

Notes from one confined violist to others.

Everything about Life during Covid is a kind of lottery. By nothing more than chance, some of us are financially fine, others decidedly not, some of us too alone, some too cramped up with others, some of us left with not enough to do, others worked to the bone. The list of chance effects is endless. I am among the lucky ones, especially one of the few lucky musicians. I miss not making music with others, but I have so much wonderful experience behind me, I can't possibly complain. And I'm also lucky to have a fairly strong addiction to Bach! I shall give in to it yet again by sharing some thoughts about the Cello Suites.

I used to think that Suites 1, 2 and 6 were best suited to the viola. The other three (C major, Eb major and C minor) make such great use of the bottom register of the cello and I felt there would always be something essential lacking on the viola. Now that Rachel Podger has recorded the cello suites ON THE VIOLIN!!! – how dare she! Is nothing sacred?! - it feels as if the viola is on safe territory with all six. Like most of us, I'm a huge fan of Rachel Podger, and her playing of the Suites on the violin is fascinating, if one can listen without prejudice - very hard!

The amazing thing about Bach is how you can do almost anything with his music and it survives, merely appearing in a different light. Bach himself endlessly recycled his music, apparently with no regard for differences between instruments. He probably never envisaged Swingle. Perhaps this propensity for taking on different forms is part of what makes for the oft-quoted universality of his music. I have made arrangements of his Preludes and Fugues for viola quartet, which often entails compressing the range of the original keyboard version, even putting the bass line up the octave above the tenor, or in other ways scrambling up the parts. I don't believe any other composer's music would survive this kind of treatment!

I've been revisiting the cello suites since lockdown in March. Previously, I had been somewhat obsessively grappling with the violin Sonatas and Partitas, but decided that if I wanted to share the fruits of my addiction with random captive audiences of friends and strangers, the cello Suites were likely to give more pleasure. They have a direct appeal, a simplicity relative to the violin works, that allows them to speak straight to the heart, and in many cases, makes you want to get up and dance, or at least jiggle rhythmically in your seat. It has been such a joy exploring these works again, though sobering to realise how much I had previously left unexamined.

I heard Steven Isserlis speaking about them recently. He said several things that I found hugely liberating. First, he pointed out that, in the absence of a manuscript in Bach's hand, each of us ideally needs to make our own decisions about bowings, based on the various early editions, and with reference to the violin works, which ARE in Bach's hand and provide us with a perfect model. I'd imagine the majority of violists now use Simon Rowland Jones' edition, which is certainly the result of much careful study but is nonetheless still a reflection of his preferences, as he would probably be the first to say. Since up-grading from the beloved old Watson Forbes edition (which, like the old Peters edition of Haydn Quartets is often so good and workable!), I've tended to assume that the bowings in SRJ's edition are now the Bible! What a liberation to allow myself to follow my instinct, especially in places

where the bowings frankly don't work out that well. (There's a big difference between "difficult" bowings that add something important to the music, and ones which on the contrary seem to be a handicap to giving shape and character to the music.) It's worth noting, too, that when you listen to the interpretations by even the most up-to-date baroque specialists, they all choose their own bowings! I think this is part of what allows them to create distinctive and personal performances.

Steven went on to say that he dislikes hearing didactic phrasing. He means the kind of phrasing in which the performer appears to be trying to show the listener that he or she understands the harmonies, and wants to ensure the listener does also, by exaggerated tenutos or rubato. These days I often ask myself (and my students) "how much is enough? How much is too much?" The answer lies partly at least in looking for a balance between honouring the long line and honouring the detail along the way, aiming for flow and continuity (the horizontal axis of the music) while responding to changes of chord, to phrase lengths and cadences and to the rhythmic spring of the dance (the vertical axis). Needless to say, there is no such thing as a perfect balance, and there are so many other things to like or dislike in any performance. Here is one, though, that for me at least seems to exemplify Steven's point, despite the obviously fine playing:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44Wz92zQe04&ab\\_channel=NetherlandsBachSociety](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44Wz92zQe04&ab_channel=NetherlandsBachSociety)

The third point that Steven made is that Bach's music is emotional music! It is easy to get caught up in matters of style and articulation, seeking "authenticity" and to forget that these things are secondary, though sometimes contributory, to bringing the music to life emotionally. But which emotions? Again, there is such a range of possible emotional response, and you only need listen to a few recordings to discover them. It can be such a personal thing, and surely says more about the performer than about Bach. That theme of universality returns. Bach's music seems to invite and allow such different responses. I feel there is far narrower spectrum of what "works" in Mozart performances than in Bach performances.

In the D minor Suite, the end of the Prelude provides a perfect example. The bar-long chords demand a decision about how to end the story, and several endings can work very convincingly. Loud or soft, in time or freely, arpeggiated or with mini-cadenzas improvised between chords? Steven Isserlis was the first person I heard play the chords very quietly, each bar its full length, conveying a sense of deep, timeless sadness. What would Bach have said? Maybe he wouldn't have approved of, or known, such overtly "romantic" approach to performance. (What was he like underneath that wig?!) To me, it felt utterly convincing. Here is a link to a very personal and emotional live performance of the 5<sup>th</sup> Suite by Steven Isserlis, filmed last year:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbsCnogb0X4&t=64s&ab\\_channel=92ndStreetY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbsCnogb0X4&t=64s&ab_channel=92ndStreetY)

I have been trying to come to terms with the character of the D minor Allemande. My instinct has always been that it is a rather "bad-tempered" and impatient Allemande, and I find myself playing it rather fast and energetically. Recently I'm doubting myself. Although the music "works" played like this, it seems to pre-empt the character of the Courante, which after all is the "fast movement" of the Suite. Also, a bad-tempered Allemande now feels wrong to me as a response to such a soulful and poignant Prelude. I haven't got it out

of my bones yet, but am searching for “assertive, noble, with undertones of sadness carried forward from the Prelude”. We shall see! I readily admit that I have been influenced by recordings from musicians I admire, as surely all musicians evolve in part through listening to others. But trying to re-educate an old instinct is hard!

Steven’s fourth point was to remind us that Dance is at the heart of the Suites, alongside emotion and inseparable from it. How obvious! And challenging. We can discover the steps of the Baroque Minuets and Gigues and all the dances, but this only takes us so far. Bach’s music transcends the steps, goes far beyond the music that would actually have been danced to. The right questions to ask are about energy, tempo, rhythmic poise or “bounce”, and the endlessly subtle interaction between these things and the contours of the melody and its underlying harmonic “story”.

Dance is by definition about the body moving. I wonder if it is possible to bring these pieces fully alive without being able to dance, in some way, and without inhibition? It is one quality that jumps out at us when watching a Baroque orchestra playing these days - all the musicians “dance” as they play, whether standing or sitting, in a way much less common in symphony orchestras. It is no surprise to me that those traditions of String playing - often from Eastern Europe - which emphasise keeping still while you play, rarely seem to form players whose Bach makes me want to dance! And we all need DANCE in some form during these gloomy days, even if it be watching raindrops in a muddy puddle!