

# Cello Suites II and III, (BWV 1008, 1009)

by J.S. Bach

intabulated for fourteen-course theorbo by Clive Titmuss

## Foreword:

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It was Bach himself that began the process of 'intabulation' of the cello suites for the lute. The *Suite pour la Luth par J. S. Bach* (BWV 995) is his own arrangement made around 1730, of a piece, assembled in the group of suites for cello (BWV 1007-1012), collected from material written perhaps ten years earlier around 1720, or possibly even from Bach's Weimar years (1708-1717.) During the Renaissance and Baroque style-periods, intabulation could equally well refer to the process of scoring vocal or instrumental parts for a keyboard instrument, normally the organ. Thus the player would have made and intabulation of works by Frescobaldi or Bach's own Art of the Fugue onto a two-clef keyboard system.

### *Bach's transcription technique*

In making his arrangement of BWV 1011, Bach transposed the piece from the key of C minor up a fifth to G minor, filling out the chords, altering some of the harmony, and adding phrasing and other performance indications. These changes form a textbook which we may follow to make more lute pieces in a similar tradition. It makes sense that we should simply transpose the pieces to a favorable key, fill out the harmony as necessary, add appropriate ornamentation and create new lute pieces, just as BACH did.

But unlike the French or English suites for harpsichord, or the Sonatas and Partitas for violin, the cello suites are not written in a uniform style and texture. In the fifth suite, subtitled *Suite discordable*, Bach changes the resonance of the instrument by using a *scordatura* tuning of the A string to G. This allows for chordal writing in the manner of the *viola da gamba*. The piece is unusually large-scale, with a long French overture in two sections; the Allemande is unusually decorated, complex and rhythmically diverse; the Gigue has relatively well-developed two part counterpoint; the Gavottes, supposed to be light and Galant, are instead thickly-textured and virtuosic. The broken-chord texture of the other suites is not so evident. Some writers have suggested that the piece have originated on an instrument other than the cello, possibly a fretted viol/cello hybrid or an enlarged viola

(There is still controversy among musicologists concerning the origins of the cello suites. Bach is known to have written for *violoncello piccolo* [Suite VI], *viola d'amore* [St. John Passion] six and seven string *viola da gamba* [St. Matthew Passion, gamba sonatas], *viola da braccio* [Brandenburg concertos], and is credited in contemporary documents with the invention of the *viola pomposa*. Cellist Anner Bylsma has speculated that Cello Suites I and II may have begun as violin pieces. Today the pieces are often effectively performed on the viola.)

It is clear that when Bach looked among his earlier pieces for a likely candidate to borrow for transcription (as he has become famous for doing), he picked the suite most easily adapted. Only the key and some details needed to be changed. This indicates a very astute and pragmatic musician who understood what might make a good lute piece from the materials at hand.

### ***Cello suites played on the theorbo?***

So why transcribe the second and third suites for 14 course single-strung theorbo, with its longer basses and re-entrant tuning, rather than the usual 11/13 course lute with which Bach would have been familiar? The success of the transcriptions themselves answer this question best of course, but simply stated, the theorbo may easily substitute for the cello in these two examples because of their style of writing. There is no necessity to transpose. The significantly thinner texture and *luthée* style of these two suites may be transferred almost unedited, onto the theorbo. The restricted compass, the low tessitura, the melodic material and the thinness of texture become advantages on the theorbo.

Whereas the lute needs chords filling out a basic two-voice counterpoint to create an effective musical texture, the theorbo may play single notes, as it would often do in filling its primary role as a continuo instrument. Notes played *tasto solo* on the longer strings of the theorbo may replace chords, especially at cadences. Melodically, the theorbo has less need of rapid violinistic figuration in the Italian style (so effectively expropriated for the lute by S.L. Weiss). Because of its thicker strings, louder sound, larger body and consequently greater resonance, the theorbo serves well, as it may in the *basso continuo*, as an alternative to the cello.

### ***Intabulating problems and features***

Only a few problems need to be solved. While the cello may play chromatic tones in its range down to C', the theorbo cannot do this. These notes must be found on the fingerboard, so occasional octave transposition of short note-groups is necessary. Quite surprisingly, some of Bach's own fondness for melodic discontinuities, exploited in his highly original cello writing, can work effectively in places where he does not use it. A simple example is the resolution of the leading note in the lower octave, frequently found in the cello suites, continued in the lute version, BWV 995 (Sarabande, Suite V). I have used this trick in several other places.

As he does at length in the Prelude of BWV 1011/995, Bach breaks the continuum into different registers to suggest antiphonal writing. It's sometimes necessary to use this trick to advantage; for example in the Courante of Suite III and, in the Allemande of Suite II. Chordal textures broken into arpeggios, found in profusion in the Prelude of Suite III which may sound somewhat overworked on a bowed instrument, sound flowing and easy on the theorbo.

The player of these intabulations will find some challenging difficulties in the right hand, and this is reflected in the tablature in the profusion of right hand fingerings. The athletic use of the broken texture makes it often necessary to pluck notes with the index and middle fingers on the fifth, sixth and seventh courses, which would be very rare in the music of the period. At first this is kinesthetically challenging to execute, but with practise it becomes naturalized, especially if the instrument is set up to account for it by having closer spacing than would be considered normal for the double-strung baroque lute. Evidence from surviving instruments confirms this difference. There is strong resemblance in this technique to that found in contemporaneous music for baroque guitar in the works of Corbetta, Sanz and Roncalli, et al.

There is also a frequent use of *tiré*, or drawing the index finger downward over several courses either in execution of measured arpeggiated texture or of chords. This technique makes it easier to move from treble to bass on the playing strings without getting lost, and it has the effect of minimizing the rhythmic disturbance caused by playing more than two notes at once. As well, it

minimizes the disconcerting effect of hearing notes out of order with the normal sequence of pitches. Occasionally I have included notes that fill the harmony that would normally be heard above the melody if played together (a good explanation of this technique is found in Kapsberger's work): The quick strum minimizes the disturbances caused by this effect and contributes to the homophonic flow.

Another unique theorbo feature is the *bebung*, notated by the double cross, intended as a bending of the note in imitation of the clavichord. A moderate tempo allows this ornament to be heard effectively. I have shown how it might be used in the Prelude of suite II, as the last note of the ubiquitous initial triad motive. This ornament may be used to good effect in other places as long as it is not pervasive.

The re-entrant tuning allows us to exploit the theorbo's ability to present over-ringing pitches in step-wise progressions. This technique is found in profusion in the French music of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the music of Robert de Visée. This blurring of scale passages is an idiomatic feature of the theorbo music of the period

The theorbo tuning also offers the possibility of presenting precisely the same pitch materials with varied colour, depending on the location of the note. I have tried to exploit this opportunity for variation as much as possible in the transcription. This effect will be heard throughout these tablatures, perhaps reaching its greatest extent in animating the complex implied harmonies of the Allemande of Suite III.

### ***Characterizing the music***

From the interpretive point of view there are significant differences in the style of the two suites. The second suite has smaller dimensions, and broken texture. The Prelude of the second suite is a play of short triadic fragments, linked by stepwise motion, drawing from the traditions of the lute and harpsichord preludes of Gallot, Mouton and Louis Couperin. Bach unveils a wealth of harmonic richness, using diminished and inverted seventh and ninth chords in what superficially appears to be a written-out improvisation. It is in marked contrast with the extravagantly-composed rigors of the third suite's sectional Prelude, which draws its inspiration from the keyboard toccatas of Froberger and Buxtehude.

The conventional structure is exhibited by the German Allemande style found in Suites I and II, with mainly step-wise sixteenths over an implied slow moving bass. The third suite incorporates sweeping gestures in *luthée* style, spreading its harmonies with written-out ornamentation throughout the range from lowest to highest. It's breathtaking for a lute-player to see so many instances of the letter 'a' in a tablature: It seems entirely idiomatic. In its structure and rhythm this Allemande seems more akin to the complexities of the Allemande of the sixth suite (see my intabulation for 13-c. lute), whose highly refined and diversified rhythmic resources are exceptional, even for Bach.

The two Giges of suites II and III share a heritage from the *Geigenstück* (fiddle tune), a formalized folk dance which exploits a build-up of harmonic tension over re-iterated pedal tones. The theorbo is an agile and resonant medium for the presentation of this pulsating energy.