



THE SIX CELLO SUITES OF J.S. BACH

fresh!

REFERENCE
RECORDINGS

William Skeen
cello and violoncello piccolo

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Liner notes by William Skeen

Schloss Cöthen (1970), Germany, where Bach worked as Kapellmeister from 1717–1725 and composed the six cello suites. Watercolor by Hermann Schiebel (1896–1973).

ach loved the cello, and we all love Bach. It's easy to understand from casual listening why these six Cello Suites are at the heart of the cello repertoire, and ubiquitous on almost every recital. Each suite is engineered and honed to perfection, and not a note is wasted. Every imaginable interpretation and contextualization has been applied to the Cello Suites, and they endure all manner of adaptation. One can hear them played on the violin, the bass guitar, and even the oboe. One can hear them accompanying a modern dance routine, next to works of fine art, or in a subway station. One can enjoy them at a sacred service, or just by oneself at home. From a performer's perspective, however, we are our own audience, and it is in this last context that I find myself exploring the boundless depths of these seemingly simple pieces.

Listeners are certainly able to appreciate the Suites, but to me, they are written for the performer. Each dance is a mini 'escape room' of the mind and fingers, so tightly packed with possible solutions and dead ends. We find ourselves nearing a solution, only to find another hidden passageway, or a corner that we've painted ourselves into. There are clues absolutely everywhere, if you know what to look for. The structures are all very clear. But how do we make sense of it? Cellists use their favorite tools to figure a way out. One artist may choose to focus only on melodic line and employ a robust tone. Another may focus on articulation and dynamics. Yet another may choose to focus on timing. These approaches are important and will lead to a reasonable interpretation, but without a keen understanding of harmony, though, interpreting Bach is not possible.

ABOUT ME

I first met Johann Sebastian Bach when I was a ten-year-old boy, studying with my first cello teacher, Eugene Eicher. Mr. Eicher, though never a practitioner of the Baroque cello, had a sincere and deep knowledge of the Cello Suites. He'd even published his own edition in the 1970s which I'd learned from. Now, as I leaf through his score, I'm astounded by Eicher's understanding of historical bowing and phrasing, even if it came to him by intuition rather than through the study of historical performance practice. Mr. Eicher taught me how to make music, how to interpret what's on the page, and clearly set me on a path to

appreciate Bach's Suites and Baroque music in general.

I had the honor of working with professor Alan Harris at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Mr. Harris' open-minded approach to interpretation gave me free reign to continue making music as I wished. He had a whole-body approach to his teaching method, dealing with the physical aspects of position and musculature. It was in Cleveland that I had my first interactions with historical instruments, i.e. the Baroque cello and the *viola da gamba*. Mr. Harris kept these instruments in his studio, though he did not play them himself.

Playing Bach on historical instruments for the first time was an ear-opening experience.

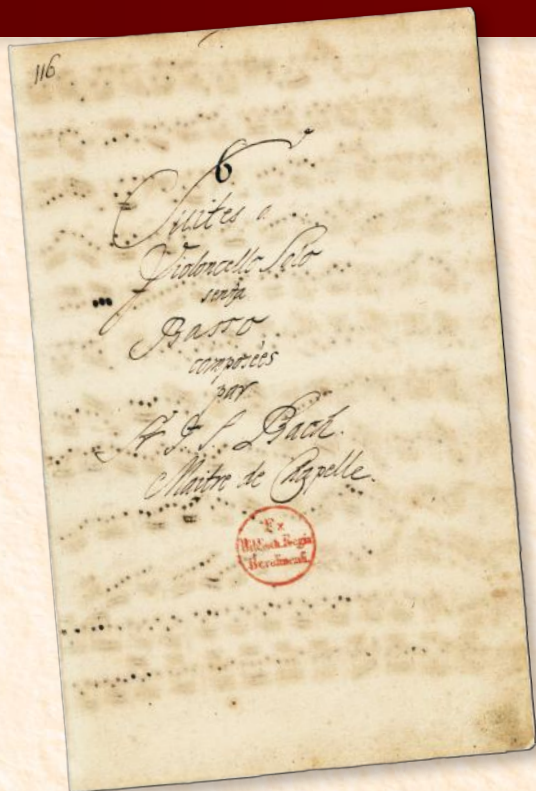
My professional pathway is what I would call 'grass-roots,' built on many years of playing continuo in period-instrument orchestras and chamber ensembles.

I began my career in Los Angeles performing with the Los Angeles Baroque Orchestra, Musica Angelica, and the 17th Century ensemble La Monica. I moved north to the San Francisco Bay Area in 2002, first joining the American Bach Soloists, then Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, later becoming a fixture in

Voices of Music. I maintained Los Angeles ties through my twenty-year professorship at the University of Southern California. I am proud to have initiated several successful ventures in Northern California including the New Esterházy Quartet, a period-instrument string quartet, and the Cantata Collective, a non-profit organization offering free monthly performances of Bach cantatas.

This long-term saturation with the complete body of Bach's varied repertoire has given me special insight into the inner workings of the Cello Suites.

ABOUT THE SUITES



Though an exact date of composition is unknown, we do know that the *Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso* were compiled in Cöthen, Germany, in the 1720s. Perhaps they were a companion to the more complex Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo. The Cello Suites are written in a most efficient, yet contrapuntal manner. While the violin works wear their virtuosity on their sleeve, the suites for cello have been finely honed, devoid of excess.

Whether by design or not, the six pieces as they are ordered in the collection are perfectly presented

Suite 1 is the simplest, and Suite 6, the most intricate and challenging.

The first four suites call for standard tuning a-d-G-C. For the Fifth Suite, the tuning is g-d-G-C; though this *scordatura* is unusual to modern ears, the tuning was common in the 17th century. In context, the cello sounds much 'darker' relative to the standard 18th century tuning. In Bach's Sixth Suite, a five-string cello tuned e'-a-d-G-C is called for. A high E-string makes the instrument very brilliant sounding. Bach writes in the gleaming key of D major, an ergonomic choice, fitting the five-string cello perfectly.

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTS

My instruments and bow are historically appropriate to the standards of the early 18th century.



© SHEILA NEWBERRY

For Suites 1 through 5, I am playing a cello labeled “Giovanni Grancino, Milan. 1725.” This instrument has a warm, rich bass-end, and bright, clear high-end. The cello has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for nearly forty years, previously played by my colleague and mentor Elisabeth LeGuin. Before her, the cello was played by Walter Joachim, principal cellist of the Montreal Symphony.

For Suite 6, I use my five-string cello, sometimes referred to as a *violoncello piccolo*. This Anonymous Italian cello from the 1680s has a smaller body with thinner ribs and the sound is direct and nasal in tone,



similar to a *viola da gamba*. This particular *violoncello piccolo* is more powerful and balanced, bottom to top, than most five-string celli, having the usual brilliant high range, but also a developed low end. This instrument belonged to Austrian-American author, Native American activist, and amateur cellist Robert Treuer, who rescued himself and this cello from Nazi Germany in 1938. The cello was restored and re-converted to its original five-string set-up in the 1980s by luthier Andrew Dipper. The reconstruction and history has been chronicled by the Shrine to Music Museum in South Dakota.

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTS (CONT'D)



Just as important as the pedigree of the instruments is the artistry of the bow.

For this recording, I used a model of a 1720s bow made in 2010 by Louis Bégin of Montreal. The snakewood stick has the right combination of weight and flexibility to both release a good tone from the instrument and produce a messa di voce or shaping of an individual note that is a hallmark of Baroque performance practice.

—William Skeen



PRODUCER'S NOTE

Bach's cello suites are like a favorite, if daunting, mountain peak: you don't just climb it once.

When William Skeen came to me about recording the suites, of course I was thrilled. Who would not want to be a sherpa on that expedition? Particularly as his vision for the project was ambitious, but realistic: this recording would be a snapshot of his conception of the work, definitive for this moment, a reflection of who he is as an artist right now. Having worked with Bill on several chamber music records, I've listened to and admired his playing for many years. I knew this might not be his final statement on Bach's suites, but it would certainly be a significant offering on the topic.

Although a small church or salon might be an ideal venue for this music, we knew we wanted to record in a studio to avoid environmental interruptions. And we wanted the best: Skywalker Sound. But it was the summer of 2020 and everything was shut down—would they even book our recording? Turns out our project was the first to return to Skywalker after COVID. Luckily, it was determined that a solo cellist in the studio with a small team in the control room was manageable for health safety.



Chief engineer Leslie Ann Jones set us up with a microphone array that took advantage of the studio's enormous sonic capabilities, from eavesdropping on the cello's delicate intimacy to reveling in the richness of such a large reverberant space. This gave us a range of sounds to play with, and we settled on a

mix that Bill felt approximated not only what he actually hears when he plays, but what he wants to hear when he plays. Hooray!

We hope you'll enjoy inhabiting that acoustic space as you join us on our journey up the trails of Bach's magnificent achievement.

—Lolly Lewis, Producer

WILLIAM SKEEN, CELLO



© FRANK WING

William Skeen serves as Principal Cellist with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Voices of Music, and was Principal Cellist of the American Bach Soloists for nearly two decades. He is a founding member of the New Esterházy Quartet, the Cantata Collective, and La Monica. Mr. Skeen has appeared as *continuo* cellist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Master Chorale, and San Diego Opera; *viola da gamba* soloist multiple times with the Dallas Symphony, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Carmel Bach Festival, Oregon Bach Festival, the American Bach Soloists, and the Orquesta Nacional de México. He has also

performed the role of Principal Cellist with Pacific Music Works, the Portland Baroque Orchestra, Musica Angelica, the Los Angeles Baroque Orchestra, and Bach Collegium San Diego.

Mr. Skeen has toured and recorded with many early music ensembles including Smithsonian Chamber Players, Musica Pacifica, El Mundo, Agave, Galanterie, Con Gioia, the New Esterházy Quartet La Monica, and Philharmonia Chamber Players.

William was twice nominated for a GRAMMY® Award. In 2012, for Best Small Ensemble Performance for “The Kingdoms

of Castille” with El Mundo, and again in 2022 for Best Classical Compendium for “American Originals” with Agave.

William taught baroque cello and *viola da gamba* at the University of Southern California for two decades. He has also served on the faculty of the American Bach Soloists Academy, the Berwick Academy at the Oregon Bach Festival, the San Francisco Early Music Society’s Baroque Workshop, and co-founded the SFEMS Classical Workshop.

Mr. Skeen can be viewed on countless high-definition videos produced by *Voices of Music*.

LOLLY LEWIS, PRODUCER



© JEANETTE YU

Lolly Lewis founded the recording production company Transparent Recordings in 1980. Notable projects include Anthony Davis's opera *Tania*, a premiere recording of orchestral music by Harlem Renaissance composer Florence Price with the Women's Philharmonic Orchestra, and a Berlioz series with San Diego Symphony.

In recent years, Lolly has been particularly focused on period instrument performance and has produced six albums with the New Esterházy Quartet, including the monumental Schubert G major string quartet. She recently produced a recording of the complete Beethoven piano and violin sonatas on period instruments and is currently working on a recording of Schubert violin sonatas.

As a member of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus for over a dozen years, Lolly sang on numerous recordings including several GRAMMY® winners with Michael Tilson Thomas and Herbert Blomstedt.



Bronze medal by Arnold Hartig (1878-1972) issued in 1935 for the 250th Anniversary of the birth of J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

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Thank you for your wonderful gifts.
You have made this project come to life and
I am so grateful for your support,
your belief in me and your love of Bach.

—William Skeen

THE SIX CELLO SUITES OF J.S. BACH

William Skeen
cello and violoncello piccolo

Recorded at Skywalker Sound,
Nicasio, California, in August 2020

PRODUCER: Lolly Lewis

ASSISTANT PRODUCER: Kati Kyme

RECORDING ENGINEER: Leslie Ann Jones

ASSISTANT RECORDING ENGINEER: Dann Thompson

MASTERING ENGINEER: Sean Royce Martin

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Marcia Martin

ART DIRECTOR: JoAnn Nunes

PHOTOS: Cover ©Sheila Newberry;
Back Cover ©Teresa Tam Studio;
Watercolor, Manuscript & Medal courtesy
of Encore Consultants LLC Archives

A man with glasses is shown from the chest up, holding a cello. He is looking down at the instrument. The background is a solid dark red color.

THE SIX CELLO SUITES OF J.S. BACH

William Skeen

cello (suites 1–5) and violoncello piccolo (suite 6)

DISC ONE

72:11

Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007 18:35

- [1] Prélude 3:16 [2] Allemande 4:56 [3] Courante 3:02
[4] Sarabande 2:33 [5] Menuets I & II 3:05 [6] Gigue 1:43

Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011 25:32

- [7] Prélude 6:46 [8] Allemande 5:34 [9] Courante 2:23
[10] Sarabande 3:19 [11] Gavottes I & II 5:22 [12] Gigue 2:08

Suite No. 4 in E-flat Major, BWV 1010 28:04

- [13] Prélude 5:26 [14] Allemande 5:09 [15] Courante 4:06
[16] Sarabande 4:15 [17] Bourrées I & II 5:38 [18] Gigue 3:30

DISC TWO

78:10

Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009 24:46

- [1] Prélude 5:12 [2] Allemande 4:16 [3] Courante 3:34
[4] Sarabande 3:40 [5] Bourrées I & II 4:17 [6] Gigue 3:48

Suite No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1008 21:35

- [7] Prélude 4:39 [8] Allemande 3:50 [9] Courante 2:24
[10] Sarabande 4:19 [11] Menuets I & II 3:14 [12] Gigue 3:07

Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012 31:49

- [13] Prélude 5:20 [14] Allemande 8:33 [15] Courante 4:02
[16] Sarabande 4:35 [17] Gavottes I & II 4:13 [18] Gigue 5:06