

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 16 October 2022  
7.30pm

## Bach Cello Suites

Alisa Weilerstein cello

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Cello Suite No. 4 in E flat BWV1010 (c.1720)

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

Cello Suite No. 5 in C minor BWV1011 (c.1720)

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

Pause

Cello Suite No. 6 in D BWV1012 (c.1720)

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

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We left this book of 36 chapters open at the halfway point, just where the D minor suite ended. The Fourth Suite, in E flat, could hardly be more different: open, generous, secure, even at times humorous. It starts with one of those Bach *préludes* that make harmonic journeying into song, moving as most of it does through arpeggios that stride down right through what Bach thought to be the instrument's proper register, of around two and a half octaves. Just over halfway through there is a pause, after which the arpeggios are interleaved with passages running at double speed, these eventually revealing themselves to be arpeggios by other means.

The *Allemande*, making its own harmonic journey through a similar process of progressive variation, has a tunefulness and a bounce suggestive of folk music. There is bounce, too, in the main motif of the *Courante*, this motif being involved with faster elements, in semiquavers and in triplets, in a game of harmonic snakes-and-ladders. Serious deliberation, though, has to be the tone of the *Sarabande*, with in this case grandeur in the dotted rhythms.

Of the *bourrée* as a type, Bach's contemporary Johann Mattheson wrote that it is marked by 'contentment and a pleasant demeanor', which is true of this one, though it leaves out of account the multidimensional comedy. The bluff motif – an upward rush, a pair of dactyls restoring bounce, a settling down – gives rise to a plain-spoken first part, in contrast with which the second is amusingly garrulous. In another contrast, the intervening second *Bourrée* sits calmly in place.

The *Gigue* flows in 12/8, the second part much longer than the first, whose theme it brings back midway as point of departure for a different expedition.

How strange the change from major to minor. A particular feature of the Fifth Suite is the tuning of the top string down from A to G, which Bach introduced perhaps to facilitate some of the sonorous and often dark chords (though the piece can be played with normal tuning). The big first movement is in the form of a French overture, with an introductory slow section, weighted at its start by repeated appearances of the instrument's lowest note, to prepare for a fugue packed almost entirely into one line, the occurrences of its subject clearly marked by a three-note rising scale figure (C–D–E flat as it is at the beginning).

Gravity continues in the *Allemande*, to be answered by a certain quirkiness in the *Courante* that disguises some aspects held in common, like descending scale patterns.

The *Sarabande* is another of the few movements in the suites to be in one part, and is unusual, too, in being almost entirely in one rhythmic value, the slow flow of quavers pausing only occasionally. It is primal melody.

The steps of the first *Gavotte* go with a determined grace (or is it a graceful determination?), with again a contrast coming in the second. This, too, is on one line and largely regular in rhythm, but similarities to the *Sarabande* end there, for the near-uniform value now is the triplet quaver, and the line seems to be hurrying in search of itself, running, perhaps humorously, into partial versions that slip away in different directions.

To end there is, as always, a *Gigue*, but with a couple of strange hesitations.

Finally we come to a work that opens a question pertinent to all six suites: What kind of instrument did Bach have in mind? Three centuries ago there were several possibilities, including smaller instruments that could be held along the arm, like a viola or violin, and instruments with five strings, such as seem to be implied by this Sixth Suite, with its enlarged registral span – though this can be accommodated on a standard cello. The *Prélude* establishes that span and also a high degree of virtuosity. The first two bars exult in the notes of the tonic triad, the D emphasised by playing it on two different strings in alternation, one open. For a short while this keynote, on the bass staff, remains central, until an upward move comes so that the same radiant idea can be reproduced a fifth higher. Going further on up, the music then descends, and the initial motif reappears a fifth below the starting point, on G. The second half of the movement reaches higher yet, to G at the top of the treble staff, an octave above the airspace the other five suites occupy. Then the movement returns back to ground, back to the beginning, with cadenza-like passages inserted.

All the movements here are on the long side, none more so than the *Allemande*, which, distended by hemidemisemiquaver excursions, becomes fully a slow movement. With up to 30 notes in the bar, the sense of metre is dissolved; time almost stops. And the music gains added gravity from leaning towards related minor keys.

The *Allemande* and the *Courante* both start with a reiteration onto the beat. Leaps and speed regain an atmosphere of supreme confidence.

Perhaps this goes on into the *Sarabande*, but turns into wisdom, with again more harmonic casting about. Again there is the note repetition at the start, but now both notes are firmly on the firmly treading beat.

And these bouncing notes return to start the first of two *Gavottes*, which have simple first halves, suggestive of folk music in both cases, and more elaborate second parts, that of the second *Gavotte* displaying another folk feature in its tune over a drone, bagpipe-style. As before, the first dance is played again after the second.

There is a folkish tang, also, to the *Gigue*, along with a good measure as well of bravura.

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