Cello

More Than Just Notes:

Teaching Artistry to Students First Learning to Play Solo Bach

by Teresa Richardson

What a poignant moment when a student in Suzuki Book 4 flips the page to finally get their first crack at the *G Major Minuets* from the Bach *Suites*! As teachers, we understand that playing one's first solo Bach is a major rite of passage. We are familiar with the nuance and finesse required to play Bach beautifully. With the bar so high, how can a teacher best incorporate these mature concepts into lessons with young students?

Before digging into the music, I give my students what I call a "Bach talk." I explain that each suite is a collection of six dances in the same key, and mention that there is no original manuscript in J.S. Bach's handwriting. I point out that manuscript copyists sometimes made mistakes, and that the bowings, often unclearly printed, differ from one edition to the next. I lead students to discover that there are no tempi or dynamics written in the music. I explain that these combined factors create a need for each cellist to shape their own artistic interpretation of the music. I like to recommend several recordings so students can observe basic differences in interpretation, like vibrato use, bowings, tempo, and whether the tempo generally remains steady or frequently changes.

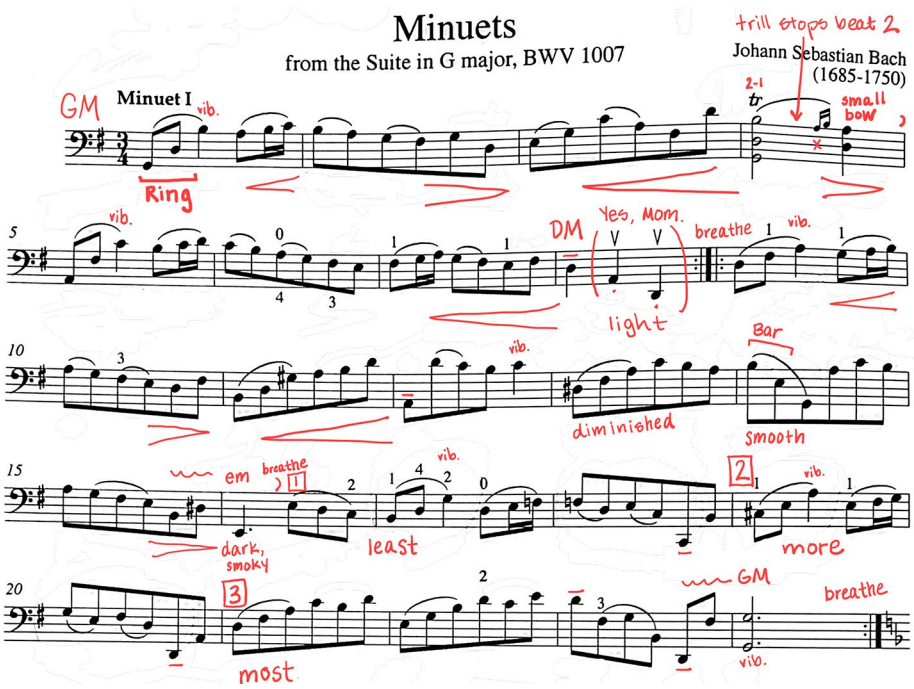
Playing unaccompanied is typically new to students starting the *Minuets*. I use the mantra "no note left behind," pointing out that every note matters as there is no piano to help support the sound. Although I have stressed the importance of ringing, resonant pitches since *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, I encourage my students to pay extra careful attention to resonance as they begin learning solo Bach. I challenge them to attend both to intonation and to using enough bow and weight to produce a tone with a "golden thread" (Peter Howard's term). In other words, the goal is to consistently play with a clear, supported core to the sound. I want my students to put enough spin on the string in the first three notes of *Minuet 1* that the result sounds like a G Major chord even though they are playing only one note at a time.

I bring the student's attention to the arpeggios and bass notes which Bach has expertly placed to create harmonic context and self-accompaniment. I write in key names at cadences, and dashes under low notes that need to be slightly elongated (and, in some cases, also vibrated) to better illuminate harmonies. In addition to bass notes, I have students search for accidentals or changes of pattern in the music that could be highlighted by adding length and/or vibrato. I identify sequences and meticulously write a staccato dot over every note I want them to play short. The light, shorter articulation of the dominant-tonic tag following a resolution at a major cadence can imitate the subdued, understated response, "Yes, Mom" (like bar 8 of *Minuet 1*).

For a beginner, Bach's melodic contour at places where the largest leaps occur often sound rather choppy. If played at a steady tempo, the sudden leap to a bass note could result in a perceived disruption of the melodic line. I often like to play segments in two ways for students so that they can discern for themselves which choice seems more musically sensitive. In *Minuet 1*, I play bars 11-12 for the student in two ways: once steadily and messily, and the second time taking care to elongate the low A to make it sound more like it belongs in the context of the phrase. I have the student vote for which version they liked better and why. That leads me to my favorite analogy for rubato in solo Bach, which has to do with Japanese gardens.

I love Japanese gardens. I highly recommend the one in Portland, Oregon, which is open all four seasons. When I went on the tour there, the guide brought my attention to the changing surfaces beneath my feet. Sometimes it was dirt, and other times it was gravel, concrete, steps, mulch, a wooden bridge, or even stepping stones over water. There were twists and turns, ups and downs. All of this is by design so that visitors take their time to mindfully navigate the terrain and acutely observe their surroundings. This mindful navigation enhances the visitor's enjoyment of the immersive experience.

When learning solo Bach, I teach my students to mindfully navigate the terrain



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of the melodic line. This translates to taking time at big leaps like the ones in bars 12, 14 and 23 of *Minuet 1* so that it does not sound like tripping over stepping stones. A new phrase can be likened to a different walking surface, or a path branching out and leading in a new direction. Maybe the arrival at a cadence is like arriving in front of a flower, momentarily enjoying its beauty, and taking a "sniff" (breath) before heading into a new section. One can imagine going up inclines while leading with a crescendo on ascending notes and walking a downward slope while tapering with a diminuendo on descending notes. The dynamics reflect the melodic contour.

I also like to delineate the concept of the three-tiered crescendo. Bach loves to use them, and there is a great example at the end of *Minuet 1*. I write numbers one through three in little boxes where each phrase tier begins, along with the words "least," "more," and "most," explaining that the three-tiered crescendo helps to give the phrases direction and adds a natural build up to the final cadence.

When talking about phrasing, my favorite approach is to compare the piece to a jumble of words on a page. The words form sentence fragments or full sentences, which end in "punctuation." A phrase ending in the dominant could sound like it ends with a question mark, and a phrase ending in the tonic could sound like it ends with a period, or an exclamation mark in forte! I like to have students determine phrase lengths and experiment to decide where each phrase leads and resolves. Together, the student and I locate the phrases with the loudest "peaks" and the softest "valleys," so the dynamic framework is established. I always emphasize the importance of breath when playing Bach, since it helps both the performer and listener understand where major phrases and sections begin and end. It helps to think about where in the music a singer or a wind player might choose to breathe.

In my experience, it is most effective to detail these musical concepts with students right away as they learn the notes. I have personally found that this approach is essential when teaching music that is as expressively nuanced as Bach is. In other words, I like to add the musical ingredients to my Bach cake batter initially, so that they are baked in early, rather than added later like icing or sprinkles after the notes and rhythms have already been learned. The technical execution required to play with phrasing, rubato, articulation, and dynamics differs from the technical execution of playing without these elements. I try to be as detailed as possible with my score markings so that expectations are clearly conveyed.

Teaching Bach suites to a student who is learning them for the first time can be overwhelming. There is so much information to impart, and teaching finesse is a journey. I try to remember that, for the student, this is just the beginning of a lifetime of playing and enjoying solo Bach. I tell my students that they, too, will someday develop their own personal artistic interpretation of Bach. I am merely planting the seeds.

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