of this musical greatness will continue to draw us on.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are other broad issues involved which are beyond the scope of this article including the role of transcriptions, editing practices, Bach source studies, performance practice, and the changing nature of publishing (especially the worldwide web).
- <sup>2</sup> This view of "most important," based on availability and usefulness, admittedly reflects national bias. However, it provides a manageable starting point for a personal list.
- <sup>3</sup> The forthcoming recording by François Rabbath was not available for study.
- <sup>4</sup> The liner notes to **Rabbath Plays Bach** (LP RML 8201; QCA Redmark, 1982) illustrate the issues by getting a term precisely wrong: playing the suites on the bass at the same pitch level employed by modern cellists retains the absolute pitch level but changes the tessitura from the lower register of the cello to the higher register of the bass.

- <sup>5</sup> David W. Beach (2005, p. 19, 21-22, 31-36) demonstrates that all movements of the first suite share a prominent motion of scale degrees 3-4-3 near the beginning. He also notes, in four dances from the third suite, the common motion to a strong subdominant cadence in the second half and, in the fourth suite, the expansion of the 8-b7-6 that opens the *Prélude* into middleground motion in two other movements. Cf. Winold (2007).
- <sup>6</sup> Bartman bases his conclusions on number symbolism and esoteric structure. His multiple criteria for determining significance amounts to special pleading.
- <sup>7</sup> Although Telemann was a contemporary of Bach, his *Grillen Symphonie* with its two concertante basses dates from very late in his life: 1765. It is thus contemporary with the earliest classical bass concerti by Haydn (1763, lost), Kohaut (1765) and those of Dittersdorf (1766-7). On Saggione, see Mary Cyr, *Basses and Basse Continue* in the Orchestra of the Paris Opéra 1700-1764, **Early Music**, Oxford, v. 10, n. 2, 1982, 157; Peter Holman, Purcell's Orchestra, **Musical Times**, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, v. 137, n. 1835, 1996, p. 18; David Lasocki, Professional Recorder Playing in England 1500-1740. II: 1640-1740, **Early Music**, Oxford, v. 10, n. 2, 1982, p. 186. I am indebted to Robert Nairn for bringing to my attention both the Telemann and Saggione's duets, published for two celli but arguably intended for Saggione's own instrument.
- <sup>8</sup> Bradetich's (2000) and Krasnopolsky's (1980) editions use other fingerings that also preserves this feature. The topic is discussed in Efrati (1979).
- <sup>9</sup> "Normal" tuning, using the sounding pitch and the designations of the American Acoustical Society, is G2 D2 A1 E1. Hartshorne's tunings (1997) from first string to fourth are: Suite 1, G2 D2 G1 E1; Suite 2, C3 G2 C2 D2; Suite 3, C3 G2 C2 G2 except Gigue C3 G2 D2 C2; Suite 4, C3 G2 C2 Eb2; Suite 5, C3 G2 C2 G2 except Gavottes C3 G2 C2 F2; Suite 6 E3 A2 D2 G2.
- <sup>10</sup> WorldCat suggests that Sterling (1957) is the best-distributed transposition to G.
- <sup>11</sup> The following discussion relies on the writings of Richard Taruskin, especially those collected in **Text & Act** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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