



BAROQUE PRACTICE

19th-Century Performance Traditions of the Bach Cello Suites

by Charles Asch

Prominent German cellist Friedrich Grützmacher made an edition of the Bach Suites in 1866, No. 238b for CF Peters, which is heavily reharmonized and re-arranged, with numerous additions to Bach's writing and alterations of notes. The first image is Grützmacher's "performers edition" of 1866, compared to Grützmacher's more conservative edition of 1867.

SUITE II.
Violoncello.

Allegro moderato.

J. S. Bach.

Prélude.

SUITE II.

PRÉLUDE.
Allegro moderato.

f molto marc.

sempre f

dimin.

The Bach *Cello Suites* were performed throughout the 1800s by numerous cellists, with performances throughout the 1860s by Grützmacher, found in concert reviews in German newspapers of the time. It is often unclear from the review if the *Suite* was performed in its entirety, or if only selected movements were performed. Regardless, this puts to rest the popular myth that Pablo Casals was the cellist to have "rediscovered" the Bach *Suites* in public performances of the early 1900s.

There are also concert reviews of Alfredo Piatti, noted Italian cellist, performing from the Bach *Cello Suites* throughout the late 1800s. Piatti even wrote an edition of the *Suites* with optional piano accompaniment, and with bowings more similar to the older

manuscripts of the *Suites*. Stylistically, Piatti would have differed considerably from Grützmacher, with Piatti's interpretations known for their purity and sparing use of vibrato.

Agustín Rubio gave a concert performing Bach's *Sixth Suite, Sarabande* and *Gavottes* in 1889 in Madrid, with violinist Enrique Arbós performing violin solo works by Bach in the same program. Ferdinand David, who played in a quartet with Grützmacher, came out with an edition of Bach's *Solo Sonatas and Partitas* for violin in 1843, upon Mendelssohn's founding of the Leipzig Conservatory. Numerous violinists came out with editions of both Bach's *Sonatas for Violin* and his *Partitas*, including Karol Lipinski in 1841 of the *Sonatas BWV*

1014-19, followed by editions by Leonard, Hubay, and Auer.

The first cellist to complete a recording of a *Cello Suite* by Bach was Guilhermina Suggia for HMV in England between 1923-1927. She recorded both *Suite No. 1 in G major* and *Suite No. 3 in C major*. These recordings are not publicly available, and are held in the British libraries as part of the Centre for History and Analysis of Recorded Music (<https://charm.rhul.ac.uk/>). Pablo Casals, with whom Suggia had a romantic relationship with from 1906-1913, finally decided to record the complete *Six Cello Suites* in 1936 when he was 60 years old, with these recordings appearing from 1938-1939.

Naturally, Pablo Casals recordings are groundbreaking in their completeness and relative fidelity to Bach's text. The performance traditions from Pablo Casals' interpretations of the Bach *Suites* are still quite strong today, with numerous cellists tracing their teaching lineage to his students. Many modern interpretations are based on the performance traditions of the early 1900s, related to Pablo Casals' popularizing and recording the complete *Cello Suites*.

For the modern performer, looking beyond Casals to earlier editions and performance styles from the 1800s could give inspiration. From the extant materials, there is a vast stylistic output of different methods and approaches to the *Suites* already from the mid-1800s. While this topic can be explored more in a future article, there are numerous manuscript copies and editions including those by Anna Magdalena and Peter Kellner, to the editions in use at Paris Conservatory, Berlin Conservatory and Vienna Conservatory in the first part of the 1800s. Already in these editions, one can see the increasing use of legato slurs by the editor, as opposed to the more sparing use of slurs in the manuscript copies by A.M. Bach and Peter Kellner. Fundamentally, the stylistic conventions of the bowing during the 1800s favored different slurring and articulation patterns than those which were prevalent during the time J.S. Bach wrote the *Cello Suites*. To a certain extent,

the recordings made by Casals and his contemporaries, basing their performances from these performance traditions of the 1800s, likely using editions by Grützmacher and his contemporaries, tend to push this stylistic morphing further in a direction of alterations in legato bow articulations from the original manuscript copies of A.M. Bach (manuscript copy from c. 1727-31) and Peter Kellner (manuscript copy from c. 1726).

Dr. Charles Asch performs on both a baroque and modern cello. On the baroque cello he has performed with Lyra Baroque Orchestra, Bach Society of Minnesota and Bach Roots Festival, as well as participating in chamber music programs featuring music of the baroque and early classical throughout the Twin Cities. Dr. Asch completed his D.M.A. at University of Minnesota, his M.M. at Juilliard, and his B.M. at Northwestern University. He has studied with Tanya Remenikova, Hans Jørgen Jensen, Richard Aaron and Jaap ter Linden. His doctoral thesis at UMN was focused on researching one of the first cellists in the latter part of the 19th century to exclusively perform with an endpin, Karl Davydov. †



Suite II Prelude — Anna Magdalena manuscript



Suite II Prelude — Kellner manuscript