

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 16 October 2022
3.00pm

Bach Cello Suites

Alisa Weilerstein cello

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Cello Suite No. 1 in G BWV1007 (c.1720)

*I. Prélude • II. Allemande • III. Courante •
IV. Sarabande • V. Menuet I and II • VI. Gigue*

Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor BWV1008 (c.1720)

*I. Prélude • II. Allemande • III. Courante •
IV. Sarabande • V. Menuet I and II • VI. Gigue*

Cello Suite No. 3 in C BWV1009 (c.1720)

*I. Prélude • II. Allemande • III. Courante •
IV. Sarabande • V. Bourrée I and II • VI. Gigue*

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Bach almost certainly had occasion to write his six cello suites during his time at the court of the young Prince Leopold of Cöthen, when he was in his mid-30s. The prince, a Calvinist, had no need of church music, but evidently looked forward to instrumental works by his composer – and clearly had skilled musicians to play them. Nothing quite like these cello suites had existed before, and nothing quite like them – searchings of the cello, by itself, and searchings of the spirit, one might say, through the cello – appeared again until the 20th Century.

Somewhat like the first prelude of the *Well-tempered Clavier*, the *Prélude* to the First Suite, opening the whole collection, is made largely of arpeggiated chords and conveys a sense of initiation, of beginning a long tour by setting out some elemental harmonic pathways. All the suites start thus with a *prélude*, and all continue with the same three kinds of dances, movements that must travel from the tonic key to the dominant in the first section, and back in the second, both sections being repeated. With Bach, these matters of inevitability seem utterly natural, easily taken care of by the run of the melody, how it flexes between activity and cadence. And of course, disciplined form offers endless opportunities for interpretative nuance.

In this case the *Allemande*, in steady common time, is at once stately and flowing, moving largely in even semiquavers. A bounce on the first note, unaccented-accented, is quite common in these suites and in this one in particular, at once affirming the starting point and creating a springboard from which the music can launch itself. The next three movements are all in 3/4 time, but very differently. Rushing and skipping, the *Courante* is followed by a typically grave *Sarabande*, after which, with another contrast, comes a pair of *Menuets*. In each of these the opening section is short and simple: that of the first minuet has a folk air, while the second's is almost compacted to a four-bar phrase played twice over. The return journey in both of them, however, wonderfully opens out. After the second minuet, in the minor, the first is repeated. Each suite ends with a gigue, this first one remembering the second minuet's G minor and in lively 6/8.

The Second Suite, perhaps the most inward, establishes a particular character right away, when from D minor it immediately ventures into a diminished harmony on C sharp. What is already in shadow, in the minor, becomes darker still, and the gesture returns to open several of the movements that follow. A further shadowing comes from how, in the *Prélude*, the metre – slow triple time, with an emphasis on the second beat as well as the first – is

that of a sarabande, gravest of Bach's measures. As it continues, the movement builds with the elements it set out in its first bar: rising arpeggio and falling scale. Gradually reaching ever higher, it touches G, then falls towards a pause, followed by a grounding.

Five dances follow, as in all of these suites, the pattern unchanging except where the penultimate movement is concerned. One source of the pathos of these dance movements may be that a return to the very beginning remains an option in the first part but not in the second. Here the *Allemande* starts with a theme that reappears a couple of times in the first part, in higher registers, but that the cello cannot find again in the second, though it searches. The *Courante*, almost entirely in even semiquavers, brings a turn to exhilaration, but allows the performer to decide (or not) whether this is the exhilaration of running or of running away. Then comes the *Sarabande*, which Mstislav Rostropovich described as having 'the white-hot intensity of solitude'. Of the two *Menuets*, the light-textured second is in the major, so that the repeat of the first comes with a dive back into the dark. Giges are customarily high-spirited, but the finale of this suite eludes words.

The Third Suite is a cascade of clarity, emanating from those joint springs of scale and arpeggio – both elemental states presented one after the other in the opening gesture. The *Prélude* proceeds in unbroken semiquavers, moving with agility in and out of neighbouring harmonic realms, settling for a while to explore a fan of chords on G, before finally, of course, reachieving its starting point, which it does again to cap its grand finish. 'Ma fin est mon commencement' (Guillaume de Machaut); 'And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time' (TS Eliot).

The twin elements of scale and arpeggio closely govern everything else in this suite, giving it the transparency of perfection, the perfection of transparency. In every dance the second half mirrors the first in much of its detail, the one supporting, confirming the other. Ringing changes on a couple of rhythmic shapes, the sprightly *Allemande* is followed by a *Courante* that is in a single part until the chord that concludes it. The *Sarabande* ventures further harmonically, but without putting its serenity at risk. Of the *Bourrées*, the second, in the minor, sets out from a variation of the first's initial motif. Then the robust *Gigue* runs into a burst of folk-style playing over a drone – and runs into it again, at a different pitch, in the second half – before reaching its destined goal.

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