

The music

Johann Sebastian Bach Suite no4 in E flat major BWV1010
(1685-1750) Suite no5 in C minor BWV1011
Suite no6 in D major BWV1012

It's generally accepted that the six *Cello Suites* we're to hear today were written early in Bach's career, at some time between 1717 and 1723 when he was in the service of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen. It was a fruitful time for composition: the Prince's only formal requirement was for simple church music, which left Bach ample scope to write the *Brandenburg Concertos*, *Orchestral Suites* and *Violin Sonatas and Partitas* as well as these masterpieces for solo cello. The court was full of skilled musicians and such a cornucopia of new works would have provided a marvellous addition to their existing repertoire. For the renowned viola da gamba player, Christian Ferdinand Abel, the *Cello Suites* would have been a special treat.

The *Suites* were probably not first conceived as a set of six. It's noticeable that nos 4-6 are on a considerably higher plane of difficulty and musical invention than nos 1-3 and it's now presumed that the additional three were written a bit later when Bach started organising some of his instrumental works into neat groups of six.

Unlike the six *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, no manuscript in Bach's own hand exists, giving endless scope for debate about exactly how he intended them to be performed. It was only because one of his pupils asked Bach for a copy of the score that we have a contemporary manuscript at all — one written out by Anna Magdalena but without any significant notation, leaving our insight into performance practice at the time singularly opaque. There are a few later manuscripts, but whether these in any way reflected Bach's own further thoughts or his corrections of his wife's text can't be known: the changes may simply have been made by other performers.

The first published edition came out in 1824, a full century after their composition. And it took another hundred years until they slowly started to become more widely known, aided by Casals' ground-breaking recordings in the 1930s. The arrival of the LP then eventually led to a flourishing. Given the lack of any definitive performance practice to bind them, every cellist could come to their own conclusions. And indeed they still are, as we shall have the pleasure of confirming in our three recitals today.

The works all follow the standard format of the baroque suite. First comes a prelude, often with the character of an improvisation, allowing the composer, and performer, considerable freedom. This is followed by a sequence of movements based on dance forms from the major musical centres of Europe. All the dances are in binary form with repeated A and then B sections (AABB).

The allemande probably originated in Germany in the 16th century and was subsequently adopted in the French court. Usually in duple time, with two beats to the bar, it was thought of as a rather serious, courtly affair. The composer Johann Gottfried Walther wrote that the allemande "must be composed and likewise danced in a grave and ceremonious manner." In contrast, the courante is a lighter dance in triple time, with three beats to the bar, its name derived from the French for "running". There are two main types, the Italian and the French — the former livelier than its more elegant Gallic counterpart. Bach employs both types in the cello suites.

Next comes the sarabande, slow and reflective, again in triple time and often the emotional centre of the suite. This, originally Spanish, dance is often coupled with a gigue, or jig. From Britain via France, it is generally the liveliest movement and the most likely to betray its dance origins. To smooth the transition from the slow sarabande to the fast gigue, Bach inserts a *galanterie* in each of the suites, an optional, lighter section usually consisting of a pair of fashionable dances, the first of which is repeated after the second. In the first two suites these are stately minuets, in the next two, lively bourrées and, in the final two, gavottes, derived from a French folk dance in moderate tempo.

Alex Rolton will be playing the suites on cellos set up in the baroque manner which have a number of important differences from their modern equivalents. In brief, baroque cellos have a shorter, less-angled neck and a shorter fingerboard, with gut strings held at lower tension and pitch than modern metal strings and they are generally held between the knees rather than using a spike. The baroque bow is also shorter, lighter and curves outward favouring a gentler articulation. The flatter bridge arch and lower-tension gut strings mean the instrument itself offers less resistance to bowing two or three strings together (double or triple stopping), or in quick succession (arpeggio). Bach makes much use of these in most movements of the suites. You will almost certainly be able to hear — and see — more in the discussion following this concert at 5.00pm.

JS Bach *Cello Suite no4 in E flat major BWV1010*

I Prelude ~ II Allemande ~ III Courante ~ IV Sarabande ~ V Bourrée 1 and 2 ~ VI Gigue

In contrast to the preceding three suites (to be heard later today), E flat major, with three flats in the key signature, is perhaps a somewhat less natural fit for the cello, with fewer opportunities for using the more resonant open strings. Despite this, the suite is largely warm, buoyant, even occasionally humorous. The *Prelude* starts with a large two-octave leap — covering almost the entire range of the cello in Bach's time — followed by an arpeggio-like sequence of notes. This pattern is broadly repeated across a number of keys until interrupted by a double-speed, cadenza-like passage. These two elements then continue in alternation to the end of the movement. Flowing scales and wide leaps feature in the genial *Allemande* while the lively *Courante* has an engaging air of instability due to the incorporation of semiquavers and triplets against its overall quaver motion. Dotted rhythms and frequent chords evoke a sense of grandeur in the *Sarabande* while good humour is evident in both *Bourrées*, the first characterised by rapid upward scales and downward jumps, the second providing a short, but calmer, contrast. The *Gigue* flows cheerfully in lively quavers, its second half much longer than the first.

JS Bach *Cello Suite no5 in C minor BWV1011*

I Prelude ~ II Allemande ~ III Courante ~ IV Sarabande ~ V Gavotte 1 and 2 ~ VI Gigue

While sharing its key signature of three flats with the fourth suite, the *C minor Suite* is a very different, more sombre creation. Bach requests the top string of the cello to be tuned down a tone from A to G, perhaps to facilitate some of its darkly sonorous chords. The *Prelude* is in the form of a French overture consisting of a slow, solemn introduction featuring characteristic dotted rhythms (a long note then a short note) which is followed by a "fugal" section in which multiple overlapping parts are ingeniously implied by a single line of melody with occasional chords. Dotted rhythms appear again in the noble, yearning *Allemande* while the harmonically-daring *Courante* is in the more sober French style rather than the Italian of the other suites. A mere 20 bars (40 with repeats), the *Sarabande* is notated almost entirely in quavers, pausing only occasionally, with no double stops, its pure, harmonically-radical, melody allowing the cellist considerable freedom in interpretation. This movement has been particularly revered by cellists and audiences alike: Mstislav Rostropovich described

it as the essence of Bach's genius; Paul Tortelier viewed it as an extension of silence; Yo-Yo Ma played it at the site of the World Trade Center, as the names of the dead were read on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks. A graceful but determined first *Gavotte* follows, contrasting with the rapid triplet quaver movement of the second. The suite ends with a tuneful *Gigue*, with one or two unexpected hesitations.

JS Bach Cello Suite no6 in D major BWV1012

I Prelude ~ II Allemande ~ III Courante ~ IV Sarabande ~ V Gavotte 1 and 2 ~ VI Gigue

While it can be accommodated, with effort, on a modern cello, the wider tessitura of this suite, sometimes reaching an octave higher than the others, suggests it was composed for a somewhat smaller instrument, most likely with an additional top string. A likely contender is the piccolo cello, with a fifth string tuned up to E, which Alex will play this afternoon. The additional string increases the sympathetic resonances of the instrument – something we will hear much more of in Tanja Orning's recital at 8.45pm – and allows it to travel further in its sequences of notes, giving the music a wider harmonic sweep. This, coupled with the festive key of D major, gives much of this suite an extrovert, joyful character.

The *Prelude* exemplifies this with its continuous, almost jaunty, movement in triplet quavers and its emphasis on repeated notes exploiting the tones of D and A that are central to the D major tonality, all rounded off with rapid, cadenza-like passages. The highly-ornamented *Allemande*, marked *molto adagio*, is, in many interpretations, the longest movement in all of the six suites. With up to 30 notes in the bar, time almost seems to stand still, the movement gaining greater expressivity by its excursions into related minor keys. The contrasting *Courante* exudes confidence and speed, eschewing chords or double-stopping, while the harmonically-wandering *Sarabande* embraces them with all their expressive possibilities. The well-known first *Gavotte* starts, like several movements in this suite, with repeated notes and has a folk-like simplicity which is even more evident in the second *Gavotte* with its imitation bagpipe drone. The final, bravura *Gigue* also remains true to its folk-dance origins, an earthy conclusion to a set of suites worthy of Heaven.

Programme notes by Dick Ware and Martin Cunningham.

(Continued on insert) >>

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Programme Notes

BACH SUITES FOR SOLO CELLO

The Baroque Cello – Alex Rolton



3.15pm, Saturday October 10th, 2026
Little Missenden Church

66th Little Missenden Festival

The artist

Alex Rolton *cello*

A member of the Philharmonia Orchestra since 2018, Alex performs with the Orchestra in all the major concert venues around the world and extensively throughout the UK, working frequently with the world's most prominent conductors and soloists. Aside from the Philharmonia, Alex is in high demand as a guest principal and continuo player with some of the top baroque and classical orchestras, working frequently with the English Concert, the Academy of Ancient Music and Brecon Baroque. His continuo playing for early music ensemble La Nuova Musica was described by *The Times* as “suave and assertive”.

Alex began playing the cello aged five and has since accrued two degrees from the Royal Academy of Music where he studied with professors Felix Schmidt, Joe Crouch and Jonathan Manson. Whilst studying at the Royal Academy he won all the internal cello competitions and – playing a 5-stringed piccolo cello – even one violin competition.

When not playing, Alex is often to be found tinkering on ageing Land Rovers, working on his brother's farm, or creating big band-style multi-cello arrangements which – during lockdown – found considerable success online.

He plays an English cello, built in London in the mid-18th century.

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