

A Brief History of the Cello and the Suites for Violoncello Solo by J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

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THE EVOLVING CELLO

- The form of the Cello was in great transition in the 16th and 17th centuries. It originated as the bass instrument from the VIOLIN family, not the Viol family. The violin family originally had 4 members, 3 of which survive today (Violin/Soprano, Viola/alto, tenor and Cello/bass).
- The double bass as we know it today is the “bass” descendant of the VIOL family not the violin family.
- The cello came in various shapes and sizes and had many different yet similar names. (Violonzino, violonzello, violonpiccolo, violonbasso, violon doppio, violon grosso and violon grande).
- Many perceived these to be different instruments depending on the geographical area. Around 1660, the term Violoncello, become commonly used to refer to a single instrument.
- With the advent of the “wire-wound string, gut strings were less used. As the wire wound string produced many more tonal options, the cellos were shortened as they no longer needed to accommodate a gut-string which required length to compensate for density.
- The wire-wound strings afforded greater tonal clarity color and power.
- The newly decreased size was standardized by members of the Amati family during the early 17th century. As the cello evolved, it emerged and the compromise between the tenor and bass violins. With this new size standardization, came the fixed tuning of C-G-d-a. It has remained this way since the Baroque era.
- The Baroque aesthetic called for the quality of timber over tonal strength which explains the great body length and higher arching in many instruments built before 1700. The “new smaller cello” allowed for both the baroque tonal aesthetic and the tonal aesthetic of the early 18th century which required strength, depth and a broader range of colors for the newly composed works for this instrument and to satisfy the increased concert hall size in Western Europe.

BACH

- Bach's third and happiest post in Cothen (1717-1723) under Prince Leopold, an avid music lover and high level viola da gambist and this was his first time to compose secular music
- Bach had artistic latitude to compose solo, chamber and orchestral works for various instruments based on the forms set by current French, German and Italian composers
- Bach was regarded by his contemporaries not only as a great composer, but also a great pedagogue. He systematized keyboard fingerings which can be seen in his Well-Tempered Clavier or Keyboard Inventions.
- According to Johann Forkel, a Bach biographer, Bach believed in using music, rather than exercises, to teach gradual technical proficiency and musical structure even with the most beginning student.
- Bach composed unaccompanied works for violin, cello flute and piano as well as Brandenburg Concertos, Orchestral suites, Well-Tempered Clavier as well as numerous Sinfonia and Inventions.
- The Cello Suites were composed in 1720 shortly after the death of his wife, Maria-Barbara in July of that year. Their musical content and complexity shows his intense reflection due to her loss.
- His Italian influences were based on the compositions of Vivaldi, Marcello and Domenico Gabrielli (considered by some scholars to be the "father to the cello" as Corelli is to the violin)
- By the late 17th Century, Italian Cellists began to leave Italy and re-settle elsewhere in Europe setting a new standard for technical proficiency and influencing and extending the standard of new compositional styles.
- Bach was incorporated these techniques with "German" musical voice. These techniques include extending the register cellists would be required to master, faster tempos, double and triple stops, scale and arpeggios and more difficult string crossings, basically allowing the cello to be considered a virtuoso instrument.
- Style of the suite follows the basic design on the French Keyboard suites and their instrumental character integrates the "modern" Italian styles of flair and decoration with his uniquely balanced German style of instrumental composition. As stated before, his Italian influences were based on the compositions of Vivaldi, Marcello and Domenico Gabrielli.

- Polyphony in stringed instruments was not a new concept. It's compositional complexity and challenges only inspired Bach to continue this compositional style.
- In 1553, Diego Ortiz explained in his *Tratado de Glesses*, “polyphony on an essentially melodic instrument would be presented as a texture where the melodic and harmonic focuses switch from voice to voice”.

THE CELLO SUITES

- The Baroque suite originated during the Middle-Ages and was invented when lutenists grouped popular dances together to be performed as a complete work with a cycle of movements.
- Movement Sequence; Allemande, Courrante, Sarabande and Gigue
- Bach's suites: PRELUDE, GALANTERIAN (Menuet/suites 1&2, Bourree/suites 3&4, Gavotte/suites 5&6) (Shorter and much less stylized dance movements, retaining much of their originally intended dance beat)
- By Bach's time, many of the dance movements lost their original purpose and became more stylized solo works. Thus, they lost their dance beat in exchange for virtuosic flair to illustrate an instrumentalist's mechanical capabilities.
- The dances are composed in binary form (A:II/B:II).
- The Prelude was meant to be an improvisatory and fantasia-like display of the instrumentalist's virtuosic ability. Medieval lutenists used this movement to “tune” the instrument and “warm up”. The Prelude consists of arpeggios, scales, pedal tones, cadenza-like sections and multiple stopped.