

The Cello Suites of Bach and Britten:
History, Form and Performance

by

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Introduction

My first exposure to Benjamin Britten's solo cello suites was at a performance institute I attended a few summers ago in New Hampshire. A fellow student performed the *Marcia* from the First Suite, and I was instantly intrigued. The percussive *col legno* attacks, coupled with the passages of harmonics evocative of a distant trumpet call, created a theatricality I had never heard before in music for solo cello. The movement was just over three minutes long, but employed the use of the entire cello in a way that fascinated and impressed me.

When I eventually heard the pieces in their entirety (on Matt Haimovitz's *The 20th Century Cello*), I became interested in pairing one of the Britten suites with one of the cello suites by Johann Sebastian Bach, which I had been studying and performing for years. This was mainly due to the fact that these were the first pieces I had encountered that also occupied the genre of solo cello "suite." I immediately ordered the sheet music.

Initially, I imagined that Britten was inspired solely by the Bach suites when he composed his own unaccompanied pieces. But when my Faber Music edition arrived, I opened the music to discover a page with a reproduction of Britten's scrawling dedication, "For Slava." Recognizing "Slava" as the nickname for cello virtuoso Mstislav Rostropovich, I began to realize that there were more nuances to this project. I had envisioned a straightforward comparison between the Britten and Bach suites, but my research uncovered a much more complex and touching story behind each of these pieces. Britten's beautiful and erratic works were without a

doubt inspired by Bach, but more importantly, they were gifts from Britten to one of his dearest friends.

There isn't much Britten scholarship concerning the Suites specifically. Sources I was able to find focused on the innovative cello technique the pieces require, or analysis of their Russian elements and influence.¹ A comparison between Britten and Bach's cello suites seems to me natural and inviting, so it is somewhat surprising that scholars haven't yet elaborated on this connection. This thesis takes as its purpose then to examine the circumstantial situations that brought about both the Bach and Britten cello suites, what this musical form meant to each composer, and the complications of studying and performing these pieces. My first chapter posits that there are hitherto unremarked-upon similarities in the circumstances that brought about these two sets of suites, despite the very different careers of Bach and Britten. The second chapter focuses on each man's relationship with the genre of "suite." The third chapter will examine performance issues that arise when preparing these pieces, focusing specifically on the sixth Bach suite and first Britten suite, which I performed back to back in my thesis recital.

¹ Hsieh, Hui-Ju. *Britten's most Russian tribute to Rostropovich: The Cello Suite No. 3, Opus 87*. DMA Dissertation, Boston University, 2007.

Chapter 1:

Patronage and Friendship

How does the context in which Bach wrote his unaccompanied cello suites circa 1720 compare to that in which Britten composed his own cello suites in the early 1960s? What commonalities and differences characterize the compositional methods of each man? I will argue that Baroque composers are more accurately described as craftsmen than artists, limited in their creative decision-making by royal patronage, whereas 20th century composers had much more artistic autonomy. Britten dedicated works to important figures in his life for deeply personal reasons. His three *Suites for Solo Cello* provide a case in point, since they arose out of his intimate friendship with virtuoso cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Bach's career consisted, for the most part, of compositions required of him by a given patron at a given time. Some of these works were dedicated to specific individuals, most famously the Brandenburg Concertos (dedicated to Christian Ludwig, the Margrave of Brandenburg), but these dedications related directly to Bach's employment circumstances, or to hopes for a future position. It's wrong, however, to assume that Bach's obligations to various patrons dispelled the influence friends and family had on his work. Despite the great impact of circumstantial elements on Bach's career, he too had meaningful personal relationships that inspired and shaped his compositional output. I will argue that key friendships pushed both Britten and Bach toward instrumental pieces after predominantly vocal work, despite different approaches to composition.

Bach, like most composers in the Baroque era, composed mainly in response to the demand of his employers. Bach's various appointments often required very different musical responsibilities. For example, he was first hired in 1703 by the minor court of Weimar as a violinist, but when he relocated soon after to the town of Arnstadt, he took the position of church organist. After moving from Arnstadt to serve as church organist in another town, Mühlhausen, Bach settled into the life of aristocratic court employment during a ten year stint at the Weimar ducal court, serving as organist, as well as violinist in the Weimar court band.²

It was at Weimar that Bach established himself as a composer, especially by imitating the style of Italian and French contemporary composers, and he was eventually promoted to the position of *konzertmeister*, principal violinist of the court orchestra.³ It is clear that Bach felt restricted by his employment at Weimar; he desired the position of Kapellmeister, or musical director of the court orchestra, which would offer a heightened salary and the opportunity to supervise the other musicians. When the Weimar Kapellmeister died in 1717, Bach was denied the position. So when he received an offer soon after to become the Kapellmeister at the court of Cöthen, he was naturally interested and asked permission to leave Weimar. He was subsequently thrown in the castle jail.⁴ Interestingly, in his book, *The Cello*

² Sibling, Eric. *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly, 2009. 17-31.

³ Clive Brown. "Leader." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 13 Mar. 2011 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/16178>>.

⁴ Sibling, *The Cello Suites*, 26-27.

Suites, Eric Sibling cites “an old account handed down from one of Bach’s students” which states that Bach started his composition of the first book of the Well-Tempered Clavier while imprisoned at Weimar. Sibling postulates that the striking similarities between the opening prelude of the WTC and the prelude from the first Cello Suite could indicate that “Bach quite possibly started writing the first cello suite in jail.”⁵

Although Sibling’s speculation regarding the circumstances surrounding Bach’s composition of his cello suites is vivid and potentially accurate, it is impossible to know exactly when Bach wrote these pieces for an equally intriguing reason: the original manuscript has disappeared. Despite the lack of a hard copy in Bach’s hand (only a copy in Anna Magdalena’s script survives⁶), most scholars estimate that the Suites were composed around 1720, while Bach was in residency at Cöthen, after his release from the Weimar castle jail.

⁵ Sibling, *The Cello Suites*, 27.

⁶ Interestingly, the lack of an existing composer’s manuscript for the cello suites has led some researchers to believe that Anna Magdalena actually composed the suites herself, rather than simply copying them. Martin Jarvis, of Charles Darwin University, discovered in 2008 that the inscription on the earliest manuscript of the suites reads "Ecritte par Madame Bachen Son Epouse," which translates literally to “written by...” rather than “copied by...”

Dutter, Barbie. "Bach Works Were Written by His Second Wife, Claims Academic - Telegraph." *Telegraph.co.uk*. 23 Apr. 2006. Web. 13 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1516423/Bach-works-were-written-by-his-second-wife-claims-academic.html>>.

Salleh, Anna. "Bach's Wife May Have Been Composer" *ABC.net.au*. Web. 13 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/10/04/2382049.htm>>.

Bach turned to composition of secular, instrumental works during his residency at Cöthen, due to the Calvinist religious practices of the court there, which favored only simple, vocal church music. (Additionally, the lack of an organ in the small town prevented Bach from composing keyboard works at the same rate.) Although he consistently wrote instrumental works for keyboard instruments throughout his entire career, this was the first opportunity for Bach to explore purely instrumental composition, giving him much more freedom to explore writing for various, specific instruments.

Although Bach composed mainly in response to the requirements designated by his employers, I would like to argue that the composition of the cello suites was only possible due to the freedom Bach enjoyed in his residency at Cöthen, freedom that was partly due to his close friendship with the young Leopold, prince of Cöthen. Leopold was an avid supporter of the arts. He was not restrictive of his Kapellmeister and would have encouraged Bach to experiment with different ensembles and instruments. Leopold was not only a music lover but an avid performer; he sang and played the violin, harpsichord and viola da gamba.⁷

Although Bach absolutely fits the stereotype of Baroque composer as craftsman, his deepest personal relationships still shaped his career and music. Although the influence of his private life is not as overt or extensively detailed as that of Britten's, it is worthwhile to make note of instances in which Bach wrote for the

⁷ Wolff, Christoph. "Capellmeister in Cöthen, 1717-1723." *Johann Sebastian Bach: the Learned Musician*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. 192. Print.

ones he loved, in particular his second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach. Bach's relationship to Anna Magdalena was instrumental to his career; she was a skilled copyist and prepared his compositions for sales and performance. But in addition to helping out with some of the grunt work involved in Bach's composition, she was an accomplished singer and keyboardist and served as a musical confidant for Bach. The closeness of their marriage and musical partnership resulted in Bach dedicating musical works for Anna Magdalena, most notably the "Little Keyboard Book for Anna Magdalena Bach."⁸

The composition of Benjamin Britten's cello suites also occurred at a juncture in which the composer returned to writing instrumental music. Despite composing a great deal of instrumental music early in his career, Benjamin Britten became a composer of primarily vocal music in his mature career. This was due in part to the positive reception of his early operatic works, including *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, and *Turn of the Screw*. But this turn towards vocal music can also be attributed to the friendship and relationship that grew between Britten and tenor Peter Pears, whom Britten met in 1937. Britten wrote an extensive succession of songs and opera roles with Pears in mind.

This was just one of many personal relationships that directly affected the nature and form of Britten's musical output. Unlike Bach's compositions, whose form and instrumentation were directly influenced by the terms of his employment, Britten's work was frequently the direct product of a relationship he established with

⁸ Sibling, *The Cello Suites*, 96-97.

a particular musician or another composer. In a 1964 speech, Britten defended this habit, stating, “I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships...I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, I do not write for posterity.”⁹ Britten’s collaborative work as a pianist and his career as a composer were symbiotic; many artists he accompanied later became inspirations for a piece. Arguably, it was one of these personal and musical friendships that led to Britten’s return to composing substantial instrumental music, most particularly for the cello.

Britten met Mstislav Rostropovich for the first time in September 1960, after Rostropovich’s performance of Shostakovich’s first Cello Concerto at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Shostakovich, who had dedicated the concerto to Rostropovich, invited Britten to attend and introduced him to Rostropovich after the concert. The cellist almost immediately requested that Britten compose a piece for him, which eventually took shape in the form of the Cello Sonata in C, completed in January 1961. The Sonata was followed by the Cello Symphony¹⁰ (1963) and the three Cello Suites. Although they could barely understand each other when speaking (they communicated in a private, hybrid language they called “Aldeburgh Deutsch”)¹¹, Rostropovich and Britten developed an intense friendship and creative collaboration that would continue for the remainder of the composer’s life. Britten

⁹ Ross, Alex. *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 412.

¹⁰ The Cello Symphony, for solo cello and orchestra, is immediately reminiscent of Sergei Prokofiev’s Symphony-Concerto in E minor for cello and orchestra, a work of a similarly large scale, also dedicated to and premiered by Rostropovich.

¹¹ Oliver, Michael. *Benjamin Britten*. London: Phaidon, 1996. Print, p. 169.

also established a strong friendship with Rostropovich's wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. The couple would often spend holidays with Britten; in December of 1965 they celebrated Christmas at Aldeburgh, and the following year Britten traveled to Moscow to join the couple in celebrating the Russian New Year.¹²

Britten's developing friendship with Rostropovich was just one of many fruitful creative relationships the composer shared with instrumentalists. Interestingly, Rostropovich, too, made a habit of cultivating powerful bonds with numerous composers throughout his performance career. Glière's 1946 cello concerto was the first piece by an eminent composer to be formally dedicated to Rostropovich; the young cellist was still a teenager when Glière noticed and acknowledged his remarkable talent with this dedication. The Glière concerto, however, was just the first in a long series of works dedicated to Rostropovich. Nikolay Miyaskovsky was the next composer to write specifically with Rostropovich in mind. It was through Miyaskovsky that Rostropovich met Prokofiev¹³, who wrote him a Sonata and in turn introduced him to Shostakovich (who, as mentioned before, introduced him to Britten).¹⁴ Rostropovich was the dedicatee and first performer of works by each of these major composers, as well as an assortment of lesser-known composers.

¹² Kennedy, Michael. *Britten*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print. Master Musicians. P. 88.

¹³ Interestingly, shortly before his death Prokofiev was working on an *unaccompanied* cello sonata for Rostropovich, which would have predated Britten's suites by a decade and been the first work for solo cello dedicated to the virtuoso.

¹⁴ Wilson, Elizabeth A. M. *Mstislav Rostropovich: Cellist, Teacher, Legend*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. 64-78, 125.

It is possible that the composition process of the Suites was actually a joint effort between Rostropovich and Britten, since there was a history of collaboration between them. Though Britten completed the 1960 *Sonata for Cello and Piano* before presenting it to Rostropovich, he sent the cellist the first movement of the *Cello Symphony* in November of 1962 while the work was still in progress. He included a note from Britten begging the cellist's approval: "...I hope you will like it so far, dear Slava; I must confess I can hear you in every note and every bar, although I fear it may not be worthy of your great art." Rostropovich responded, praising the excerpt as "the very top of everything ever written for cello."¹⁵

Britten's documented collaboration with guitarist Julian Bream suggests that the unprecedented technical elements of the cello suites could have been developed in partnership with Rostropovich. An interview conducted by Humphrey Carpenter with British writer Donald Mitchell describes the cooperation between Britten and Bream: "Ben would sometimes consult Julian, and ask, 'Is this possible on the guitar?' And Julian would say, 'No it isn't.' But then he would take it away and try it and find that it *was* possible, that it worked."¹⁶

Although correspondence between Britten and Rostropovich that mentions the Cello Suites is limited by their language barrier and geographic distance, a few

¹⁵ Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten: a Biography*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992. 415. Print.

¹⁶ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: a Biography*, 421.

available letters indicate that composer and cellist were in dialogue regarding the Suites. In an undated letter from early 1965, Rostropovich refers to the First Cello Suite, mentioning a previous letter from Britten: “You write in the letter that you don’t consider this work too successful. I looked at it, so far only on paper, but I tell you honestly: either you are too stupid to understand what a piece you have created or it is simply pretense!”¹⁷ Britten responded in January of 1965, saying “...I got your letter about the Cello Suite, and I wonder now whether you have played it, and like it a little, or find it impossible or dull to play? How I long to hear you play it!”¹⁸

Even during the years Britten was not particularly prolific as an instrumental composer, he remained active as a dynamic performer of chamber music as both a pianist and a violist. Britten’s experience as a violist prepared him to compose for solo cello, but the technical intricacies of the suites still imply some sort of collaboration between cellist and composer.

Britten’s friendship with Rostropovich can also be seen as growing alongside a mutual admiration between Britten and his contemporary, Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich also had a close creative relationship with Rostropovich and dedicated multiple pieces to him, including his epic Cello Concerto No. 1; he was, as mentioned before, responsible for introducing Rostropovich to Britten at the first British performance of the concerto.

¹⁷ Britten, Benjamin, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke. *Letters from a Life: the Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*. Vol. 5. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010. 639. Print.

¹⁸ *Letters from a Life: the Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*. 628.

In 1965, Britten and Pears traveled to a Soviet composers' colony in Armenia to visit Rostropovich and his wife, as well as Shostakovich. As Britten got to know Rostropovich, a friendship also blossomed between Shostakovich and Britten. There was a great deal of mutual respect between the two composers. In *The Rest is Noise*, Alex Ross argues that there was a connection between the emotional quality of their music: "Britten's psychological landscape, with its undulating contours of fear and guilt, its fault lines and crevasses, its wan redeeming light, made Shostakovich feel at home."¹⁹ The two men continued to correspond throughout the rest of their lives (Shostakovich died only a year before Britten, in 1975), and arguably demonstrated their admiration for each other's music by quoting excerpts of the other's work in their own. The opening *Declamato* of Britten's Second Cello Suite sounds strikingly similar to the opening cello theme of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (1937). Scholars, including Ross, argue that excerpts of Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony are strongly reminiscent of Britten's first Cello Suite, contributing to the argument that this symphony is in honor of the friendship between the two composers.²⁰

In conclusion, despite the significant differences in the ways Bach and Britten composed, for both composers, their suites for solo cello marked a turn towards instrumental music that was due in part to new friendships. For Bach, the fact that Prince Leopold took a liking to him allowed him to obtain a position at the Cöthen

¹⁹ Ross, Alex. *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 436. Print.

²⁰ Ross, Alex. *The Rest Is Noise*, 440.

court that gave him the freedom to explore new genres, like music for solo instrumentalists. Additionally, Bach's relationship and musical collaboration with Anna Magdalena resulted in the only surviving copy of the Cello Suites. It was the friendship Britten established with Rostropovich that led him to write for solo cello. For Britten, there was of course the added resonance of Bach's groundbreaking contributions to the genre – an association I will explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 2:

Exploring the Solo Instrumental Suite

Having looked, in the first chapter, at the personal circumstances that lay behind Bach's and Britten's respective decisions to write music for solo cello, it is now time to explore what the relationship was, for each composer, with the genre of the solo instrumental suite. Here, I will analyze the inconsistent form of Britten's three suites in contrast with the rigid, unvarying structure of Bach's six suites. I will then argue that in the case of these two sets of suites, both composers were using an obsolete musical framework, with terminology that was archaic for their time. Baroque dance suites were old-fashioned by the time Bach wrote the cello suites. In the case of Britten, there is a two-fold reference to the past: by the later 20th century, Bach's cello suites had become canonized in the musical repertoire. They were so well known that all new works in this genre would inevitably be subject to comparison. In writing cello suites, Britten invited direct comparison to Bach's cello suites, which were themselves already deliberately archaic. I conclude this chapter by exploring the possible references that Britten is making by using the terms he does in the format of his Suites, as well as the possible reasons he may have opted for this particular genre.

Grove Music Online defines a suite as "any ordered set of instrumental pieces meant to be performed at a single sitting."²¹ Different movements within a suite may

²¹ Fuller, David. "Suite." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 11 Feb. 2011 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27091>>.

be connected in various ways: they may be in the same key or related keys, movements may be variations on an established theme, or more subtle thematic relationships may exist.

In Europe at the time of the Suites' composition, the instrumental suite was already a popular and well-established genre. A suite was comprised of a collection of different dance movements, although the layout of suites varied from distinct countries and composers. In the 17th century, French musicians began to group these stylized dance movements, derived from court ballet, into sets with a common key.²² Eventually, four movements emerged as the core of the typical Baroque Suite, in this order: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue. There was still frequent variation of this framework, including the optional addition of preludes and "galanterie" movements. Bach's suites are prototypical Baroque suites, and despite the lack of standardization of the format, Bach's six cello suites all follow more or less the same structure.

Each of Bach's six cello suites is in six distinct movements. Opening each suite is a Prelude. These Preludes are often virtuosic and rhythmically free, serving as introductions to the individual character of each suite. The second movement of each suite is an Allemande, which originated in sixteenth-century Germany as a lively dance, but by Bach's time was generally set at an elegantly slow tempo.²³ Following

²² Schulenberg, David. "Music for Solo Instruments I." *Music of the Baroque*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 222.

²³ Sibling, *The Cello Suites*.

the Allemande is the Courante, which appears as the third movement in all of the six suites. The Courante is a lively, fast-paced dance that was popular in various regions of Europe in Bach's time. A Sarabande follows each Courante. The Sarabande is typically the slowest and most melancholy movement of these suites; Rostropovich once described the Sarabande as evoking a "dreamy sadness."²⁴ The fifth movement is the only which varies from suite to suite. Despite this variation, Bach always employs a pair of popular French court dances, choosing from the Minuet, Bourée and Gavotte. The first two suites feature Minuets, the third, Bourées, while the fifth and sixth use Gavottes. These "galanterie movements" are light and usually feature a memorable tune. The sixth and last movement of each suite is a lively Gigue, which has a faster tempo than any other movement and playfully concludes the suite.

A side-by-side comparison of the sixth Bach and the first Britten solo cello suites highlights the broad spectrum of material held within the genre of "suite" by each of these composers.²⁵ Bach's sixth suite is a prototypical Baroque suite in that although each movement, including both "galanterie" movements, travels to other keys and establishes new tonics, the harmony always returns to and cadences in D Major. Although all six suites are firmly rooted in a given key, there is a slight difference between the first three and the second three. While the movements of the fourth, fifth and sixth suites remain purely in their particular key, the second galanterie movement of the first, second and third suites cadence in the parallel minor

²⁴ Siblin, *The Cello Suites*, 108.

²⁵ These two works were performed back to back in my thesis recital.

or major of the other movements, creating a somewhat stronger divergence from the original key. This slight variation barely changes the overall effect of the suite's consistency of harmony, especially since the galanterie movements are in Da Capo form and the second galanterie is heard more as the B section of one movement in A-B-A form than as an independent movement.

The form of Britten's first suite is as follows:

Canto Primo – I. Fuga – II. Lamento

Canto Secondo – III. Serenata – IV. Marcia

Canto Terzo – V. Bordone – VI. Moto perpetuo e Canto Quarto.

The term “Canto” has a literary overtone, recalling Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as Ezra Pound's long poem, *The Cantos*. Musically, Britten's cantos function similarly to the Promenades from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, dividing the longer movements and recycling material from the introductory “Canto Primo” later on. Since Britten chose to leave the Cantos unnumbered, the suite contains six true, numbered movements, a possible reference to the six-movement form of Bach's suites, albeit that the second and third Suites deviate from this pattern, consisting of five and nine movements, respectively. Additionally, the third Suite contains a numbered, full-length movement titled “Canto,” straying from what Britten established the canto to be in the first suite. It is clear that Britten's suites are much more flexible than Bach's in their form and organization.

But the fact remains that both Bach and Britten were composing within a musical framework that was obsolete. The dances presented in Baroque Suites had long passed from fashion; these suites were never meant to accompany any real movement. David Schulenberg estimates that the Allemande was only danced from 1550 to around 1600.²⁶ The movements of the Bach Suites no longer resembled or represented the characteristics associated with the original dance of the same name. Additionally, by 1720 the term “suite” had begun to be replaced by other terms. François Couperin used the term “ordre” in reference to his suite-like harpsichord works, the first volume of which were written a decade before Bach’s cello suites.²⁷ “Partita” had also emerged as a synonym for “suite.”

It is notable that in the compositions that immediately preceded the composition of the Cello Suites, the six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, Bach had already begun to abandon the outmoded terminology and form of the Baroque Suite. Although the violin sonatas are consistent in their form (four movements which alternate slow-fast-slow-fast, with Italian titles, in the style of the Italian “sonata da chiesa”), the three partitas are much more unorthodox. They contain different numbers of movements (four, five and seven respectively) and while they incorporate traditional movements from the prototypical Baroque suite, they introduce new elements that make them much more novel in their structure than the unchanging, six-movement framework of the cello suites. After beginning to stray from the

²⁶ Schulenberg, David. *Music of the Baroque*. 241.

²⁷ Schulenberg, David. *Music of the Baroque*. 268.

established Baroque suite structure in the partitas, why did Bach subsequently organize the cello suites in such a traditional and fixed fashion?²⁸

The Baroque suite was a well-established and popular genre. Bach evidently wished to situate his new solo works in this tradition, which is how he came to use these archaic French movement names. But why did Britten title the movements of his Suites using antiquated, *Italian* terms? It is possible that he was referencing the first dated works for unaccompanied cello, which go back to late seventeenth-century Italy, works that would have been precedents for Bach in his own composition process. A cluster of Italian cellists and composers were beginning to explore the soloistic potential of the cello. Both Giovanni Battista degli Antonii (1610-98) and Domenico Gabrielli (1659-1690) worked out of Bologna and wrote *ricercari* for solo cello. Gabrielli's *Seven Ricercari for solo cello* (1689) began to explore the instrument's virtuosic capabilities, incorporating "florid passagework and double, triple and quadruple stops."²⁹ Other pioneering works for solo cello came from the court of Modena, where Giuseppe Colombi (1635-1694) wrote *toccatas* and *ciacconas* for cello. These pieces would have influenced Domenico Galli (1649-

²⁸ The more inconsistent arrangements of the Partitas indicate a stronger connection between Britten's suites and these Bach *violin* pieces, rather than his cello suites. Britten was probably also referencing the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin when he wrote the suites for Rostropovich. This hypothesis is strengthened by the observation that Britten's second cello suite concludes with a Ciaccona that is significantly longer than the preceding four movements, immediately recalling the monumental Ciaccona that concludes the second Partita in D minor for solo violin.

²⁹ Suess, John and Vanscheeuwijck, Marc. "Gabrielli, Domenico." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. 15 Mar. 2011
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/10453>>.

1697) to write his *Trattenimento musicale*, a set of twelve unaccompanied sonatas for violoncello, published in 1691.³⁰

I would conjecture that Bach and Britten may have *both* looked to these early Italian examples of solo string music before composing their suites. Bach was often influenced directly by Italian composers and musical style. Many of his compositions directly exhibit characteristics of a popular Italian musical form.³¹ This indicates that he may have been familiar with the solo string music of these late 17th-century Italian composers. The fact that his sonatas and partitas for solo violin, composed immediately before the Suites, incorporate Italian terms in their movement titles is further evidence that Bach looked to these pioneering Italians before composing for solo cello. Britten was probably consciously following in Bach's footsteps, looking to Italian precedents; in this way, he was in touch with, and interested in exploring, Bach's process of composing the cello suites.

Although Britten deliberately fashioned the movement titles of his suites to appear to be antiquated, Italian terms, some of them don't necessarily have a traceable performance history. For example, the reasons for the Bordone from the first suite are particularly hard to determine. "Bordone" simply means "Drone" in French, and almost every musical tradition, Eastern and Western alike, has employed

³⁰ Pyron, Nona and Lepore, Angela. "Galli, Domenico." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. 15 Mar. 2011
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/10550>>.

³¹ Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: the Learned Musician*. 126.

the use of drones.³² The Marcia is similarly hard to pinpoint. Although marches appeared frequently in Baroque music, especially Italian opera, they were never found in a chamber music setting. This march is much more likely to be a reference to a 20th century march, for instance Prokofiev's March from his 1919 opera, "The Love for Three Oranges." Another example is the Passacaglia that concludes the third suite. Although the passacaglia's origins are in 17th century Spain and Italy, and although the term is strongly associated with Bach's organ music, by the 1960s, the form had already been revived as a well-established convention in 20th-century opera. By the time he wrote his cello suites, Britten had already explored passacaglia form in *Peter Grimes* and other works.³³

Britten probably would have also been familiar with and influenced by some works for solo cello composed by other 20th-century composers in the years before he met Rostropovich. (Since there is a great volume of pieces written for solo cello in the 20th century before the 1960s, Britten was most likely to have come across either works by other British composers, or other works using the title of Suite. American composer Ernest Bloch wrote three "suites" for solo cello in 1956-7 that may have caught Britten's attention. He would have most likely heard Max Reger's three cello suites of 1915, much more overt in their Baroque references than Bloch's. Interestingly, lesser-known Russian composer Boris Tchaikovsky published a suite for solo cello for Mstislav Rostropovich in 1960, the year the cellist met Benjamin

³² Baines, Anthony. "Drone." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/08192>>

³³ Ross, Alex. *The Rest is Noise*. 427.

Britten. These are just a few examples of countless pieces that Britten could have had an awareness of when he began writing his cello suites.

In choosing to write unaccompanied cello suites for Rostropovich, rather than more accompanied music, Britten must have been deliberately situating his pieces in the lineage of Bach's suites, as well as of his Italianate influences. Britten also wrote "suites" for a number of other solo instrumentalists. In addition to Rostropovich's cello suites, he wrote suites for solo oboe, guitar and harp. It is possible that Britten saw writing unaccompanied music as a valuable exercise of discipline, requiring writing of the utmost efficiency. Britten could have also been interested in the textural possibilities offered by unaccompanied cello music and the variation between single melodic lines and compound melody. He may have been attracted to the challenge of achieving great compositional complexity through instrumental simplicity.

But I would argue that since his Cello Suites are such a personal tribute to Rostropovich, Britten wanted to pay homage to the Bach suites because he knew how important they were to his dear friend. He may also have been moved by Rostropovich's own performance of the Bach suites at the Aldeburgh Festival.³⁴ The limitations of writing for solo cello would be slighter when working with a virtuoso with the technical abilities of his friend. Rostropovich recorded half of the Bach suites in 1956 when he was 29, and re-recorded all six forty years later. He expressed his

³⁴ Shin-I Su, Elizabeth. *Innovative Use of Technique in Benjamin Britten's Cello Works: The Inspiration of Mstislav Rostropovich*. Doctor of Musical Arts Dissertation, University of Maryland – College Park, 2003.

long-lasting adoration of the pieces in a 1991 interview when he said, “Nothing in the world is more precious to me than these Suites.”³⁵

Clearly both Bach and Britten were drawing upon numerous sources and ideas as they composed their cello suites. This resulted, in both cases, in multifaceted works that present contemporary performers with significant challenges, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

³⁵ Furie, Kenneth. "Bach, a Cello, a Church in Burgundy, Rostropovich - New York Times." *NY Times*. June 1995. Web. Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/18/arts/video-view-bach-a-cello-a-church-in-burgundy-rostropovich.html>>.

CHAPTER 3:

Performing the Cello Suites

By the time Bach joined the court of Cöthen, Prince Leopold had helped ensure the hiring of several instrumental virtuosos from Berlin. These included the successful cellist Carl Bernhard Lienicke and gambist Christian Ferdinand Abel, who both arrived shortly after Leopold took control of court in 1716.³⁶ It seems more than likely that Bach wrote his cello suites with either of these specific, accomplished instrumentalists in mind.³⁷

Although lack of evidence prevents further exploration of the influence of a particular performance relationship on Bach's composition of the cello suites, the technical demands he makes of the player far exceed anything hitherto asked of a solo instrumentalist. His suites go far beyond the music of the earlier Italian composers of solo instrumental music. In the case of Britten, we are on surer ground. His friendship with Rostropovich is well documented and has been indisputably established as the impetus for the composition of Britten's three suites for solo cello.

³⁶ Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: the Learned Musician*. 194.

³⁷ Phillip Spitta's extensive, three-volume Bach biography is primarily responsible for introducing the idea that the Suites could have been written for gambist Christian Ferdinand Abel. This argument remained fairly common, although recently many Bach scholars have discarded this theory, arguing that there is no proof that Abel played cello at all.

Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: the Learned Musician*.

These pieces were not simply dedicated to Rostropovich, but also embodied his performance technique and personality. First, by collaborating with a virtuoso soloist in the prime of his performance career, Britten was virtually unhindered by concerns of writing any material that was too technically challenging. Therefore, the suites are highly technically challenging, featuring difficult double stops, intricate passagework, *col legno* (in which the strings are struck with the wooden upper portion of the bow), rapid string crossings, delicate natural harmonics, and extensive use of the cello's uppermost register. The third full movement of the first suite is a Serenata that is entirely different kinds of pizzicato - from twinkly and *pianissimo* to loud and sonorous, as well as notably difficult left-hand pizzicato. The fifth movement is a *Bordone* in which the performer must hold a D pedal point while playing separate melodies on other strings.

In addition to taking advantage of his friend's remarkable virtuosity, Britten exploited Rostropovich's interpretive style and quirks as a cellist. Reviews of Rostropovich's recordings from the 1960s reveal a distinctive style of playing that was recognized (and sometimes disapproved of) by critics.

One particular feature that struck reviewers was Rostropovich's manipulation of tempo. A 1960 *Gramophone* review of Rostropovich's recording of an arrangement of various Debussy piano pieces for solo cello notes the cellist's colorful use of "rubato whims,"³⁸ emphasizing his stretching of particular musical phrases in

³⁸ F., R. Rev. of *Mstislav Rostropovich. Preludes, Book I (Debussy)*. *Gramophone* Jan. 1960: 85. Print.

order to achieve dramatic effect. Another reviewer, writing on Rostropovich's 1963 performance of the Schumann cello concerto in A minor, cautiously commented that Rostropovich "allowed himself wider speed variations than most listeners will welcome."³⁹ This highlights the extreme, exaggerated quality of Rostropovich's interpretations of oft-performed works that has distinguished him from other cellists, but is not always well received.

In addition to this flexibility with regards to tempo, music critics also acknowledged great variation in Rostropovich's playing with regards to volume and tone color. Reviewers of Rostropovich's performances from the 1960s noted the striking quality of his extremely quiet, withdrawn *pianissimo*'s and his heavy, powerful *forte*'s, and praised the subtleties of his tone variation.⁴⁰

These features of Rostropovich's playing contributed to his reputation among critics and listeners as a dynamic and highly expressive musician. A 1964 review of Rostropovich's performance of the Britten Cello Symphony with the English Chamber Orchestra (conducted by Benjamin Britten himself) emphasized the cellist's ability to deeply connect emotionally with a piece of music, noting that he was "...so

³⁹ E.G. Rev. of *SCHUMANN. Cello Concerto in A Minor, Op. 129. Mstislav Rostropovich. Gramophone* Aug. 1963: 52. Print.

⁴⁰ Rev. of *BEETHOVEN. Cello Sonatas. Mstislav Rostropovich. Gramophone* Feb. 1964: 44. Print.

completely inside the music that one ceases to be aware whether what he is doing is difficult or not...⁴¹

This intensity of musical expression is certainly reflected in the composition of the cello suites. Fluctuations in tempi in the first Suite are marked both explicitly in the score, using indicating terms like *rallentando*, *allargando* and *accelerando*, and also implicitly in the variation of note values. To mention one of many examples, in the last movement, *Moto perpetuo e Canto quarto*, amidst a flurry of sixteenth notes Britten re-introduces the majestic theme from the first Canto in quarter notes. This creates a sudden and dramatic contrast in tempo. The piece is also characterized by considerable variation in volume and tone color. Each of the six full movements of the suites possesses a range in dynamics that spans at least from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* (the majority of them include moments marked “*fff*” or “*ppp*.”). Although for the most part, the tempo and dynamic markings speak for themselves with regards to emotional character, the movements are also sometimes marked with specific indications as to their disposition. These further demonstrate the emotional intensity and contrast presented in the suite. A particularly placid moment in the Canto primo is marked “*tranquillo*,” while in the Lamento, the performer is instructed to play “*piangendo*,” meaning “weeping, plaintively.”⁴²

⁴¹ Rev. of *Mstislav Rostropovich BRITTEN. Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 68.* *Gramophone* Dec. 1964: 46. Print.

⁴² "Piangendo, piangente." *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev. Ed. Michael Kennedy. *Oxford Music Online*. 28 Mar. 2011
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e7898>>.

There are enough examples in the suites that exhibit Rostropovich's idiosyncrasies as a performer that it is safe to say that they aren't coincidences: Britten wrote the pieces specifically to honor and complement Rostropovich's technique. But I would like to argue that Rostropovich's personality was just as much captured in the Suites as his performance tendencies. In his 1996 biography of Britten, Michael Oliver states, "Rostropovich's character was...demonstratively emotional...impulsive, endearingly flamboyant and eccentric, his personality is as closely reflected in Britten's music for him as the virtuosity and intense expressiveness of his playing."⁴³ In an interview with Humphrey Carpenter, Rostropovich's wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, described her husband as a "man with a kind of frantic motor inside him,"⁴⁴ characterized by dramatic mood swings. These descriptions of Rostropovich's character could most certainly apply to the three Britten suites.

* * *

It is intimidating as a cellist to begin rehearsing any unaccompanied piece. In this solo music, one instrument is responsible for providing both melodic content and a harmonic foundation. Stringed instruments like the cello are traditionally only used for melodic material, given that only four strings are used in performance. Only two strings can sustain sound together, although three can briefly sound simultaneously.

⁴³ Oliver, Michael. *Benjamin Britten*. London: Phaidon Press, 1996. 170.

⁴⁴ Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. 398.

In his “Some Performance Problems of Bach’s Unaccompanied Violin and Cello Works,” Frederick Neumann argues that great difficulties for performers arise due to the fact that “Bach wrote contrapuntal music for two purely melodic instruments that can form pitches on only four strings with only four fingers...”⁴⁵ (In the time of Bach’s composition, thumb position, in which a cellist brings his or her entire hand onto the fingerboard of the instrument, had not yet been incorporated in common practice.) Accurately playing every note on the page can prove a challenge and may often require very specific (and sometimes uncomfortable) hand positioning.

In my preparations for performing the sixth Bach suite and the first Britten suite back to back, I found that these two pieces in particular raised an additional set of challenges due to the circumstances under which they were composed. Although we are unable to know for sure, it is generally accepted that unlike the first five suites, the sixth and final suite was written for some variety of five-stringed cello that included an E string in addition to the four expected cello strings. Scholars have speculated and debated over the issues of which particular instrument this was, and over why it was that Bach diverted from the pattern he established in the first five suites to write his final suite for a completely different instrument. A wide variety of cello-like instruments of different sizes, with four or five strings, would have still been played in Germany around the time of the Suites’ composition, making it

⁴⁵ Neumann, Frederick. "Some Performance Problems of Bach's Unaccompanied Violin and Cello Works." *Eighteenth-century Music in Theory and Practice: Essays in Honor of Alfred Mann*. Ed. Mary Ann Parker. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1994. 19-48. Print, p. 19.

impossible to determine exactly for which instrument Bach was writing. Some scholars have postulated that Bach actually invented his own five-stringed small cello or large viola for which the sixth suite may have been intended.⁴⁶ One thing that is certain is that mastering the high passagework that the suite entails is significantly more difficult on a modern cello with no E string. Recordings and videos on YouTube of performances of the sixth suite on various five-stringed instruments may invoke rage and jealousy as the most difficult passages seem to fly by effortlessly.⁴⁷

The Britten suites pose a challenge for the performer that has more to do with interpretation, (although mastering the notes is hardly an easy task). The collaboration and companionship between Rostropovich and Britten created a unique situation in which the dedicatee and first performer of the written works had unlimited access to the composer's input with regards to interpretation. Thus, the intentions of both Britten and Rostropovich are available for future performers of these pieces. In the example of the cello suites, not only did Rostropovich record the first two suites under direct supervision from Britten, but also published an edition of the suites with his own fingerings and additional dynamic markings.

⁴⁶ Stephen Bonta, et al. "Violoncello." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 29 Mar. 2011
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/44041>>.

⁴⁷ I am referring, in particular, to YouTube videos of cellists Ophelie Gaillard and Josephine Van Lier performing the sixth suite on cello piccolo.

For example:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9um5apDoOY&feature=related>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4Kxo-m4_oA&feature=related

But this provides modern performers with a limitation: the fact that any performer of the Suites has access to the interpretations of Rostropovich and Britten limits their own individual variation in performances of these pieces. A performer is less likely to deviate from the indications in the score if it means a departure from what the composer wanted to hear. It is incredibly tempting to simply study Rostropovich's performances of these pieces and mimic them as accurately as possible.

In contrast, we have an absolute lack of any definite performance interpretation that would have pleased or displeased Bach. As mentioned previously, we do not even have the composer's manuscript of the suites, only a copy written out by Anna Magdalena Bach. This lack of insight into Bach's preferred interpretation results in great controversy over the composer's intentions and the "correct" way to perform the pieces, and also leads to a great deal of variation in performances of the suites.

This was, however, not always the case. Despite the fact that today countless cellists everywhere prepare and perform starkly different interpretations of the suites, their early performance history was once dominated by a specific virtuoso cellist: Pablo Casals. Casals was almost single-handedly responsible for establishing the suites in modern cello solo repertoire. The first public performance of any Suite was by Casals, around 1901 or 1902.⁴⁸ Since Casals continued to perform the pieces

⁴⁸ Siblin, *The Cello Suites*, 74.

throughout his career and he achieved widespread fame, his star status served as a platform for introducing the public to Bach's cello suites.

The strong association between the Suites and Pablo Casals certainly affected their early performance history. Although Pablo Casals, a famous virtuoso, could get away with performing entire suites in one sitting, for the first part of the 20th century they were still typically played as exercises and used as pedagogical tools. Single movements were typically learned independent of each other, and were sometimes, but very rarely, performed as a short concert encore.⁴⁹ It was much longer before other cellists felt comfortable enough to perform suites as a whole.

An examination of available recordings of the Bach suites also reveals the breadth of Casals' influence on their performance practice. Casals was, of course, the first to produce a complete recorded account of all six suites, recorded throughout the 1930s.⁵⁰ (It is a little strange that Casals did not record the suites until he had been performing them for over a quarter of a century.) His recording has without a doubt remained the most influential recording of the works and has never gone out of print. Additionally, the earliest available recording of all six suites after Casals' that I could find is Pierre Fournier's 1961 recording. Perhaps cellists recorded the Suites in the 1940s and 1950s, but the shadow Casals cast prevented them from holding any real influence in the long run. Or maybe cellists were intimidated by the strong association

⁴⁹ Horton, Scott. "Bach's Cello Suites—Six Questions for Eric Soblin (Harper's Magazine)." *Harper's Magazine*. Web. Mar. 2011. <<http://harpers.org/archive/2011/01/hbc-90007890>>.

⁵⁰ Soblin, *The Cello Suites*, 115.

between Casals and the suites, and felt uncomfortable following up the recording of the performer who had brought the suites to the spotlight.

Whatever the reason, eventually performers overcame their reservations and increasing numbers of cellists began performing and recording the suites. As of 2009, there were “more than fifty recordings in the catalogue and upwards of seventy-five performance editions of the music for cellists.”⁵¹

It is also possible that the strong association between Britten’s cello suites and Mstislav Rostropovich has perhaps prevented them from widespread recording and performance. The earliest available recording of all three suites (since Rostropovich never recorded the third) is Timothy Hugh’s 1987 recording - a significant time after Rostropovich’s initial 1960s recording of the first two suites. Maybe, as with the Bach suites, with time more performers will be drawn to revisiting and playing the Britten suites. But in an era of greater documentation, one wonders whether performers will ever feel entirely free of Rostropovich’s presence, which is so strong in the Britten pieces. It is my hope that they will eventually become open for interpretation in the way that the Bach suites are now. These pieces may have been written for, and with the assistance of specific individuals, but they reach out beyond their immediate time and place to generations of solo instrumentalists, many still to come.

⁵¹ Sibling, Eric. *The Cello Suites*. 6.

Conclusion

Since Rostropovich only recorded two of the three Britten suites, he left the door open for other cellists to offer listeners a complete recording of the set. However, Rostropovich casts a shadow on every later performer. Every review I encountered of a subsequent recording of the Britten suites offered some kind of comparison to Rostropovich's definitive 1968 Decca version, usually to reinforce the idea that it can not be surpassed. A *Guardian* review of Pieter Wispelwey's 2010 recording echoes the sentiment behind the majority of these reviews: "Rostropovich...set standards that all of Wispelwey's best intentions can't quite match."⁵²

Certain recordings have garnered some authority of their own. Norwegian cellist Truls Mørk's 2001 recording has been widely respected by classical music critics as perhaps the best complete set of the suites. Even Mørk, however, does not escape comparison with Rostropovich; British music critic Michael White notes, "...his playing is less energetic than Rostropovich's but more elegiac."⁵³

⁵² Clements, Andrew. "Britten: Cello Symphony; Cello Suite No 1 | CD Review | Music | The Guardian." *Guardian.co.uk*. 17 June 2010. Web. 04 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jun/17/britten-cello-symphony-suite-wispelwey>>.

⁵³ White, Michael. "Truls Mørk - Britten - Cello Suites 1-3." *Amazon.com*. Web. 10 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.amazon.com/Truls-Mørk-Britten-Cello-Suites/dp/B00004Z34E>>.

It was with some trepidation that I undertook to perform both the Britten and Bach suites in my recital. There was an element of compromise in my performance of both pieces: I perform the 6th Bach suite on an instrument for which it was not written (and with one string fewer than the instrument for which it *was* written). Likewise, the Britten was written for a specific performer with certain traits of technique and personality that are impossible for me to fully capture. Are my performances, and all contemporary performances of these pieces, merely pale renditions of the original compositions?

Since the Bach Suites only began to be performed publicly in the 20th century, when Baroque instruments were no longer readily available, cellists have been performing the sixth suite on modern instruments since its arrival to the cello repertoire. Performances of the suite on five-stringed instruments are few and far between, due to the unavailability of these outdated instruments. Therefore, my performance of the suite falls directly in line with its performance history. As a result, helpful fingerings and bowings are well established and readily available.

I've decided that since Britten has so clearly written Rostropovich's technique and personality into the music of the suites, any performance of them naturally emulates the great cellist. By interacting with the score, a performer is also interacting with Rostropovich. Therefore, although the Rostropovich Decca recordings of the first two suites serve as powerful references for contemporary cellists, they should resist the temptation to further imitate these performances, however legendary.

Instead of representing Rostropovich's nature, I am interested in representing the nature of the friendship between composer and cellist. Since Rostropovich's flamboyance and expressiveness is clearly represented in the score of the Suites, I think it may be moving to also represent Britten's personality, which was decidedly more restrained and reserved. I think incorporating the personalities of both these men is an effective way to present pieces that are such direct products of their friendship.

Part of the incredible power of Rostropovich's playing came from his amazing ability to tell the music's story in his own voice. In his review of Rostropovich's delivery of the first British performance of Britten's *Cello Symphony*, critic Desmond Shawe-Taylor wrote, "Rostropovich played the work as though he had composed it himself."⁵⁴ Rather than attempting to emulate the details of Rostropovich's, or any other cellist's interpretations, we should instead try to embody what Shawe-Taylor noted of this remarkable musician. Cellists should determine, and in turn strive to effectively convey, their own musical understanding of any piece, whether it is a Bach suite from the 1720s, a Britten suite from the 1960s, or anything in between.

⁵⁴ Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. 429.

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