

“Bach Six Cello Suites”--Pablo Casals (c. 1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

Essay by Eric Siblin (guest post)*



Pablo Casals

The music, two and a half hours of solo cello, had been in the bloodstream of Pablo Casals for half a century when he finally summoned the nerve to record it.

In 1890, back when the Cello Suites were all but unknown, a 13-year-old Casals discovered the sheet music in a Barcelona music shop. It was a struck-by-lightning moment in what would be a monumental career.

The young cellist spent the next dozen years mastering a composition which requires virtuoso technique and ranges over vast emotional terrain. At the dawn of the 20th century, his command of the material and personal fame enabled Casals to start performing a single cello suite in major concerts.

It was a radical thing to do. The unaccompanied cello, unlike solo piano or violin, was not considered sufficiently dazzling to fill concert halls. Yet in the hands of Casals, the greatest cellist of his day, this baroque music composed in the early 18th century by Johann Sebastian Bach enraptured audiences worldwide.

“How could anyone think of Bach as cold,” Casals remarked, “when these Suites shine with the most glittering kind of poetry!”

Recording the six suites, however, clashed with what the music meant to Casals: intensely personal masterworks in a constant state of evolution. He worried that he wouldn't be able to do justice to the music. Born in a Catalan village in 1876, Casals despised the “steel monster,” as he called the microphone, which picked up background noise he wasn't even aware of. All that changed with the turbulent political climate of the 1930s. With the advent of the Spanish Civil War, the politically engaged cellist from Catalonia couldn't perform in his

homeland anymore. An ardent democrat, he refused to play in Russia under the Bolsheviks; and he had boycotted Germany since Hitler came to power, and Italy once fascism took over. “In a period of acute physical danger and emotional turmoil,” wrote biographer Robert Baldock, “Casals needed to play.”

So in the autumn of 1936, devastated by four months of civil war in Spain, Casals allowed himself to be convinced by Fred Gaisberg, the head of EMI, to go into the Abbey Road Studios in London. He recorded the tragic second cello suite and the passionate third suite, sending his heartfelt notes into the “steel monster” of modern recording technology. Two years later, with his beloved Barcelona reeling but defiant in the wake of a fascist bombing campaign, Casals returned to a recording studio in Paris to lay down the optimistic tones of the first cello suite. He then recorded the powerful, explosive sixth suite.

The following year, with Spain in fascist hands and Europe spiralling towards total war, Casals at age 62, completed the cycle of suites. In Paris, he recorded the fourth and fifth suites, connecting the wrenching notes of despair and loss.

The 12-inch 78 rpm records were released on the Victor label in three instalments, beginning with suites two and three in 1940, one and six the following year, and four and five in 1950.

The results were spectacular: the first-ever complete studio account of the music, destined to be the most famous and by far and away the most influential. Critic Norman Lebrecht ranks it one of the best classical recordings ever made, praising Casals for having brought “grandeur, dignity and, above all, hope” to the Bach suites. “This is as much a testament as a performance, a blueprint for the cello future.”

The music conforms to a highly symmetrical structure. There are six suites in different keys, each one consisting of six movements. Bach kicked off each suite with an improvisational prelude followed by a sequence of dance movements: the allemande, courant, sarabande--interpolating either a minuet, bouree, or gavotte here--and ending with a gigue.

Listen to Casals in the prelude of the third suite in C major: he sets the scene of a dramatic collapse, picks up the pieces, gathers momentum, and plunges into a maelstrom, straining, nearly breaking apart, only to emerge with bouquets of chords and a declaration of love. Every listen brings fresh discoveries. Isolate the lowest notes from the high ones and they speak with a separate voice that is fascinating. Or consider the prelude’s midpoint cacophony, which comes shockingly close to noise, yet with a full orchestra bottled up somewhere inside the cello, clamouring to be heard. The dance movements that follow are a succession of jauntiness and raw energy, heroism and devastation, tunefulness and timelessness.

After Casals gave Bach’s music mass appeal, there was no stopping the suites. By the end of the 20th century there were scores of recordings in the catalogue and upwards of 75 performance editions of the music for cellists. Other instrumentalists found they could transcribe and tackle the Cello Suites: the flute, piano, guitar, trumpet, tuba, saxophone, banjo, and more have all essayed the music with surprising success.

But, for cellists, the six suites remains their alpha and omega, a rite of passage, the Mount Everest of their repertoire. New recordings of the suites regularly win “disc of the year” honors. And the scratchy old mono recordings made by Casals continues to be a top seller among historical titles.

It is not lighthearted music. To name just a few examples, the suites have been played at memorial services in honor of the victims of 9/11, at another memorial marking the Rwandan genocide, and at various high-profile funerals, including the massive ones held for the former publisher of “The Washington Post” and for Senator Edward Kennedy.

If the music has often been employed for sad occasions, it is in large part explained by the dark, moody tones of the cello, plus the fact that the Bach suites require one lonely instrument. Yet the cello is the instrument that most closely resembles the human voice; it is capable of more than just doom and gloom. The six suites, four of which are in major keys, have their fair share of upbeat merrymaking, devil-may-care attitude, and ecstatic abandon.

The music was considered “an item for connoisseurs” when Casals’ pioneering recordings were first released. “They are cool and pure and lofty,” wrote the critic for the “New York Times,” “set forth with the simplicity that distinguishes searching art.” They still have serious status, fuelled by highbrow reviews that suggest the suites “represent some sort of apex of Western musical creativity” or that the music “has a purity and intensity that approach the Japanese yet remains more accessible to Western ears.”

The desire among so many cellists to re-record is so strong because interpretations can vary so wildly, even within the same cellist’s career. Deprived of Bach’s original manuscript--which was lost to history after the composer’s death in 1750--cellists are forced to make more decisions than usual. (The sheet music which the teenage Casals found dated from the early 19th century.)

Bach left no “indications,” the notation that guides musical characteristics such as tempo, dynamics, bowing, styles of play and various sonic curlicues. The Cello Suites are a blank slate, a Rorschach test that allows cellists to put their own stamp on Bach and interpret the music as they see fit--or as they think Bach would have wanted his music played.

The question of being true to Bach and his era--known as “authenticity”--has become a musicological battle fought with strings and vibrato. The purists aim to play Bach as his music is thought to have sounded circa 1720. This affects everything from the type of strings on the cello (gut) and the instrument itself (period instruments are favoured) to the size of the concert hall (small, preferably), the tuning (lower), and the use of vibrato (none).

The “period police” are not impressed with the recordings made by Casals, pioneer though he may have been. These hard-liners dismiss him as more Romantic than authentic, playing it fast and loose with the baroque facts, taking liberties with Bach’s score, and indulging in syrupy emotions.

But a major problem facing “authentic” players is the unavailability of an authentic 18th-century

audience. Listeners now have music and ideas in their heads that did not exist in Bach's time. Can listening to a piece of music on an iPhone in an air-conditioned room, with a knowledge of rock, jazz, and salsa ever really be the same as hearing it during the 18th century in the candlelit castle of His Most Serene Highness?

Consider the beautiful spot about 20 seconds into the gigue of the third suite as played by Casals that sounds like a riff in the hands of a rock guitarist? It is a bold, churning phrase that would not be out of place on a Gibson Les Paul wielded by, say, Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin. Bach's audience, two centuries before the electric guitar was invented, could not have heard the notes in remotely the same way. Historical faithfulness has its limits.

If nothing else, the lack of a manuscript in Bach's hand has ruled out any definitive claims to authenticity. And beyond that, there is an inner logic and beauty to the suites that flourishes with so many approaches.

Casals sounds authentic, and not because of the hiss and squeaks and crackle of the vintage mono recording. Even though his mindset was Romantic, his use of vibrato exaggerated, his knowledge of baroque history limited, and the recording technology of his time primitive, Casals played the suites the only correct way--by breathing life into them.

Eric Soblin is a former music critic for "The Montreal Gazette" and author of "The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece." The book, part biography, part music history, and part literary mystery, has been translated into ten languages. His second book is titled, "Studio Grace: The Making of a Record."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of the Library of Congress.