Articulation in J. S. Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suites

Dr. David Sills

Fifty years ago, on 21 April 1947, violist Lillian Fuchs gave her first performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's Suite No. 2, BWV 1008, at a concert of the newly formed Musicians Guild of New York, ushering in an era in which Bach's *6 Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso* would take on a new life as staples of the viola repertoire.[1] The suites had only shortly before become essential to cellists, owing to the pioneering work of Pablo Casals.[2]

These suites represent one of Bach's most extraordinary efforts. Like other works upon which he clearly lavished his care—including the sonatas and partitas for violin solo, the Brandenburg Concertos, the *Musical Offering*, and the *Art of the Fugue*—the compilation of the Cello Suites is encyclopedic. The works present the gamut of string technique up to the composer's time even more completely than their violinistic counterparts, since they include a work in scordatura and a work for a five-stringed instrument.

Although the Suites raise provocative questions, articulation is perhaps the most vexing issue confronting performers of these works. For most violists, this issue resolves itself into questions about which edition and what other sources should be used in preparing a performance and about how to interpret what these sources say.

Editions

Editions of the Suites for cello and their manuscript sources have been discussed in the Winter 1996 *AST* by Jeffrey Solow.[3] His conclusion that an edition cannot be the last word on "bowings, fingerings, dynamics and even notes in some cases" is well taken and even better applied to currently available viola editions.

Editions ideally transmit the composer's notation to the public as faithfully as possible. An edition cannot, however, transmit the composer's musical ideas. If it could, musicians would never disagree as to the exact meanings of markings. The development of musical notation has been a motley affair, with composers adding more and more symbols to gain control over performances of their music. In the end, ironically, the multiplication of symbols and the ambiguity of their usage now require interpreters and an art of musical performance separate from that of musical composition. The same symbols are used differently by different composers, and can even have different meanings in works by a single composer. Scores need interpreters to decide the exact meaning, for a given piece at a particular performance, of the symbols the composer has set down.

The best performers can hope for, then, is that an edition will transmit the composer's notation. But what, exactly, does as *faithfully as possible* mean? Editions made from manuscripts that are not legible, contain mistakes, or were never finished are not necessarily more accurate than their sources. Whatever the state of the manuscript when the composer left it, however, the notes of the printed edition appear neat, uniform, regular, and apparently absolutely authoritative, often more so than they actually are.

> *"Although the Suites raise provocative questions, articulation is perhaps the most vexing issue confronting performers of these works"*

Manuscripts, then as now, are prepared for a variety of reasons, not all of which are parallel to the concerns of modern performers. The intended purpose of a manuscript can have a bearing on the way its contents are arranged and recorded. What is incidental to the purpose of the copyist's work will influence how careful he or she is about copying it.

The manuscript copy of the six Bach Suites by Johann Peter Kellner, usually referred to as Quelle B, for example, is deficient in articulation marks, which is a pity, as this is probably the earliest surviving source. This deficiency may reflect Kellner's intent for the volume: Russell Stinson has convincingly argued that Kellner's copy of the violin sonatas and partitas may have been made with the idea of using it as the basis for keyboard performance.[4] Bach himself played these works at the keyboard, according to his student Johann Friedrich Agricola.[5] The brilliant adaptations for harpsichord and for organ of several sonatas and partitas and of the cello Suite No. 6, made and recorded by Gustav Leonhardt, demonstrate the potential of the practice.

If Kellner's intent in copying the suites was to use the manuscript similarly, articulation might not have been as important to him as it might have been had he intended performance on a stringed instrument. The notation of the Suite No. 5 in his

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copy is not in scordatura, as a cellist would need in order to play it, but in concert pitch, a version more useful for a keyboard player. Also, two movements of the Suite No. 5 are missing: they are the only two of that Suite in which no chords or double-stops occur in the original, and might therefore have seemed to Kellner less fitting than the others for keyboard treatment.

Anna Magdalena Bach, who also copied the Suites, was often frustratingly careless in placing slurs. Her habits can be clarified, however, by comparing copies of the violin sonatas and partitas made by husband and wife. Such a comparison helps clarify the latter's habits and provides at least some basis for judging what her husband may have meant by the markings she put in her manuscript of the Cello Suites, known as Quelle A.[6] Comparison between these and the articulations Kellner included in his copy can clarify what Bach probably wrote in the manuscript from which both copies were ultimately derived.

Given the chain of inference supporting any edition purporting to reflect Bach's intentions, performers could argue that no reliable conclusions about articulation can be drawn from the sources and that they might as well read any articulations they like into an edition. If, however, articulation is a part of a composer's inspiration, this argument paints performers into a corner with no way out. If the performer's intention is to reflect the composer's ideas, he or she should try, at least, to retain what can be deduced about those ideas from the composer's notation rather than to arbitrarily replace them with ideas further removed from the composer's genius. Such fidelity to the composer's intentions is a rather recent phenomenon and perhaps less a result of moral scruple than of the practical discovery that the composer's ideas frequently work better than the performer's, at least when the composer is Bach.

Interpretation

Eighteenth-century habits of bowing and fingering were as different from today's as are modern bows and instruments from theirs. Those daring to adopt equipment closely matching that of earlier times, however, have discovered that many notations are not as unrealistic or unmanageable as they may at first have seemed. Does this mean that violists must adopt Bach's articulations to the extent to which they can be recovered on modern instruments and bows? Violists are clearly not obliged to do so, any more than pianists are obliged to adopt Beethoven's pedaling, which in some places seemed nonsensical until early proponents of the fortepiano discovered that on that instrument the pedaling was perfectly natural and completely effective. The instruments have changed; no amount of study can make them sound the same.

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Then again, why not at least try Bach's articulations? If violists seek, however, to duplicate the sounds of eighteenth-century instruments, they will fail. They must not look to make the same sounds; they must look to make equivalent sounds. In doing so they will rediscover the rhetorical sense that eighteenth-century performers found in this music and reconstruct it for their own times.

An excellent example of what must be done is found in the difference between the characteristic phrasing in groups of two of the nineteenth century and the characteristic three-and-one (or one-and-three) groupings of the eighteenth. The latter seems unfamiliar at first, and odd: the tendency to accent the separate note must always be controlled. The bowing can be mastered with a little effort, however, and is key to the spirit of the Bach Suites: the first three Preludes illustrate its importance. (See Example 1.)

Example 1: Three-and-one-note articulations in Bach Suites 1 through 3

Suite No. 1, Prélude, mm. 13–14

Suite No. 2, Prélude, mm. 13–16

Suite No. 3, Prélude, mm. 37–40

Example 2: Bach Suite No. 1, Menuet I, mm. 1-4

Menuet 1re

Another good example concerns the treatment of the two-note slur. Violists must not apply to these the much later habit of the seamless bow change. Baroque performers took for granted a characteristic sound for such slurs that involved shortening the second note slightly—separating it, in other words, from the following note—and making a slight diminuendo

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from the first note to the second. These characteristics work just as well on modern instruments as on old ones and lend passages like the first strain of the first Menuet from the Suite No. 1 a dance-like quality that is delightful both to produce and to hear. (See Example 2.)

The habit of connecting unmarked separate notes together can too often give passages of unslurred sixteenth notes—for instance, in the Prelude from the Suite No. 5—a dull, lifeless uniformity. Nothing is more unforgivable in Bach than to be dull. Reviving the eighteenth-century practice of playing such notes fairly short and a bit separated from each other makes passages like these come alive. (See Example 3.)

Example 3: Bach Suite No. 5,Prelude, mm. 114-34

The articulation of chords, too, differed in the eighteenth century. Chords often function in the Suites as points of arrival and harmonic clarification. A more eighteenth-century, arpeggiated approach to them not only lightens the powerful but ponderous sound chords have in post-Classical tradition, but helps make pitch and harmonic motion clearer. In movements such as the Sarabande from the Suite No. 6 where the interdependence between melody and harmony is closer, the direction of melody becomes more self-evident when chords are played in this manner. (See Example 4.)

Example 4: Bach Suite No. 6, Sarabande, mm. 6-10

These concepts of micro-articulation set the stage for rethinking larger articulative ideas about this music. The German term *durchführung*, used to describe the Baroque technique of melodic elaboration, is often translated as spinning out. This is a perfect description of the effect Bach manages in movement after movement of the Suites as he draws out a melodic thread more and more finely, focusing on the progress from one moment to the next until, before the listener realizes it, the melodic thread has spanned the movement from beginning to end. Nineteenth-century melodic development, with its discrete phrases and cadences, is quite foreign to this spinning-out concept. The nineteenth century sublimated moment-to-moment beauties to gain the delayed gratification of structural points of arrival. Modern violists can reincorporate into their playing the delight in short-range events that the eighteenth-century musician must have found in music that so focuses upon them.

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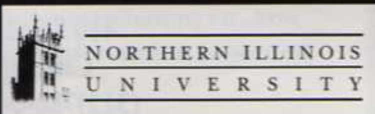

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rightness of Bach's markings. Bach was a string player and was surely aware of the visceral effect of the articulations he wrote; violists can at least adopt them provisionally, in deference to his authority, until they discover whether they work. And they do.

Not even Bach could completely enough transcend contemporary attitudes toward the viola to provide it with an unaccompanied work. Bach held no animus toward the viola; he liked to play it, preferring to be "in the middle of the harmony."[7] He used the instrument in a soloistic fashion in several works, including the Brandenburg Concerto No. 6, the Cantata No. 18, and a number of isolated cantata movements. Surely he was the violist for whom he most often wrote, and his music suggests that he was prepared to expect of violists a technique no more limited than he expected of violinists.

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Might not Bach, hard at work on these Suites and anxious to hear the sound of the latest passage in the excitement of its first discovery, have looked past the cello in the corner to his beloved and familiar viola? The sound of stringed instruments restored to their eighteenth-century identity has done much to make the viola, with its comparative lightness and clarity, seem an acceptable alternative to the modern cello, so much darker and heavier in tone than its older namesake. If violists play the suites heavily and thickly, they may forfeit the right to play them at all.

Of course, this new rhetoric cannot be created by rethinking articulation alone. Tempo is one of articulation's partners in creating the sound world of a performance. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's obituary of his father recalls that Bach preferred his tempos very lively, and indeed such tempos can help ensure the proper manner of execution.[8] Accepting Bach's own articulations and finding convincing interpretations of them would be a powerful first step toward finding a new and workable rhetoric for a group of important works from the past. **AST**

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