

Bach 5: A Journey of Discovery

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How did I get here?

In 2013 I started a project I had long wanted to do. I said to myself, “What would it be if I actually played the Bach Cello Suites with the bowings Anna Magdalena actually wrote and performed them with a Baroque bow?” I decided to do 3 and 4 the first year, 2 and 6 the second year and 1 and 5 the third year—one suite performed in the Fall and one in the Spring. I have lived with the Bach Suites my whole cello life—over 70 years. I lived through many approaches.

Editions

My first edition was the Schirmer (Frits Gaillard 1939). In the 1940’s teacher/performers were influenced by their 19th century trained teachers. The prevailing idea was to make the bowing match the phrasing and to bow similar passages the same way. In this age before computers, the manuscript(s) were not available to every cellist. The edition recommended to me in college was French by Casal’s protege, Diran Alexanian, published in 1929 (Francis Salabert). It had the Anna Magdalena manuscript as well as a interpretive notation of the suites. It was (and still is!) fascinating to decode the waves of sixteenth notes into voices that included melodies, harmonies, bass lines, and phrases.

Next came the Barenreiter 1956 edition by Wenzinger which was called a Critical Edition. This Swiss cellist, who lived in Basel, a leading early music city, led the way in providing an edition that we could see his suggested bowings (dotted lines) against the solid lines of his interpretation of the manuscript. In the back of the edition, in German, was listed the sources he used with the variants in each manuscript. We learned that there were different notes in different manuscripts and even different rhythms. We started to get available editions of Bach according to various manuscripts. Along the way, International Editions published an edition with the MS on the right and the interpretation on the left ().

The number of editions kept increasing, now well over 100. Each edition gave the ideas of the artist who created it. No one played the Suites in the same way and, unless the user played with the same tempo and inflection and mind as the edition creator, it did not sound right. What to do? Change the bowings and fingerings, of course. Now we had generations of cellists using messy pages with changed bowings according to their teacher/coach suggestions. Next came no bowings or fingerings edition by Vandersal. This was a welcome relief. We had to add ties, trills, and puzzle over which rhythms and notes to use, but the page was clean and, with the advent of copy machines, we could have new fresh copies as our ideas changed.

The early music movement was growing in the 1950 and 60s. Amsterdam was a center and the harpsichordist Gustav Leonhart was at the forefront. The principal cellist of the Concertgebouw orchestra was Anner Blysmá. He became a colleague of Leonhardt and soon in his words “became smitten with the world of early music”. In the 1960’s Anner produced a recording of the Bach Suites that threw the cello world a curve. We had never

heard such different articulations! I remember the first time I heard it. I thought it was terrible—so different from anything I thought was “right”. A few days later, something about the recording compelled me to give it another listen, and then another—I became fascinated with the freshness of the interpretation. Meanwhile my knowledge and exposure to early music increased through my experiences with George Hunter and Peter Farrell at the University of Illinois while learning viola da gamba and performing with these leaders in performance practice studies in the USA. I became a member of the Viola da Gamba Society of America, my first Journal was only the second one issued!

The year 2000 was a Bach year, the 250th anniversary of his death. Barenreiter issued a second edition of the Bach cello Suites (BA5216). In one cover of 6 volumes we had all 4 extant manuscripts from the period (Anna Magdalena, Forkel, 2 from a library about 10 years later), the first edition of(the one that Pablo Casals found in a book store in 1930s), a booklet of historical perspective, and an unedited version of the suites with all of the variants clearly listed in the music so you could chose/know what to play—the ultimate “do it yourself” Bach edition that I had been waiting for all my life! Besides all this, the “Notes” are in English! Now they have produced a second edition of this edition (BA 5217 in 2018) with corrections.

Preparation

I had, of course, played and taught all of the Suites. I had only performed 4 of them completely from memory. My routine, since the new Barenreiter, was to teach the first suite in detail, using it as a primer to introduce concepts of interpretation in Bach: form, character, melody, harmony, real bass line, articulation, voices, and phrase structure. For Suites two through six, each student looked at the manuscripts and made their own version of the suite with their own bowings and fingerings based on the manuscripts. The next choice after the first suite, I worked along side of them at each lesson. I looked at the manuscripts each time as though it was the first time I saw them also. I suggested that they prepare a clean copy from their unedited version and date it with the idea that they could make a different one the next time they played or have a copy they could add suggestions of a master class teacher. In my one copy of the Bach suites, I have marked the suggestions of everyone who ever heard me play the particular movement and as a result it is a mess—I can’t read the ideas, and I don’t have a clear record of the ideas of the various artists who coached me. Over the 20 year I have done this, I have absorbed a good deal of insight. With my other study which includes my standbys: Anner Bylsma’s *Bach the Fencing Master*, Meridith Little and Natalie Jenne’s *Bach’s Dances*, and Allen Winold’s *Bach’s Cello Suites: Analyses and Explorations* in two volumes, I started to see recurring patterns.

The recurring patterns were:

- slurring one plus three or three plus one rather than two plus two slurred or two separate and two slurred.
- more separate bowings
- rarely slurring over bar lines in dances (Little and Jenne say never)

- a different bowing at the end of a sequence “announcing” the new idea to come.

Articulation “rules” were to play:

- a two note slur “ti ya”;
- to leave a slur in the articulation of the note to follow (3 plus one become “ti ya da-ta” or “ta- ti ya da”)
- to physically experience the basic dance steps of the dance and articulate according

Harmonic and melodic observation were:

- to look for the line in chords to know which note to lean on in order to transition to the next idea
- to basically get louder going up in pitch, to get softer going lower in pitch
- to treat sequences with multiple voices with special care in dynamics (Bach 3 *Prelude*)
- to choose words for character or mood

We are human, so I saw tiredness and errors occurring in the manuscripts and even a few errors in the xxxx Barenreiter.

I am happy to say that each of the cellists I coached came up with a unique interpretation based on their own convictions and they all played the Bach Suite of choice differently with the strength of their convictions. With each new suite, they became more independent in their preparation. I feel this approach helped them develop their own strengths in musical interpretation. This approach was not easy for me to retain my own version in my head, but it had the result of making me more flexible and open to change within a context of the style. Being comfortable my new versions of Suites 1, 2, and 3, the ones I have performed the most, was daunting. It was helpful to think of YoYo Ma, Janos Starker, and Anner Bylsma as they worked through their new approaches to produce new recordings.

Speaking of recordings, my favorites are Casals, Bylsma, Peter Wispelwey, Jean- Guihen Queyras, and the third recordings of Yo Yo Ma and Janos Starker. Fourneier’s 2nd suite is a marvel of the traditional approach. I listen with pleasure to a variety of approaches—I like dance articulations instead of what I call “gooey” Bach. I like to hear Bach’s ideas predominant rather than the performer’s personality. I like to listen to recordings after I have conceived of my own approach—I feel I can listen to the artist’s ideas with greater understanding and depth after I have done my own study.

The Baroque Bow

My gamba experiences had given me opportunity to use a bow with a narrow ribbon of hair with a straight, or reverse camber stick and pointed tip. I liked the feeling. I decided to order a Baroque Bow a week before my first concert! I did not have time to have one made for me so I was sent 20 bows in a case and I chose from there. The bows arrived several days before and I loved the clarity of sound, ease of use, splendid articulation, and how it felt to play. For me there was no “learning” time needed. Just a different choice of stick with different sound outcomes.

Bach 5 Preparation

The year before Bach 5 (2014-15) one of my college students decided to perform Bach 5 on his graduate recital. His thoughtful preparation of his edition was a good start for my study also. In the spring of 2015 I used the Barenreiter unedited score as a master to indicate the bowings of the other versions. I put the Anna Magdalena bowings on the pitches and write the other bowings above in rhythmic notation without lines (example). I wound up with a draft of possibilities to make my final performance version

This suite is in the French Style—the only cello suite that is. Bach wrote French Suites (list) Listen to them. Listen to French music played by Baroque Orchestras: Lully, Marais, and Couperin are good starters. French harpsichord music is a must—listen to x, x, and x. Look up French overture. You will find it is in two parts: the first, a prelude with dotted rhythms; the second, a fugue, is not a type of music cellists often play—look it up. In performance practice, French dotted rhythms are heightened (make the short note closer to the next beat; 16th notes are played “unequal” meaning the beat remains the same but the notes are “bent” within the beat according to direction and agogic. Look up the French style Courante and understand the style in comparison to the Italian Courante.

We have Bach’s own MS of this suite for the Lute (written in G minor). This is a wonderful source to check pitch discrepancies as well as rhythm and articulation. I found remarkable similarity in all 4 MS versions (I did not use the first edition version as a source to prepare my edition.). What was different, was the way each version approached the cadences. It is always a challenge to determine which notes the slurs are actually over. Does the writer unconsciously lean to the right? Is a bowing put in and then you are expected to follow the pattern? Are the bowings purposefully different in similar passages for variety?

Bow Rhythm

I ask everyone, including me, to approach a Bach suite first without bowings. Play the pitches and determine the structure of the movement, the melody, the harmony, the key relationships, the harmonic rhythm, the voices and the character. Before we get wrapped up in what bowing to use, we already have a good idea of the musical sensibility of the movement.

I take what is to be the copy for my performing edition for my next step. I am using the Vandersall edition because it is organized with good page turns and is clearly printed. With this edition you must carefully check all pitches with the manuscript and Barenreiter and add ties and trills. By checking the manuscript you find what few discrepancies there might be in the Barenreiter. (in bach 5 x and x).

Next is to look at the manuscript and add the obvious bowing—some are very clear including repetitive bowings that are clearly indicated (Bach 3 Gigue). Next is to make a good guess at the others by playing from the manuscript. There is some magic about being in a performance mind when determining the bowing markings that makes it clearer.

Then there is the next stage of what is the bowing? Rather than getting bogged down, I mark these places in my emerging edition with question marks. The next step is to indicate what the possibilities might be lightly in the music. Next, I look at the movement as a whole and discover that similar places are not the same—either there are different bowings or one place has a bowing and the other place does not. Now a decision is to be made—make them the same or keep the difference. Sometimes a bowing does not work out—you arrive at an obvious down bow with an up bow. It is like taking a test. You know most of the answers but some you are not sure of. Rather than getting bogged, down, you continue to work the test. Some of the questions give you ideas about how to answer the one you are not sure about. Sometimes getting a distance from the “problem” gives you more clarity about the possibility of solutions. It is enough for me to leave my practice day with a movement roughed out as for sure bowings; possible solutions; and question marks marking the places a decision must be made.

I feel when I play the manuscript bow rhythms on an open string, it creates a new dimension in the elements of the music—notated rhythm and bow rhythm are two elements that play off each other. When I play bowings that “match” the phrase, the bow rhythm is dull and uninteresting. Note that if there is a sustained note, the separate notes take the bowing of the sustained note unless otherwise indicated.

After, a month of study and experiment, I had completed my edition. I still made minor adjustments as I delved into the suite more deeply.

Memory

I had played this suite in college without tuning the A to G, as the Anna Magdalena and the other editions (except the 2nd ed) indicates. My excursions into scordatura were successful when looking at the music, but tortuous in memorizing. My brand of pitch memory, strong visual memory, and aural/kinesthetic memory seemed at cross purposes when I tried to fit the music in my head. Playing without the tuned down A was not an option for me in the coming performance, so I determined to figure out how to make it work. The kinesthetic part was helped by my knowledge of gamba which is tuned primarily in fourths with one string only a third apart. I told myself, if I could do that, this would even be easier because it was only one string—positive attitude! With that in gear, I told my visual memory to dial down so my aural memory could prevail. I really worked on the new kinesthetic feeling of the chords which gradually became more comfortable. The visual memory was channeled into knowing where I was on the page rather than seeing a “d” and having it sound a “c”. I analyzed my music before I started to play—especially the fugue. I used different colors for sections, and the statement, passages, and sequence terminology that Winold uses.

In November, I decided to work on memorizing all the movements simultaneously so no movement would “get ahead” of the others in learning and memory. I found that the Allemande, Courante, and Gavotte I presented more issues for me in memory than the others—including the fugue. I think this is due to the number of chords/double stops in these movements. I would choose a small musical section to perfect and read the rest every

session. I felt I knew the music well because of my years of study and coaching. It was a big help to know what I wanted to hear before I started. This phase took about two hours a day. I always played all the repeats—sometimes many times. This is a problem for the Prelude and Fugue which is half the piece but no repeats. I would repeat the Prelude several times in the initial phases and repeat each section of the fugue as many times as necessary to secure the memory. Otherwise the other movements actually get played more times than the prelude and fugue.

By winter break, starting December 15, I was frustratingly stumbling through 2/3s of the suite. Although we were visiting family until January 4, I maintained my practice schedule, getting up before the family so I could have my two hours. I wondered if I could give myself a Christmas present of having the whole suite learned and memorized by then. My original target date was to start my 100's on January 1, 2016. To my delight, with 90 minutes of practice a day I was able to get through the whole suite with not more than three stumbles a movement by Christmas day. I gave myself a few days to let the memory settle (I was now at 75 minutes a day to accomplish my goal). On Dec. 28, I asked my accomplished cellist daughter, Trina, to hear me and mark the music with the errors she found, as I was playing from memory. There were a few invented notes, a few invented bowings, and a few fingerings (mostly using open high G string instead of D string 4th finger). She marked my spots with clear colored dots to bring my attention to these places. I want to say that in some places I changed the MS indications of using 4th finger on G to using open G because of the way I heard the color, or grouped the notes in the phrase. I like my music to reflect exactly what I am playing because I find it confusing to play one thing in my head, and then see another thing when I am looking at the music.

100's

What are 100's? I feel that going through the piece 100 memorized times secures the memory, artistry, and confidence needed for performance. My hope was to have 10 memorized performances and 100 memorized times before the target date, March 13, 2016. Timing of learning is helpful to avoid panic and stress. I started the hundreds four days ahead of schedule because the memory work went faster than planned. The plan was to do two memorized performances a day. After each 10 memorized performances, I played again with the music to reinforce what I was doing. When you are your own teacher, you have to monitor your work closely. After the first 10, I had the opportunity to play all of Bach 5 for my family. I find that each time I go through it, the signposts are clearer, I see them earlier, the performance is smoother, I can pay attention to tone color and dynamic contrast more. I am best first in the morning. My later day play-through was accompanied by a busy mind from the rest of my activities and was not so smooth. Sometimes I experimented with watching TV or looking outside the window as I played to see how deep the learning is. Most times I want to be present to shape and enhance my ideas. Occasionally, I will excerpt the chords in sequence. Sometimes I play the bass line without the rest of the music. If I do only one movement with the chords or bass line each time I play the whole suite, I do not add to the practice time.

Prelude

I think this movement came the easiest. Its three sections are clear. The melissmas are all slurred, except for measure 17 which in AMB MS (Anna Magdalena Bach) MS have 2 bows ending on the high note on an up bow. It is the first part of the French Overture, which you already know what is.

Fugue

The fugue has 5 big sections including the final cadence starting at measure 209. I learned this section by section. I found each had a character. I learned the start of each section clearly. I marked the bowings in pink over the existing pencil marks so they would stand out to my visual memory. Watch out for m. 42 and 61—they are the same and easy to skip from one to the other.

Part II starts with an Eb chord and has a greater variety of bowings. Part III at m. 106 contains the first of the dotted quarter sustain over 4 16^{ths}. They are marked differently but I decided I wanted them all to be the same bowing even though not in the same direction so I highlighted these in yellow (they are up, down; down, up; up, and up again at m. 209. Part III is mostly separate bows again. Part IV starts m 137 ending on F and starting on the Bb and has the most complex bowing. There are 27 measures that start up bow. Part V starts with the pick up to m.176 with the same notes as the start of the fugue but on the opposite bow which helps to remember the difference.

I kept learning one section at a time from memory. I would repeat the “new” section more times in playing of the movement until it felt as comfortable as the learned sections.

Allemande

This piece moved very slowly to mastery. I found myself adding double stops when there were none; getting the chord right, but with the wrong configuration of notes, getting the bowing confused; and, in the many skips, starting on other notes than the written ones on the lower voices. Gradually with many repetitions of each half before proceeding, it started to come together. Measure 17 cadence gave me a particular challenge even with understanding the Bb C D G bass line. Measure 24 and 25 were also confusing. I found that as I continued to memorize, there were similar chords with different voicing and my fingers and brain would feel as though they were twisted into a pretzel. The second half of all Allemandes is where Bach is most adventurous as to key and extended phrases, and this one is no exception. I remember the second section starts with the same chord as the second section of the Courante, but the pitch then goes down. It is easy to waft over the Courante if you are not careful. The same is true of certain chords in this suite—if you are not attentive, one chord can make a bridge to another movement!

Courante

Necessary shifts confused my aural/kinesthetic memory until I sorted out the logic of the shift in my mind. I started to feel that I was taking a trip in the car and the journey had certain landmarks for me to recognize to make my way because I couldn't see the street names or house numbers clearly as I was driving. This helped a lot to sort out the. sequence

of events. The second half, as I said before, starts with the same chord as the second half of the Allemande but this time the music goes up before coming down—Allemande down, Courante up. I tried to add chords in measure 19 for days before appreciating the simplicity before the ending. I also was confused for some time with which ending went where.

Sarabande

Is there a more beautiful piece written? The 20 measures of this gem are poignant in their simplicity but hidden complexity. I struggled over the bowing of this movement the longest of any of the other movements. I finally settled on starting up bow with a pattern of 1-3-1. In Measure 3 I unhooked the last two notes which left the end of the phrase in measure 4 ending on a question mark up bow. Next phrase is bowed 4 + 2, ending the section on down. Again I start up for 1-3-quarter for 7 bars (although the bowing is the same, it does not feel the same). In bar 16 the bowing changes to 3-1-2. Measures 17-19 are 1-3-2 with measure 19 separating the last two notes (as in m. 3) and ending 3-1-1 on an up bow. This leads to starting the repeat on down and reversing all the bowings (and kinesthetic feelings). I played the second half many times. I think the musical result was worth the effort.

Gavotte I

I found this movement the hardest to memorize. Thank goodness I got to play it three times each session with the repeats and da capo! The configuration of the chords and the fingering was a challenge. The bowing came quickly. Measures 9-10, 22-23 gave me particular grief.

Gavotte II

This is quick to learn except for measures 12-19 which will need a little extra attention.

Gigue

This is also quick to learn. The decision in this is to slur over the bar line or not. I decided not to slur over the bar line until measure 17; not in measure 28; separate sixteenth notes in measure 39; and all others slurred over. This necessitates double downs in measures 23 and 40. The opening is G-Eb; the second half starts Bb-G.

Polishing

My 100's finished February 12, 2016, nearly a month before the performance. I was determined to play for people at least 10 times. What did I discover now? Playing for my classes early on, before the hundreds were done showed me about energy level—generally too high, but not bad, I just wore myself out. I played for my husband: rhythm and agogic were his concerns. Next was my daughter, a fine cellist—she wanted more character differentiation with each movement. Next was a colleague and former student: she thought I was focused too much on memory and had “slick” spots in interpretation. “Look at the prelude some more,” she said, “and think about melody not just harmony.” I have several recordings I love which have great bass line clarity and I am pleased that I overdid that

aspect. Meanwhile I am learning that looser bow hair on the Baroque bow makes the “crunch” go away on chords. I gave myself permission to be in the music, not carry the burden of memory with me—that’s accomplished! I still have blips but I know where I am and get myself out of trouble easily—it might be a bowing, a fingering, or hearing a “C” in my head on the A string and going for a second finger instead of fourth finger—I think symptomatic of “letting go”—not a bad thing. I really am enjoying these post 100 playings—the whole Bach world is expanding. With that in mind I have listened to Bach French Overture for organ/piano Glen Gould and the 3 Partitas and 3 Sonatas for unaccompanied violin with Henryrk Scherzing—so clean, so clear, so rhythmic. From these, especially the violin, I felt the performance energy that worked to deliver the message.

“So,” you are thinking, “how did the performance go?” It was the last of the six Suites I performed. All present thought this was the most personal, the one that transported them to another realm, and the one in which I really “let go, “I concurred.