



# BAROQUE PRACTICE

## The Rondeau by Marais for Cello

by Charles Asch

There is an axiom “if you want something done right, do it yourself” —so I wrote a new adaptation of the famous *Rondeau* theme by Marin Marais, appearing at the end of this article to preview. As good things require, I had help in typesetting and feedback from students, which I am very thankful for. This is a cello-friendly adaptation of the “Gavotte” theme we know and love from the Suzuki method books. I have corrected the title from *Gavotte* to *Rondeau*, and the composer from “J.B. Lully” to “Marin Marais.” Most importantly, I have used the original notes and articulations from the piece by Marais, which are quite different from the version in the Suzuki books. Because the piece was originally written for viola da gamba (basically a cello with frets and more strings), I have not included ornaments and certain double-stops that would present problems for the cello.



Rondeau by Marais from *Pièces de Viole*, Livre 1, Paris 1686

No. 24 *Rondeau* appears in the midst of a musical bouquet, fragrant with *Preludes*, *Fantaisies*, *Allemandes*, *Courantes*, *Sarabandes*, and yes, with *Gavottes*. The massive 27-movement *Suite No. in D minor* appears in Marais’ *Pièces de viole* (1686). Marais also wrote a *basso continuo* part that accompanies these works, which can be played by another bass-register instrument and a chordal instrument such as a theorbo or harpsichord. This *basso continuo* part could be played by another cellist, or even with guitar.

The corrected title *Rondeau* ought to inform the style, as a *gavotte* is a heavier, more peasant-like dance than the more poetic and expressive *rondeau* form. One of the classic French *forme fixes*, the *rondeau* derives from 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century poetry and songs about love by the *troubadours*, which later inspired music by composers such as Guillaume de Machaut. A *rondeau* has a refrain that comes back, with interspersing themes developing from and contrasting with the refrain. Perhaps the *troubadour’s* enthusiastic audience sometimes would have joined in on the refrains, while the *troubadour* embroiders the verses with all of his poetic power and imagination. One could say the *rondeau* tells a story, whereas the *gavotte* is a dance.

This particular *Rondeau* appears in the form of AA-B-A’-C-A’-B-A’-C-A’. The A theme has a resolute character evoked by the opening D-A fifth in the bass clef, after which the B section (ms. 8–21) rises in register, evoking a more desperate, yearning character

with more slurring and new key areas using the same rising 5<sup>th</sup>. The return of the A theme (m. 18) is a surprise, as it comes in a higher register above middle C on D-A. After a brief connective section, the rhapsodic character of the C theme emerges in florid 8<sup>th</sup> note passages that emanate from the depths of the low D (D<sub>2</sub>) on the instrument. The alternating Dorian, Aeolian and Mixolydian allusions in these scalar passages are slotted into the more usual D melodic and harmonic minor in the editions of this work found in the Suzuki books, and the striking registral contrast between sections is reduced and even reversed.

New versions of this *Rondeau* have muted this registral expressivity, altered evocative modal tonalities, and altered the articulation in such a way as to deprive the work of its original power. Not only were notes and articulations drastically altered, but the title and composer were also mixed up. Please see my companion article in *String Notes* Fall 2022 titled *The Misattribution of a Gavotte* on how this *Rondeau* by Marais came to be falsely known as the “Gavotte by Lully.” In short, this incorrect title came from a publication in 1904 by Willy Burmester called *Stücke alter Meister*, which contains a great deal of the source material for the Suzuki method books. In my prior article, I discussed the common practice of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in re-purposing and adapting tunes from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries for the style and needs of the day. In the case of the Burmester edition, this meant completely dispensing with entire portions of the B theme, changing the accidentals of the C theme (especially in altering many B<sup>n</sup> to B<sup>b</sup>), and altering the articulation to suit Burmester’s preferences in style.

Burmester’s version was adapted for cello by his colleague Jacques van Lier in 1906. The Lier version is interesting, because it maintains the exact same notes and articulations as the Burmester, but one octave lower. It’s as if Lier did absolutely nothing for this cello arrangement aside from attaching his name to it and adding a few fingerings. The edition by Lier, beginning on the D on the A-string of the cello, requires thumb position in treble for much of the C theme of the piece! Considering this piece was composed for a bass viol tuned from low D-G-C-E-A-D, it is odd that it avoids the core register of the cello.

This edition by Lier informed the version of “Gavotte” one finds in *The Suzuki Method: Sato Cello School Volume 3*, published in 1968. This version is still an octave too high compared to the original by Marais. In the Suzuki violin edition of 1978, the “Gavotte” finally appears in the form we find in our revised editions from 1991. While the “Gavotte” for violin is in the key of A minor, the registration and articulation seen in this edition exactly mirror the version which appears in our modern editions for violin, cello and viola.

## Gavotte

ガボット

Allegretto J. B. Lully  
grazioso mf

Suzuki Violin School, Volume 2, Summy-Birchard 1978

Suzuki Cello School, Volume 3, Revised Edition, Summy-Birchard 1992

In the Suzuki violin edition of 1978, the B theme drops in register, as does the contemporary cello edition of 1991. This has always sounded odd to me, the way the suppressed B theme roots around on the dusty C string after the clear presentation of the A theme, before the piece suddenly decides to ascend into unrelenting melodic and harmonic minor scales up to third position. In addition, the editions from Burmester to Suzuki completely misunderstand the “flattement” symbol of m. 21 (m. 20 in the Suzuki, giving every student who plays this piece grief with an unnecessary trill (furthermore, a trill with an *illegal* main-note start). One could at least use this piece to teach proper ornamentation, a skill every student needs in the Partitas and Suites by Bach.

Thus, the infamous *Gavotte* is actually a pastiche, a sort of “piece

by committee” that we give students because “it’s in the book.” One simply tells students to learn it because it’s familiar, which I understand, but *I’m not putting up with it* anymore. Rather than getting caught up in a “halfway-house” version that slightly adjusts the Suzuki version to something approaching the original theme by Marais, what follows is an “urtext-ish” edition that is usable for intermediate level cello students. I have only altered notes and ornamentation that are not idiomatic to the cello.

While there will be a more complete ornamentation and style guide, here is a key in brief: the *mordents* are performed downwards in one alternation, while *trills* begin on the note above the written notes, usually in two alternations. It is also appropriate to play the sections with fewer or no ornaments on the first iteration, and then to add ornaments on a repeat. Eighth notes not under a slur can be played very slightly “swung”, which the French call *inégal*. There are four places Marais indicated to apply vibrato: a horizontal squiggly line that indicates a two-finger vibrato above the pitch called *flattement* (m.21, m.49), and a vertical squiggly line that indicates *plainte* (m.25, m.53), a vibrato with more even oscillation using one finger. This piece is appropriate to intermediate level cellists, and can also be adapted by violin, viola and bass with ease. In my next article, I plan to present an ornamentation and style guide for *Rondeau* meant for a student of this piece. I will also go into a bit more detail on baroque ornamentation on the viola da gamba and cello to clear up any confusion, as the first reaction I got from a student on this edition was to “please explain the little squiggly lines”!

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# “Rondeau” from Pièces de viole, Livre 1

Marin Marais (1656–1728)

arr. Charles Asch

Cello

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