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J. S. Bach: *Cello Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV 1007*

From 1717 to 1723, Johann Sebastian Bach was employed by Prince Leopold as Kapellmeister at Köthen. With a court orchestra of 17 accomplished musicians available to him, it was during this period that he produced the bulk of his instrumental music, including the four orchestral suites, the six Brandenburg Concertos, and the most substantial part of his chamber music. In the midst of this enormous output are twelve jewels – six sonatas and partitas for solo violin and six suites for solo cello – and a lingering mystery.

Polyphonic writing was the gold standard of the Baroque. There are essentially only two ways of creating polyphony on a solo violin or cello. One way is to play two or more strings at once (“double-” or “triple-stopping”) or arpeggios (“broken chords”). The other way is to use a compositional technique variously called implied polyphony, pseudopolyphony, polyphonic melody, or compound melody; this is a kind of layering technique with fragments and contrasting rhythmic figures coming in and out of focus within a single voice. Violinist Yehudi Menuhin describes the challenge for the performer:

[A]lthough many of Bach’s movements for solo violin and particularly for cello are written in one voice, that is without counterpoint and harmony, the counterpoint and the harmony are in fact implied and every effort must be made to bring the different voices out clearly, even though there is never more than one voice sounding at a time.

Before Bach wrote these twelve works, there had been very few attempts at writing for an unaccompanied non-keyboard solo instrument. When he was in Weimar in 1703–1705, Bach met the noted Baroque violinist and composer, Johann Paul von Westhoff. It was possibly then that he was first exposed to one of the earliest examples of this genre, Westhoff’s six solo violin partitas (pub. 1696). But it would be 15 to 20 years before Bach would compose his own solo string works, so there is no immediate cause-and-effect between Westhoff’s pieces and Bach’s. And there is no evidence that they were written for a special occasion, or to curry princely favor, or for a particular performer; nor is there any evidence they were even performed publicly during Bach’s lifetime. That leaves us with a puzzle that has led to much musicological conjecture and, of course, dispute: Why did Bach decide to write these solo violin and cello pieces during his time in Köthen (1717–1723)? In the midst of it all is the “solo/soli” conundrum.

In the spring of 1720 Bach accompanied Prince Leopold on a sojourn to Karlsbad. Bach’s wife of thirteen years, Maria Barbara, was in perfectly good health when he left. When he returned three months later, he was shocked to find that she had died and was buried in his absence. Bach was suddenly left alone.

The autograph copy of Bach’s solo violin works was prepared by him after his return from Karlsbad – after the death of his wife. So we know that at least all the violin works were finished by the end of 1720, the date on that manuscript. The title page of the autograph of the six violin sonatas and partitas gives the title in Italian in Bach’s hand: “Sei Solo.” But if he had intended to label the collection as six solos for violin, then it should





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have read “Sei Soli.” Did the meticulous Bach make an unlikely grammatical or spelling error? Or ... did he know exactly what he was writing: “Sei Solo” is correct Italian for “You Are Alone,” words that certainly would have reflected Bach’s grief upon returning home in 1720.

Some performers, such as violinists Christian Tetzlaff and Simon Standage, have seized on this as a “spiritual double entendre,” and violinist-musicologist Helga Thoene has gone so far as to say the famous solo violin chaconne is a “tombeau,” or funeral tribute, for Maria Barbara. Thoene and others also go further in discovering deeper religious aspects. Cellist Steven Isserlis has connected this to the cello suites:

[A]fter I’d read some of the pioneering works of Professor Helga Thöne, who has detected references to Lutheran Chorales in the partitas and sonatas for solo violin, I am sure that they are embedded in the cello suites as well. Furthermore, Professor Thöne has suggested that the works for violin are tied to specific Christian festivals; again, I feel that this could apply equally to the cello suites. The idea of expressing religious devotion through dance is certainly not unusual in baroque music; many of the movements of Biber’s famous ‘Mystery Sonatas’ for violin, for instance, are dances—and Bach himself constantly uses dance-forms in his cantatas.

The original manuscript for the cello suites disappeared, and they would have been lost were it not for a copy made by Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena. Other copies were made from hers, then a few editions mostly treated them as exercises, but the works were virtually unknown until, one day in 1889, a 13-year-old cellist happened upon a tattered copy of them in a thrift shop in Barcelona, Spain. That young cellist was Pablo Casals.

Stephen Soderberg

Caroline Shaw: *In manus tuas*

In manus tuas, Domine,
commendo spiritum meum.
Redemisti me Domine,
Deus veritatis.

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit;
You have redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.

Benjamin Britten: *Cello Suite No. 1, Op. 72*

In September 1960, Dmitri Shostakovich’s first cello concerto was getting its London premiere in the Royal Festival Hall. The soloist was Mstislav Rostropovich. Shostakovich was there as well, and although he had never met Benjamin Britten, he invited him to sit with him at the concert. After the performance, he introduced Britten to Rostropovich. By the time they parted, “Slava” Rostropovich had worked his





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legendary charm on Britten and made him promise to write a new work for him. The next year, Rostropovich premiered Britten's Cello Sonata with the composer at the piano. Next came Britten's Cello Symphony. And then, after hearing Rostropovich play the Bach solo cello suites, Britten presented him with his solo Cello Suite No. 1 as a Christmas gift in 1964.

And so it was that, nearly two and a half centuries after Bach composed his amazing solo string works, yet another composer took up Bach's most intimidating challenge to those coming after him: how many dance steps can you perform – on a tightrope – without a net. In a less frivolous vein, using composer and jazz pianist Mel Powell's definition of counterpoint as "the art of creating multiplicity," the Bach challenge is to squeeze multiplicity from just one voice. Benjamin Britten was up to the challenge.

Bach's first cello suite begins with a Prelude that, much like other preludes he wrote, is superficially no more than a string of arpeggiated chords. But because of the way a note in one chord "leads" to one or more notes in another chord, the result is a polyphonic maze of voices.

Britten begins his first cello suite with what he calls a "Canto." This will be repeated in various guises as it marks off the suite into three sections of two movements/dances each. It is reminiscent of the function of the promenade theme in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but it is no stroll through an art gallery (and what Britten does with the Canto is vastly more interesting). The Canto is a remarkable nod to Bach's Prelude. While there are harmonic complications due mostly to Britten's use of the cello's open strings, it is nevertheless, superficially, like the Bach, also a progression of arpeggiated chords. But rather than arpeggios of single notes as in the Bach, Britten's arpeggios are made of double stops, giving a denser, more "lush" sound to the harmonic texture.

There is a final, fourth appearance of the Canto within the Suite's final movement. Its primary function at the end appears to be to rein in the runaway horse unleashed by the presto "Moto perpetuo," one of the more virtuosic outbursts in the contemporary cello repertoire.

Stephen Soderberg

