

# Praeludio con la suite da Gio. Bast. Bach aufs Lautenwerk (BWV 996)

Foreword:

A lute transcription of Lautenwerk suite in E minor, BWV 996, is truly a daunting task. First it seems necessary to convince the conservative musical community that other than traditional connections, there is little reason to suppose that the work was written with the lute in mind. The work assumed its present spurious identity as Lute Suite No. 1 in spite of the title (supposed to have been added by J.G. Walther, who prepared many early keyboard sources of Bach's works), and supported by the advocacy of influential German scholars who promulgated a lute-playing Bach; Wilhelm Tappert, Albert Schweitzer, Hans Neeman and F.G. Giesbert.

Despite a valiant attempt to debunk this image by Hans Radke in his article *War Johann Sebastian Bach Lautenspieler?* (1964), the characterization of Bach as the composer of four lute suites whose syntopical organization is comparable to the suites for violin, cello or harpsichord -- as a composer fully conversant with the lute's idiom, and its technical and musical potential as a vehicle of large-scale suite composition -- has remained.

A recently-written reference work, the dictionary-style *Oxford Composer Companion guide to J. S. Bach*, edited by Malcolm Boyd, lists the suite, along with BWV 995, 997, 998, 999, 1000 and 1006a, as being among Bach's 'lute' works, though the suite is clearly full of technical impossibilities. A commendably even-handed assessment of the arguments about Bach's lute-related repertoire in this volume by T. Crawford seems to contradict the classification, turning the tide in favour of keyboard origins.

If we adopt the view that the lute had little direct influence in Bach's musical thinking, it frees us from the rationalization that we simply don't understand the lute or its music well enough, which was the case when the work was included in the first Bach complete publication Bach Gesellschaft (1936), or the Neue Bach Ausgabe, (V/10, 1982, T. Kohlhase ed.). The latter publication included the piece in a neologist category of *Werke für Lauteninstrumente*, though normally a keyboard instrument would not be considered to be in the lute family, whatever its tone-colour and stringing.

Since its initial appearance in the Bach Gesellschaft edition (in its E minor and A minor versions) the suite has been widely published in many guitar transcriptions, appearing first in Bruger's original transcription (still available) for guitar/lute hybrid with additional basses and subsequently in transcriptions by Stingl, Wensieki, Bream, Bellow, Willard, Scheit, Teuchert, Koonce, et. al. Julian Bream's foreword, for example, referred to "...bold figurations so characteristic of the lute". Yet none of these publications has altered the perception that Bach wrote suites specifically for the lute, and in fact most of them have not questioned the principal assumptions upon which the transcriptions are made.

Despite clear passages of *luthée* style (arpeggiated presentation of a fundamentally chordal texture), particularly in the Allemande, Bourée and Sarabande, the other movements are obviously far beyond the lute in their thick texture (including four-tone chords at cadences, parallel thirds in the bass line) and uncharacteristic ornamentation.

D. Rhodes published a lute transcription (possibly the first?) of the work in tablature in 1976, transposed to G minor, in which he argues for lute origins: "...the profundity of technical skills which this excessively difficult work demands points to an extraordinary player, as we know S. L. Weiss to have been..." The tablature transcription puts sections of the Gigue and Praeludio into uncomfortably high positions on the fingerboard, in addition to transposing many bass notes into the lower octave. His adventurous solutions, including a change of pitch, single stringing and limited scordatura nevertheless render the piece difficult to perform even for experienced and technically accomplished players.

Of these putative lute pieces, the *Lautenwerk* suite is the earliest of the group, supposed to have been composed before 1712, and further therefore among the earliest surviving pieces from the composer in standard Baroque-period keyboard notation. Without resorting to anachronisms such as altered intervals in the standard D minor tuning, changing the pitch of the lute to preserve the tonality, single stringing (suggested by Rhodes, above), added frets or other devices (including mechanical ones, such as fretting devices or capo d'astro mechanisms, as suggested by Italian writer Cipriani), judicious, even radical, transcription is necessary in order to make the work playable on the lute within observed contemporary practice

In making this arrangement, I have adopted the view that the work is certainly an experiment written specifically for the *Lautenwerk*, entirely within Bach's usual keyboard practice. The piece is not written to 'imitate' the lute, but freely uses lute-like textures current in the keyboard traditions of the period.

The *Lautenwerk* is a keyboard instrument with which Bach is closely associated. Bach certainly owned one, (listed in his possessions after his death) and its general specifications are well documented by an authoritative source (Jacob Adlung in *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, 1768), though no contemporary instrument has survived.

Modern reproductions have elucidated several important issues which should be considered by the contemporary player. Though the texture may seem thick to the lutenist, the piece exhibits features which show that Bach adjusted his approach to keyboard composition when writing for this instrument. The low tension dictates that the instrument would have been played more slowly and carefully than metal-strung harpsichords or clavichords since the keydip is greater, the plucking action and damping slower, and the tessitura of the writing must be lower to account for limitation of the range in the treble due to the low tensile strength of gut strings. (further, Adlung advises that no part of the string may touch metal, so it's likely that wooden tuning pegs were employed). As with the leather-quilled stops (*peau de bufle*) found on French harpsichords (Taskin, Blanchet), some touch-sensitivity may allow for dynamic variation. Bach also appears to me to have observed the strictures -- and exploited the advantages -- in his other writing for the instrument, BWV 997, 998, possibly also 1000, 1006a.

From the lutenist's point of view, the piece employs a thicker texture than was the contemporary lute practice, a small compass of C' to c", standard keyboard ornament signs, a rhythmically active contrapuntal bass line including chromaticism and figuration impossible on the lute, and a key rare among lute composers. The key of E minor was used by Dufaut, Reusner and others, in a previous century, but with a basic two-voiced texture and diatonic tuning modifications appropriate to the lute's capabilities.

The daunting task then, is to arrange the piece in a manner which I see as being technically and musically feasible in performance. Where there are octave doublings of the bass in the tenor or alto, since they are taken care of by the octave stringing of the lute, I have eliminated them. Likewise with any impossible chords or ornaments, which are numerous, notes not in the span of the left hand position or containing too many tones. When the texture or disposition of notes made the piece unwieldy and unidiomatic, I have been guided by contemporary models in finding a performable solution. What results is obviously a personal answer to the problems, which lays no claim to authenticity or authority purely by being absolutely faithful to the text.

Most importantly perhaps, I have moved the entire work to a tessitura more comfortable for the lute, transposed to F minor. I am indebted to other lutenists, my teachers, Eugen Dombois and Hopkinson Smith, for alerting me to the potential fertility of this approach. In keeping with the original, I have been conservative with the use of open bass notes, (except in the realized Sarabande) transposing the bass into the lower octave only where necessary, to intensify the effect of their use, and maximizing the possibility of articulation by the left hand. The "realized" version of the Sarabande has considerably more transposition of the bass. I have set the piece for eleven course lute, since the adoption of the thirteen course lute in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany can easily be dated to 1719, well after the composition of the piece. For authority on this matter, refer to S. L. Weiss' dated pieces of the British Museum MS.

Particularly troublesome are the impossibilities of bass line of the Gigue and some chords in the Passagio and Presto. Even if the notes are arranged in a more playable manner, the musical effect on the lute is scrambled and frantic. In the Passagio I removed repercussions of chords, quite unidiomatic to the lute, and in the Presto removed parallel sixths and doubling. In the Gigue, I adopted a similar procedure and have reduced the bass line especially at the end to an essentially homophonic re-inforcement of the upper voices. Weiss' music gave seminal guidance in these changes.

All these passages have been altered to mimic contemporary lute practice by composers more familiar with the lute's inherent limitations. The reader should consult the original version to observe the changes. I am quite prepared to admit that I have created what, if it were a contemporary intabulation like those of Weyrauch (BWV 997, 1000) or Falckenhagen (BWV 995), would be referred to as an "inferior" source. Having played the work many times, each time making accretionary changes, I am satisfied that most audience members would be prepared to accept inferiority if it makes the playing of the piece more plausible, and therefore more enjoyable to hear.

The tuning of the sixth course to B flat was a common scordatura for the lute in the late 17<sup>th</sup> c. The F minor suite by Esias Reusner, found in his unpublished collection *Delitiae Testitudinis*, provided an model for the transcription, ornamentation and chord disposition. An F minor suite by Weiss in the Dresden MS is another model, though the tuning is conventional.

### **Appendix: the Sarabande realized:**

In this suite J.S. Bach wrote what would have been considered an elaborated version of an underlying simple Sarabande in French style, complete with *tirades*, ornament signs in common keyboard use and other features. Here I have created a de-constructed alternative A and B sections which shows how it may be treated in performance: The simplified version is presented

first, but with more characteristic lute ornamentation, then further elaborated with yet more ornaments and Bach's added *fioriture*. The player may wish to apply the basic process freely to other movements, especially the Courante and Bourée, as well as to other works in this genre.

Refer to Bach's French (BWV 812-817) and English (BWV 806-811) harpsichord suites (especially the Sarabande of the third English suite in G minor), for more examples of this performance practice. Many other examples may be found in the works of J. J. Froberger, D. Buxtehude, G. Boehm and S. L. Weiss (Sarabande, fol 86r., British Museum MMS. Add. 30387).

Lute ornamentation used in my transcription includes appoggiaturas or trills (commas), slides (vertical crosses, or *coulées*), measured or arpeggiated *separées* (slashes between chord tones), mordents (angled single cross), turns (wavy line), the note-bending known to clavichord players as *bebung* (double crosses) and idiomatic chord filling. The half cross found in the bass at the end of the Presto is used to notate a rest, not normally found in lute tablatures of the period. For stopped notes the left hand is simply lifted; for open ones, the thumb is used.

It should be noted that *bebung* is an ornament used only occasionally. It is not the ubiquitous vibrato wavering common to modern string and guitar playing, but closer to the rise-and-fall pitch envelope of the baroque flute or viol. It is normally employed in slower tempi. Both J.J. Quantz and T. Mace have revealing contemporary descriptions.

Lastly, the reprise of the last four measures of the Bourée is editorial.

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