



BASS

Have You Played any Bach Lately?

by Tom Pieper

It is widely agreed that the *Prelude* from *Suite No.1 for Unaccompanied Cello* by J.S. Bach is a great piece of music. Moreover, few pieces are as well-known to humanity as this work. Since Pablo Casals in the early 1900s, most cellists have studied and practiced this prelude, and many musicians have had the piece gnawing away in their inner ear. The piece continues to inspire instrumentalist and diverse fans to seek out and play the piece—regardless of the instrument. Here is a recording of Pablo Casals to satisfy your curiosity: <https://vimeo.com/191331601>

Many, many recordings can be found online, and notable cellists like Yo-Yo Ma, have recorded these suites multiple times over the years: https://youtu.be/PCicM6i59_I, <https://youtu.be/1prweT95Mo0>, https://youtu.be/3uiUHvET_jg

While performed most often on cello or viola, other instruments, as well as the double bass and electric bass (<https://youtu.be/i-tzPu7e2pg>) have dived into the act. While people are not necessarily making bucks from Bach, they are spending a lot of facetime with this piece. A quick search today on YouTube produced 127,000 listings, and when narrowed to Electric Bass yielded 50,300 listings. The six suites were written around 1720 and may have been instructive pieces for the cellist of the day. You may have heard the *Prelude No. 1* in movies like *Ex Machina* and *The Hangover Part 2*. Many of us grew up hearing our cellist friends practicing and performing this piece. My early recollection of all the suites was when a vibraphone player showed me a book of the *Preludes* he found tucked away on a shelf in the music library at college. A few years later, I was living in Rochester NY and several bass players were sharing a cassette tape of a mysterious unknown player playing these pieces at pitch—the bassist happened to be Edgar Meyer! <https://youtu.be/CNdVvOrTV70>. While they were deeply impressed, the cognitive dissonance of what they were hearing on the bass was overwhelming. How could anyone play this well?

In the last 300 years, it is safe to say the

piece has legs and will be around for the future. Therefore, let's spend an appreciative time marveling and musing on its beauty, while committing to join the club of people claiming this piece. When you start, understand you may have to make a home for this prelude on your music stand.

After completing your work, reward your grandparents, parents, pets and friends with a performance. You will have a great piece in your repertoire when they ask you to share something you're working on.

Just a few more versions to help set the stage, and to share the impact this piece has

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had on the music profession, and the wide interpretations to draw from for your own understanding. These clips come from a variety of bass players.

- Stanley Clarke <https://youtu.be/2qEBYM6DZzY>. One of the most famous jazz and electric bassist of his generation; known for his work with Chick Corea in *Return to Forever*, and his own recordings as a leader since the early 1970s
- Gary Karr <https://youtu.be/BGcoTs5YjPo> (excerpt-note German bow) The most famous soloist of his generation; started the ISB; owns a German bow and Amati bass previously owned by Serge Koussevitzky
- Jeff Bradetich <https://youtu.be/9yjVwRI5aiU>
- Lauren Pierce on double bass <https://youtu.be/FntHqALD1S0>

Here is question #1: at pitch? Because many electric basses now have a double octave neck, using the upper octave makes a lot of sense. With this option, the notes sound in the same range as the original and with the frets close together, a fast fluid speed can be realized. Pizzicato on the electric bass is the only option, and is impressive to hear. Notes blend together in a way that satisfies the player's desire to accomplish a challenging piece and connect to a greater audience.

Or question #2: sounding an octave lower? This is also why you have an electric bass—it is *low* in pitch! To play the piece as written, sounding an octave deeper brings out the power and drive in the composition. It also works down in the lower octave on a 5-string bass tuned with a low B. One reason we play electric bass is we can do something guitar players cannot. I'm hearing a metal version in octaves with guitar in the background. With 24 fretted instruments, play it high, but don't ignore the opportunity to drop down low too. When you drop it down to the lower octave you add depth, but a few notes must be played in another octave (octaviated); however, the power and beauty of the piece remains intact.

From the top:

Play on the electric bass in the octave sounding for cello. Electric bass and cello are written in the same place, however the electric bass sounds one octave lower. Mostly everything will be played above the 12th fret or double dots, but for now, think of the 12th fret as your starting point. All

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the patterns and dots, or position markers, remain the same in the upper as well as lower part of the neck. Also, when you need to hit a lower tone the open strings can help you reach then notes with limited movement. All the notes will be read as usual, but will be fingered an octave higher.

Some tips to make this piece easier to learn:

- Start with an open G string and the first D played on the 12th fret of the D string, your second finger will play the A on the G string
- In measure 5, shift after the second B and land on 2 on the G on the 12th fret. Stay in the same position until

measure 7 when you move to the 16th fret until returning to the 12th fret on beat 4. Stay here until the 3rd beat of measure 9 where you shift to the 15th fret until the end of measure 10

- In measure 11, slightly stretch to keep the B within reach of your 4th finger
- In measure 12, place your second finger on the 15th fret, for the C
- At the end of measure 12, shift to the 14th fret for the A and stay there until shifting to the 12th fret for G in measure 14
- At the end of measure 14 shift to the 10th fret for the C and stay until measure 19
- In measure 20, reach for the C# on the

- 9th fret with your first finger and then play the A on the 12th fret with your second finger
- In measure 21, do the same except play the C on the 8th fret, and the A on the 12th fret again with your second finger
 - In measure 22, play the D on the 17th fret, with your second finger until the fermata
 - In measure 23, shift on the B and on the last C
 - In measure 24 shift on the C and later the A and stretch back to play the C
 - Open D and second finger on D, shift to D on 17th fret
 - Open G and A on 12th fret for measure 25
 - Play open D and open G for measure 26, 16th fret G and shift to 15th fret B flat with second finger and again with A second finger on beat 4
 - 4th finger on A on 14th fret on measure 27

- Shift to second finger on A on beat 3 of measure 27, and to 10th fret, second finger on G on “e” of beat 4
- Play the C with the second finger on the 15th fret for measure 30
- In measure 31, place the second finger on the 12th fret
- On beat 4 of measure 33, shift to 1st finger on the 15th fret
- Measure 37 drop to open D and play octave lower to end; on 24 fret bass play at the 12th fret and work up chromatically till 39
- On measure 42 play the chord G on 22nd fret, B on 21st fret, G on 24th fret (10th, 9th, 12th for lower octave)

Bonus track! Gary Karr and Richard Davis
<https://youtu.be/1aN4qWDMPrw>

For double bass players it is a great challenge to play at pitch and bowing works out a little better on the higher strings than in the lower positions with string crossings

across the bass. Because the notes are closer together up high, and easier to hear when notes are in your singing range, the upper register is a good place to begin. Also, the high G is easier to play on the double bass than the electric. The flip-side again is when you play the lower octave on the double bass, it is even cooler than trying to pretend you're a cellist. Begin to try this on the double bass and I will examine it in another edition! Good luck for now and enjoy this great piece.

Tom Pieper is the Orchestra Teacher at Central Middle School in Wayzata, MN. Tom's compositions and bass playing can be heard on recordings with the Illicit Sextet, and Spiritjazz. Tom also teaches at his home studio and MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis and can be reached at Thomas.pieper@yoga@gmail.com. †