

Extraordinary solo cello performance of Bach's Suites in Australia

By Adrian Falk
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Pieter Wispelwey, the 37-year-old Dutch cellist, performed all six Suites for solo cello by J.S. Bach at the new City Recital Hall in Sydney on June 10. While the Bach Suites are not technically difficult by modern standards of cello playing, the performance of all six in one concert constitutes a major undertaking, not only of stamina, but deeply informed musical intelligence.

Despite minimal publicity, the June 10 concert quickly sold out and a second performance was arranged. It is of considerable cultural interest that two large and dedicated audiences were generated by these concerts which, while particularly demanding on the performer, also require educated and sustained attention on the part of their listeners.

Wispelwey is undoubtedly a leading cellist of his generation. He was trained in the school of Dutch specialists in authentic performance practice, where his teachers included Anner Bijlsma, and went on to extensive further studies internationally. He is perhaps unique among today's concert cellists in his mastery of all epochs of cello music, from the most ancient to the most recent.

The six Suites contain six movements each: a formal Prelude followed by the dance-based Allemande (German), Courante (French or Italian), Sarabande (Spanish), Menuets or Bourrees, and ending with a Gigue (English). Each Suite maintains a distinctive character through its six movements, and the set as a whole displays a stately progression from simple to complex and from naive to profound. The placement of such music within the capacity of the solo cello cannot but call forth a certain austerity, a distillation of the essential, which deepens its integral strength and is central to its authority for those who know and love it.

J.S. Bach (1685-1750) was the supreme composer of the German baroque era, and one of the outstanding geniuses of human history. A north German Protestant, he enjoyed an amazingly diverse apprenticeship in all of the contemporary forms of music, as an organist, violinist and composer. He held successively three important posts: court organist and orchestral director in Weimar (1708-17); court music

director at Cöthen (1717-23); and cantor (municipal composer) in Leipzig (1723-45). [1]

His cello Suites were composed at Cöthen in 1720. They are an important component of his compositions for solo instruments, which include notably the six Sonatas and Partitas for violin, and for keyboard the sets of six each of English and French Suites, and the Goldberg Variations. With many other works, they collectively constitute a pinnacle of intellectual and artistic creativity.

European music before Bach's time had been dominated by the French and Italian styles, as exemplified by the French opera composer Lully and the Italian violinist Corelli. The latter was a direct descendant of the Italian Renaissance, which gave rise to a golden age of string playing as well as to the manufacture of stringed instruments by master craftsmen culminating in Stradivarius.

Bach incorporated and superseded these national styles, forging a new, late baroque musical language. He completed a prodigious output of music in all the accepted forms, for solo instruments, for organ or clavier, for voices and orchestra, including the great choral Passions (settings of the Gospels) and some 300 complete cantatas composed at the rate of one per week for performance the following Sunday. In addition there is a large body of secular work for diverse instrumental forces, such as the Brandenburg Concertos, orchestral suites, violin and clavier concertos, etc.

Supporting its inherent aesthetic value, the fact that Bach's music elicits a fascination in young children is also noteworthy. It suggests the presence of an elemental pulse, shape and construction—a simplicity—that go to the core of the music's strength and its lasting value. The first volume of the modern Suzuki school of violin and cello education for young children ends, rightly, with Bach.

Bach himself had 20 children, and found the time in an unbelievably heavy work schedule to educate them musically. His second wife Anna Magdalena, besides what must have been a most challenging domestic life, also made fair copies of much of his music for publication. The extant manuscript of the cello Suites is thought to be in her hand.

Among his sons three, Johann Christian, Wilhelm Friedmann, and especially Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, played roles as composers of extreme importance in the transition from the baroque to the classical style (that of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven) in music.

In the cello Suites Bach set out to explore and develop every potential which he found in this instrument. The cello was not previously noted as an unaccompanied instrument, but was considered rather as a useful supporter of the bass line in vocal and instrumental music, or as an occasional soloist amongst others as in the Corelli Concerti. In his Suites Bach created a music for cello alone that is complete in all respects. It sustains its surface interest through an unlimited harmonic palette, through every kind of rhythmic intricacy, and through the brilliant resource of disposing multiple voices sequentially, but virtually simultaneously, across the range of the instrument. This usage constitutes one of the more demanding elements of the music upon its listeners. There is a sort of mathematical hidden law requiring the listener's attention to divide itself between the present and the past, and to identify connections that are present in almost a subliminal fashion.[2]

J.S. Bach was probably the greatest improviser (spontaneous composer) in music history. His documented compositional output, staggering as it is in volume, may not be of greater magnitude than the improvisations he regularly undertook at the organ. He would certainly have committed each of the 36 movements for solo cello to paper in not much longer a time than it takes to perform them, each at a single sitting. All the movements spring from their own generative musical cell, and elaborate that germ into a formally complete and rounded whole. There cannot be any doubt that this is a music which will endure (as it has already for several centuries) as long as humans retain their love for the form, for the intellectual and emotional challenge, and for that mimesis of life which are the unique capacities of music.

While the dance forms base this music on traditional rhythmic and textural qualities, Bach's extraordinary inventiveness invests these simple forms with an austere and spiritualised content. As already mentioned, the Suites form a progression of increasing complexity and emotional depth. From the relative innocence of No. 1, the cycle moves through melancholy, grandeur and heroism to a crux (crucifixus), the religious tragedy of 5 and the sublimity of 6.

As Wispelwey's own program note points out, they were certainly conceived as a single cycle, and as was Bach's practice, as a representation of the journey and fate of the Lutheran spirit. This music was meant to depict the course of human life, not simply from youth to old age, or from life

to death, but from innocence to knowledge, from particular to universal, and from earth to heaven. That such a spiritual progress took place, for Bach, under divine dispensation, does not preclude us from hearing it today in a purely humanistic way.

These Suites form a fundamental strand in the development of cello music generally: they constitute its "Old Testament". They stand unique in the course of the emancipation of the cello from a subordinate to a solo role; a precursor to the new role given to this instrument in his string quartets by Haydn in the later 18th century, and thereafter by every serious composer.

To perform all six in one evening is to accept the challenge of bringing to life this complex cycle of musical and human qualities. Wispelwey sat on a low, intimately lit podium, with a dedication which was not devoid of humour and earthiness, and with no other equipment than a fine old cello. He captivated his audience for some three hours of intense, virtuosic and deeply intriguing music making. The element of selflessness, in service of a greater value, was manifest in his presentation, and this too was recognised by the listeners.

The only reservation one might make would be that the demands of such a marathon performance resulted in each Suite receiving perhaps not the same detailed attention and consideration as it would merit on its own. But it would be churlish to hold this against Wispelwey, who played every note from memory, with relish and wit, and with a completely thought-out identification with Bach's musical conceptions. Others might do it differently, but not many others are proposing to. Those who know the music first hand found in his performance a powerful stimulus to rethink their ideas about it.

One attends such an evening with high expectations of musical reward. Wispelwey's performance inspired a heightened sense of the achievements of which humans are capable, and a renewed grasp of the complexity and nobility of our humanity. Music like this is a window into what life should be.

Notes:

1. For a perceptive summary of his life and work, see Chapter 8 of *Music in the Baroque Era* by M. Bukofzer.
2. *Gödel, Escher, Bach* by D.R. Hofstadter examines this and other aspects of the music.

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