

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 20 November 2023
1.00pm

Jean-Guihen Queyras 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*

Ahmet Adnan Saygun (1907-1991) From Partita for solo cello Op. 31 (1955)
Lento • Vivo • Adagio • Allegro moderato

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Cello Suite No. 1 Op. 72 (1964)
*Canto primo. Sostenuto e largamente • I. Fuga. Andante
moderato • II. Lamento. Lento rubato • Canto segundo.
Sostenuto • III. Serenata. Allegretto, pizzicato • IV.
Marcia. Alla marcia moderato • Canto terzo. Sostenuto •
V. Bordone. Moderato quasi recitativo • VI. Moto
perpetuo e Canto quarto. Presto*



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We do not know if **Bach** played the cello. Keyboard instruments he did, of course, and the violin, but where the cello is concerned we have no evidence – except that of his six cello suites, which seem to suggest he was acquainted with the instrument at close quarters. Almost certainly, he wrote the six works when he was in his mid-30s and employed by the young Prince Leopold of Cöthen. The prince, a Calvinist, had no need of church music, but evidently had a taste for instrumental compositions, if the general hypothesis is right that Bach during his time in Cöthen wrote not only his cello suites but also his solo pieces for violin, orchestral suites and Brandenburg concertos (though, of course, these were to be dedicated to a different nobleman). Nothing quite like the cello suites had existed before, and nothing quite like them – searchings of the instrument, and searchings by way of the instrument, one may say, of the spirit – appeared again until the 20th Century.

Somewhat like the first prelude of *The Well-tempered Clavier*, the *Prélude* that opens the set of cello suites is made largely of arpeggiated chords and conveys a sense of beginning a long tour by setting out some elemental harmonic pathways. All the suites start thus with a prelude, and all continue with the same three kinds of dances, movements which 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 so differently. Rushing and skipping, the *Courante* is followed by a typically grave *Sarabande*, after which, with another contrast, comes a pair of minuets. 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. The suite then ends with the customary *Gigue* (this one remembering the second minuet's G minor), in lively 6/8.

Ahmet Adnan Saygun, born in İzmir, was the principal architect of western classical music in Turkey. Since his project chimed with Kemal Atatürk's programme of westernisation, he enjoyed state

support, which began with a scholarship in 1928 to take him to Paris for studies with Vincent d'Indy. He returned commanding a thorough Francophone Romantic style, not too much touched by the alliance he formed with Bartók when the latter was visiting Turkey on a folk music expedition in 1936. Some of his works were taken up abroad during his lifetime, but more have been since, especially this Cello Partita, which he composed in 1955.

The unusual prompt was a production of Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* in Istanbul, given to mark the sesquicentenary of the poet's death. Saygun was commissioned to provide a three-minute prelude, to be played by the German cellist Martin Bochmann, who was teaching at the state conservatory in Ankara. Rather than attempt some relationship to the play, Saygun proposed music that would bridge the gap between Turkish and German culture on ground both shared: that of solo performance on a bowed string instrument. From the Turkish side came the distinctive modality, from the German the image of Bach. We are left to presume that only one movement was played before the Schiller, and that Saygun then added more.

The Partita is in five movements (Queyras omits the *Allegretto* fourth), of which the first is a *Lento* that starts out sombrelly over a drone on the instrument's lowest note, takes flight, and returns briefly to its original territory. A *Vivo*, short but variegated, separates this opening from another slow movement, an *Adagio* where Saygun's use of a nonstandard mode might give the impression of a dialogue with his contemporary Messiaen; the cello's voice crosses its whole range in lament. The finale begins as a transcription of the opening of the composer's First Symphony, then goes its own way, towards music caught on a drone once more, now like thread around fingers.

Britten was encouraged to go the way of Bach's cello suites by his friend Mstislav Rostropovich and ended up composing three. The first begins with a song, the *Canto*, in which the cello finds its deep, sonorous voice, before proceeding immediately into the first two numbered movements: a fugue (though one remembering how Bach's cello used to dance) and a lament. This is the pattern throughout, that *Canto* sections, pauses for self-recollection, are interspersed with more substantial character pieces. The next pair of these comprises a delicate *Serenata*, pizzicato throughout, and a *Marcia* involving effects of flute (harmonics) and drums (fifths at the bottom of the instrument, played with the wood of the bow) around a passionate middle section. To end, we have a *Bordone* (i.e. drone, on D) and a *Moto perpetuo* incorporating a completion of the *Canto*.

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