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THE BACH CELLO SUITES - A CASE STUDY:

THE “BOURRÉE” OF SUITE NO. 4 IN E-FLAT

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Abstract

Among the staples of the modern cello repertoire are the six *Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso* by Johann Sebastian Bach. Yet the absence of an autograph in the composer’s own hand forces cellists to consider four eighteenth-century manuscripts and the first printed edition, each of which differ on such issues as phrasing, slurs, ornamentation, and in some cases the pitches themselves. Of the four manuscripts, the one by Anna Magdalena Bach, the composer’s second wife, is known to have been copied directly from the autograph of her husband. While her manuscript does contain a number of inconsistencies that were unlikely to have been in the original, a comparison of the slurs and phrasing in the “Bourrée” of *Suite No. 4 in E-flat* in her manuscript with those found in the other contemporaneous manuscripts lend credibility to the argument that hers should be given priority by cellists today. Her markings lead to a performance that is most consistent with the character of a bourrée, and a study of the dance forms on which the cello *Suites* are based make it clear that Bach sought to retain the character of these dances in the *Suites*. 
The six *Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso* by Johann Sebastian Bach have been a staple of the cello repertoire since their re-discovery in 1890 by the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. Casals’s performances of the *Suites* have served to popularize them to such an extent that every cellist who is serious about mastering the repertoire of their instrument must be able to perform them with both technical mastery and musical sensitivity.

There are several distinct challenges that the twenty-first-century cellist must address with respect to the Bach *Suites*, however. Perhaps the most significant of these is the absence of an autograph version of the *Suites*. Cellists are forced to consider four eighteenth-century manuscripts when making decisions about phrasing, slurs, articulation, and even the notes themselves. The most prominent of these is a copy made by Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena, dated between 1727 and 1731; another is a copy made by one of Bach’s students, Joseph Kellner, dated 1726. Finally, there are two late eighteenth-century manuscripts to consider whose scribes are unknown.

These four manuscripts vary in a number of ways, but especially when it comes to the issues of slurring and articulation, about which there appears to be very little consensus regarding what the composer intended. Ornamentation and even the pitches themselves can sometimes vary within these sources, and so the cellist who seeks to give an authoritative rendering of the *Suites* is forced to make decisions about each of these issues while considering the sources.
The Manuscripts

The origins and relationships of these four copies are discussed in great depth in the 2000 Barenreiter edition of the *Suites*. The Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript was originally the second part of a larger volume that also contained her husband’s *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*. The manuscript became separated from that of the solo violin works, and became property of the Royal Library in Berlin in 1841. It is known to historians as Source A.

Source B is in the hand of Johann Peter Kellner, who copied a great amount of Bach’s music and probably knew the composer himself. The *Suites* are located on pages 249 to 276 of a large volume containing many of Bach compositions. These two earliest copies differ in a number of ways themselves, so much so that scholars believe they, too, are not based on the same source. Kellner’s copy, Source B, contains a number of mistakes that are most likely due to his own carelessness, such as incorrect rhythms and the omission and duplication of measures. One of the movements in the fifth *Suite* is incomplete; the Sarabande is missing completely.

The third source has sometimes been called the Westphal manuscript, as it was discovered in the estate of Johann Christoph Westphal of Hamburg in 1830 after his death. This manuscript, known as Source C, is in the hand of two anonymous copyists,
and has been dated to the latter half of the eighteenth century. The last eighteenth-century copy, known as Source D, was offered for sale in 1799 by Johann Traeg, an art and music dealer, in Vienna. Like C, the copyist of D is unknown; it has been dated to the latter part of the century and is most likely from Germany.²

An interesting aspect of this search for the most authentic version of the cello Suites comes from the first printed edition, published by Janet et Cotelle in Paris in 1824. The preface to this edition claims that a well-known cellist from the Royal Academy of Music, Pierre Norblin, had discovered the original manuscript in Germany: “Après beaucoup de recherches en Allemagne, M. NORBLIN, de la musique du Roi, premier violoncelle de l’Académie royale de Musique, a enfin recueilli le fruit de sa persévérance, en faisant la découverte de ce précieux manuscrit.”³ However, there is no independent confirmation of this claim, and its similarities to sources C and D make it likely that all three were copied from a yet undiscovered manuscript. While it is possible that this manuscript was prepared by the composer himself, the divergence of these latter three sources from the earlier copies by A.M. Bach and Kellner make it unlikely.

There is every reason to believe that Anna Magdalena copied both the Violin Sonatas and Partitas, BWV 1001-1006, and the Cello Suites, BWV 1007-1012, from her

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 5.
husband’s autographs. Her manuscript has the labels Pars 1 and Pars 2, respectively, and it is known that she copied the violin works from the surviving autograph. In the autograph of the violin works Bach himself used the label “Libro Primo,” implying that the missing autograph of the cello Suites would constitute the second volume.  

However, while in many respects Anna Magdalena’s copy of the violin solos is faithful in exact detail to the autograph, in matters of slurring and articulation there are numerous inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Laura E. Kramer explores these discrepancies in great detail in her doctoral dissertation entitled “Articulation in Johann Sebastian Bach’s Six Suites for Violoncello Solo (BWV 1007-1012): History, Analysis, and Performance.” Kramer’s research has identified four types of discrepancies between the remarkably consistent markings in the autograph, and those in AM Bach’s copy: the shape, length, placement, and omission of slurs. The following comparison of the Giga from the D minor Partita demonstrates all of these discrepancies (Ex. 1).

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5 Kramer, “Articulation,” 49.
Example 2.1a: JSB, D minor Partita, Giga, mm. 11-13

Example 2.1b: AMB, D minor Partita, Giga, mm. 10-14

Example 1: *Partita in d minor*, Giga, mm. 10 – 14

The composer has clearly marked the first three notes in each grouping of six as being slurred; the AM Bach copy has four notes slurred in some groupings, has shifted the beginning of the slur to the second note in at least three of the groupings, and has omitted the slur in the sixth grouping. The markings in the Anna Magdalena copy could easily lead to varying interpretations of how this passage should be bowed; this is precisely the challenge that faces any cellist who wishes to undertake a serious study of cello *Suites*. As a result of these inconsistencies, most cellists do not take the slurs and bowings of the Anna Magdalena manuscript at face value, and many editions of the
Suites have used these inconsistencies to rationalize taking great liberties with the bowings, such as the 1939 edition by Frits Galliard published by G. Schirmer, Inc.

Several late twentieth-century editions of the Suites recommend seeking a consensus view among the eighteenth-century manuscripts in order to make decisions regarding slurs, bowing, and articulation. In 1962 Dmitry Markevitch, a student of Gregor Piatagorsky, came upon the Kellner and Westphal manuscripts at the Prussian State Library in Marburg/Lahn. His 1964 edition of the Suites asserts that by “cross-checking the three manuscripts now available…we can get an almost perfect rendering of what Bach intended in regard to notes, bowing and ornamentation, and a clearer idea of dynamics and tempi.”  

The rationale behind such an approach, especially when markings found in two or more of the manuscripts are largely identical, is that these similarities are an indication that the markings originated in the autograph.

Such consensus among the early manuscripts, however, does not necessarily impute authenticity to such markings. The Barenreiter edition argues that as a result of their “temporal distance” from the autograph, the three later manuscripts “must be considered inferior to the others as sources of Bach’s original text.” Further, it asserts that the slurs indicated in the Anna Magdalena manuscript are closest to the composer’s

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intentions and should be “strictly observed.”\textsuperscript{8} While her manuscript often indicates that parallel passages be articulated in differing ways, the editors believe that the resulting variety of articulation is intended rather than being the result of arbitrary mistakes, and should not be standardized or added to.\textsuperscript{9} At the same time, they also assert the right of the performer to make these decisions, and provide copies of all four eighteenth-century manuscripts in order to facilitate the process.

**The “Bourrée” of Suite No. 4 in E-flat**

In the remainder of this essay I will provide evidence from the “Bourrée” of Suite No. 4 in E-flat to argue that the Anna Magdalena manuscript, while differing from the other three early manuscripts and the first edition, should be given higher priority by cellists seeking to present an authentic performance of the Suites. The “Bourrée” from the fourth Suite, as notated by Anna Magdalena Bach, is consistent with the character of that dance when traced to its origins in central France, while the bowings found in Sources B, C, and D are not.

Johann Sebastian Bach received an early education in the dances of the French court on which the Suites are based. In their study *Dance and the Music of J.S. Bach*, Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne point out that Bach was likely exposed to the dance music of the French court while a student at Michaelisschule in Luneburg, during his

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 32-33.
teenage years. Many of his classmates were students at the Ritterakademie in the city, a
center of French language and culture. It was Thomas de la Seile, a pupil of Lully and
dance instructor at the academy, who first brought Bach to the court in Celle, where the
latter played as a court musician.\textsuperscript{10} The court at Celle itself was termed a “miniature
Versailles,” as Duke Georg Wilhelm followed the pattern of many German courts in
seeking to produce operas, ballets, and social dancing in the manner of the French
courts.\textsuperscript{11} Bach personally knew three French dancing masters: Johannes Pesch, who
taught dance in Leipzig for forty years; Pantaleon Hebenstreit; and Jean-Baptiste
Volumier, the latter two masters being musicians in the Dresden court and personal
friends of Bach.\textsuperscript{12}

The fact that Bach had an early and thorough acquaintance with the dance music
of the French court lends credibility to the assertion that he sought to retain the
character of the dance movements in his \textit{Suites for Violoncello Solo}. The \textit{Suites} themselves
are composed in accordance with the classical dance suites of the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries, whose standardization is attributed to J.J. Froberger.\textsuperscript{13} Each suite
begins with a Prelude, which is followed by the four standard dances of the suite: the

\begin{flushleft}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, \textit{Dance and the Music of J.S. Bach}, expanded ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3-4.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 11-12.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 13-14.}
\end{flushleft}
Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue. Often a dance was inserted prior to the closing Gigue, and Bach explored several of these possibilities by inserting pairs of Minuets in the first two suites, Bourrées in the third and fourth, and Gavottes in the final two.

The Bourrée is one of three peasant dances in lively duple meter that became part of the French dance suites. Originating in the mountains of central France in Auvergne and Berri, it is distinguished from the Gavotte and Rigaudon by its use of a crochet (quarter note) upbeat. The dance itself features distinct roles for men and women, the former stamping, clapping, and shouting; the latter running up to the men and then shying away. It could be sung and danced to the rhythmic stamping of the musicians, or even the stamping of wine makers as they crushed grapes.14

Gaston Vuillier, a French dance historian of the late nineteenth century, travelled to the region of Auvergne to witness first-hand the peasant dances of the region.

I felt more strongly than ever that music and dancing, like everything else, must be judged of in their native setting to be appreciated. The Bourrée of Auvergne is looked upon as a heavy dance, somewhat coarse in character. The stamping of sabots, or hob-nailed shoes, is a characteristic accompaniment marking every third beat of the measure… but when you light upon the dancers…how charming is the vision you bear away with you…15

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The first Bourrée of Bach’s E-flat Suite No. 4 for Violoncello contains numerous examples of the third beat being emphasized in such a manner. The opening basic idea of the movement, a rhythm that is repeated throughout, emphasizes the third beat by repeating the tone of the opening downbeat, and cadential points are often marked by three successive quarter notes, the third marking the octave below the second, as if to give it added emphasis (Ex. 2).16

Example 2: Bourrée I, mm. 1 - 4

The third beat marks the high note in a series of ascending scalar passages on several occasions (Ex. 3).

Example 3: Bourrée I, mm. 26 - 29

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16 Johann Sebastian Bach, Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso, Anna Magdalena Bach, ed. (Kassel, Germany: Barenreiter Verlag, 2000). Historians have come to refer this as “Source A”, thus all further citations in this essay will do so. All musical examples come from “Source A” unless otherwise noted.
Two ascending arpeggio passages also finish on the third beat of the measure (Ex. 4).

Example 4: Bourrée I, m 38.

After emphasizing the third beat in various ways throughout the dance movement, Bach then inserts two measures just before its finish, both of which have a dotted quarter note held over into the third beat (Ex. 5). Even here, the absence of articulation on the third beat still provides a launching point for the sixteenth notes that follow.

Example 5: Bourrée I, mm. 42 – 43

The second Bourrée of the E-flat Suite, with its quarter note pulses, creates a calmer mood than the running sixteenth notes of the first. Yet even here, nearly every
first and third beat is marked by a quarter note bass line, often played as a double stop by the cello alongside the melody in the upper voice (Ex. 6).

![Example 6: Bourrée II, mm. 1 – 4](image)

A brief survey of the Bourées in Bach’s *Orchestral Suites Nos. 1-3* also reveals a consistent emphasis on the third beat of the measure, such as the opening measures of the Bourée I in the *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D* (Ex. 7).\(^7\) Here the rhythm of the pickup and downbeat are echoed in beats two and three, in five of the eight measures. There is also a figure of three descending quarter notes that are slurred together, each time beginning on the third beat, as in mm. one, two five and six, which serves to give added emphasis to that beat.

The Bourrées of the cello Suite in E-flat provide strong evidence that Bach was keenly aware of the qualities inherent in this dance form. His emphasis on the third beat of the measure is a gesture of acknowledgement to its peasant origins in the mountains of central France. Further, the running sixteenth notes and echo effects that Bach employs throughout the first Bourrée in particular help to recreate the flirtation and courtship that characterize the dance itself.

However, many performances of the fourth Suite follow the bowing of Sources C, D, and E when it comes to the first Bourrée, by slurring the four sixteenth note upbeat with the downbeat of the following measure (Ex. 8).\textsuperscript{18}

This bowing is found consistently in Sources C and D, and somewhat less so in the Kellner (B) manuscript. The Markevitch edition follows this bowing. If one were to seek a consensus view of the articulation in the Suites, then this would be the logical bowing to use.

However, the Anna Magdalena manuscript is consistent in keeping the quarter note downbeats separate from the slurred sixteenth notes of the upbeat (Examples 2 and 3 above). One of the characteristics of the Bourrée is its upbeat. While Bach has divided this quarter note into a scale of four sixteenth notes, by slurring them together the rhythmic pulse of the quarter note upbeat is maintained.

In light of the Baroque practice known as the “rule of the down bow,” which expects that every beat requiring added emphasis be played at the frog in the direction

Example 8: Bourrée I, mm. 1 – 10 (Source C)

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of a down bow, the bowings in the Anna Magdalena manuscript are much better suited to Baroque performance practice than that of the other manuscripts. The added emphasis of playing the quarter note following the four sixteenths as a separate down bow, whether on the first or third beat, complies with this common eighteenth century practice. The first Bourrée also contains several passages where this figure lands on the first beat, then is immediately repeated at a differing pitch level so that it lands on the third beat, as in mm. 6 – 7 above. In this case, slurring the sixteenths and quarter together would necessitate an upbow on beats two and three in measure seven, thus significantly lessening the emphasis given to the quarter note on beat three. Yet, as previously discussed, this emphasis on the third beat of the measure is fundamental to the Bourrée’s character. Thus, for reasons related to performance practice as well as the character of the dance itself, the bowings in the Anna Magdalena manuscript are superior to those in the other manuscripts. While indisputable evidence is still unavailable, it is certainly possible to assume that this superiority is simply the result of the fact that the bowings were in the autograph itself.

**Conclusion**

From early in life, Johann Sebastian Bach was exposed to the dance music of the French court, and was a personal acquaintance of several French dancing masters. An examination of the dance movements in his *Suite No. 4* for solo cello provides clear

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evidence that Bach had a thorough knowledge of the intrinsic characteristics of each
dance, thus making the knowledge of those dance forms an important pre-requisite to
giving a stylistically accurate performance of the *Suites*. Further, the manuscript copy of
the *Suites* made by his wife, Anna Magdalena Bach, was almost certainly taken directly
from the non-extant autograph, and thus must be given the highest consideration when
deciding on articulation, phrasing, and bowing patterns.
Bibliography


_____ *Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso*. Edited by Anna Magdalena Bach.


