



CELLO

Lessons Learned from Bach

Study of the Autograph of the Suite for Lute, BWV 995

by David Carter

Of the six suites for solo cello by JS Bach, the fifth stands out for several reasons: it is written for scordatura cello (A string tuned down to G); it has a first movement in French Overture style (linked to the only fugue in the set); and it is the only suite for which an autograph manuscript exists. Bach transcribed the suite for lute, probably between the years 1727 and 1731, and the suite was soon afterwards published in tablature notation.

Performing this suite presents many challenges. The question of whether to use the scordatura tuning is the first major choice to make. I strongly advocate using this tuning; though scordatura is inconvenient, playing in normal tuning results in too many compromises. Notes must be left out, and some passages are rewritten to accommodate the tuning.

(Note: for the sake of clarity, the following examples come from the Barenreiter edition.)

Example of omitted notes:

Scordatura:



Normal Tuning:



Example of notes re-written:

Scordatura:



Normal Tuning:



In addition, normal tuning actually makes the suite more difficult, requiring awkward extensions and string crossings. In normal tuning you are in essence playing a transcription.

For those who do brave the challenges of this suite, the lute transcription can be a valuable source. Through examining the autograph one can see a number of details not present in the Anna

Magdalena manuscript, such as rhythmic details, ornamentation, articulation, and even the clarification of harmonies through the added lines of the lute part.

First of all, the rhythmic details: in the lute version of the Allemande Bach writes “overdotted” rhythms:



compared to the Anna Magdalena copy:



In the Gigue, measure 1 of the lute version contains a slightly different rhythm:



GIGUE



This raises the question whether the lute version is an elaborated version of the cello copy, or whether this omission was simply a mistake by Anna Magdalena. (The cellist Harry Wimmer wrote an excellent article about the 5th Suite in the *Violoncello Society Newsletter* from spring 1992. He points out that this gigue uses the “canarie” rhythmic figure, which originated with the “savages” of the Canary Islands! More information can be found at www.wimmercello.com.) The same rhythm is used by Bach in the Forlane movement of the 1st Orchestral Suite.

Another rhythmic feature in the lute version is the bass note used often at the end of a tied note in the upper voice. This gives the music a definite gesture with which to begin the next figure.



Though the cellist cannot play that extra note, it needs to be felt in order to give the following gesture rhythmic clarity.

Articulation is notated differently in the two versions, with

clear phrasing implications. In the Prelude the following passage reveals this:



The long phrase mark over the lute part seems to imply a cadenza-like freedom, as it does when found in the Prelude to the 4th Suite:



Ornamentation is clearly marked in a number of instances in the lute version, especially in the Prelude. Appoggiaturas are added in several measures, as seen here:

1. Prelude



Another detail in this example is the addition of harmony notes. The final chord of the Prelude is a major chord, as well as the half cadence in measure 14 of the Prelude. It seems perfectly reasonable to add some of these notes as desired.

In the Gigue, Bach adds a bass line during the long notes in the upper voice; knowing this can help the cellist give the passage more direction. Finally, Bach adds a bass line to the moving notes of Gavotte II, which to me implies a slightly slower tempo than the single line alone.

6. Gavotte II en Rondeau



This is a marvelous suite, one made even more enjoyable with the additional influences found in the lute version. It is also very interesting to hear it played on lute, giving the cellist a totally different perspective.

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