

THE
**CLEVELAND
ORCHESTRA**
FRANZ WELSER-MÖST

ALISA WEILERSTEIN PLAYS BACH
THE SIX SOLO CELLO SUITES

1.B2 In Focus Season 1 Bonus Episode No. 2

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ALISA WEILERSTEIN, *cello*
in solo recital at Severance Hall, Cleveland

Suite No. 1 in G major, BWV1007

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Menuet I and II — Gigue

Suite No. 2 in D minor, BWV1008

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Menuet I and II — Gigue

Suite No. 3 in C major, BWV1009

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Bourrée I and II — Gigue

Suite No. 4 in E-flat major, BWV1010

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Bourrée I and II — Gigue

Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV1011

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Gavotte I and II — Gigue

Suite No. 6 in D major, BWV1012

Prélude — Allemande — Courante
— Sarabande — Gavotte I and II — Gigue

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CONCERT OVERVIEW

WE DON'T KNOW WHY, or even exactly when, Bach composed his *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*, although they were most likely created during his years (1717-23) as kapellmeister in the small town of Köthen, halfway between Hanover and Dresden. Stylistic comparison with his solo violin sonatas from the same period suggests that he wrote the cello works before 1720.

Bach's original manuscripts of the works do not exist. The closest we have to an original source is a copy made by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena. Bach also transcribed the Fifth Suite for lute — and we have his original score for that in his own handwriting.

The Suites were not published during Bach's lifetime, and for many decades they were usually thought of as exercises — either ideas that Bach was working out on paper, or as studies for cellists to use in practicing their instruments.

The Cello Suites became well known through the efforts of Pablo Casals, one of the 20th century's most gifted cellists. Since that time, these suites have become one of the greatest and most-loved works for cello — showcasing a player's artistry in a journey across a range and depth of emotions. Cellists tackle these pieces, suite by suite, to master them and to discover their own take on the great art encased therein.

These “In Focus” performances featuring cellist Alisa Weilerstein were recorded at Severance Hall in January 2021 especially for Cleveland Orchestra audiences. Weilerstein was raised in Cleveland and played in the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra as a student — and made her solo debut with The Cleveland Orchestra at the age of 13 in 1995, before launching off on her internationally-acclaimed career.

—Eric Sellen

ABOUT THE MUSIC: BACH SOLO CELLO SUITES

UNACCOMPANIED SUITES FOR CELLO, BWV 1007-1012
by **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750)

Composed: circa 1715-25

Duration: 15-20 minutes per suite, and just over two hours in total for the six

BACH'S SET OF SIX unaccompanied suites for cello belong with the six sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin (BWV 1001-1006), all written about the same time around 1720, as representing the unchallenged peak in solo music for those instruments, both in technique and in expressive variety.

THE INSTRUMENT

The violin was well established when Bach wrote the suites, whereas the cello had not yet firmly claimed its role in the string section, with the viola da gamba still being widely used for continuo bass lines and as a virtuoso solo instrument.

Many of the cellos that survive from that period in today's museums are heavier and larger than the modern form, which evolved later in the 18th century. The sixth of these cello suites was originally written for a smaller, higher-pitched variety of cello.

THE FORM: PRELUDE AND DANCES

All six of the cello suites follow a pattern derived from French music, each beginning with a Prelude followed by a standard sequence of dances with French names: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue. All the movements of each suite are in the same key, with an occasional change within any given movement of mode between major and minor.

The one thing that was not considered standard is the pair of movements that precede the Gigue. At this point in the six cello suites, two have Menuets, two have Bourrées, and two have Gavottes. In each, two of a kind are to be played in alternation — that is say that the first Menuet is heard again after the second Menuet in an A-B-A form (well known in musical circles as *da capo* form), often found in opera arias and in minuets and scherzos in the classical symphony.

Dance music was traditionally paid for on commission by the hour. Therefore, much could be saved by repeating as much as possible. These dance movements were everywhere formed in two parts each, each half being repeated. In the cello suites, Bach invariably keeps the two halves in approximate balance, the second half normally a little longer to allow for some exploratory music before returning to the main key.

THE DANCE FORMS

Bach adopted the traditional styles of dance forms as follows:

Allemande — in a moderate 4/4 time with a short upbeat and flowing figures, the two halves repeated. In Suite No. 5, dotted figures replace many of the usual running figures. In Suite No. 6, the pulse is almost hidden by a cloud of figuration showing off the range of the instrument.

Courante — in a moderate triple time (3/2 or 3/4), a little more tuneful than the Allemande, the two halves repeated. In Suite No. 5, the Courante is more thoughtful, perhaps to reflect the minor key.

Sarabande — slower tempo, triple time, with some double-stopping, the two halves repeated. In Suite No. 5 the Sarabande has no double-stopping but some very strange intervals, whereas in Suite No. 6 the entire Sarabande is double- and triple-stopped.

Menuet — a formal dance in 3/4, both halves repeated, alternating with Menuet II.

Bourrée — in quick duple meter, both halves repeated, alternating with

Bourrée II.

Gavotte — a stately dance in 4/4 with two upbeats, both halves repeated, alternating with Gavotte II.

Gigue — a lively dance in 6/8, useful for showing off, both halves repeated.

THE PRELUDES

The Prelude to each suite is not dance music, but a freely composed movement without any repeats, often requiring special techniques such as string crossings, or moving more adventurously from key to key, or simulating a fugue. Suite No. 5 is in two tempos, the first broad, the second a little swifter.

EXCEPTIONS

The first four Suites conform to a standard pattern, but the last two stand apart in certain respects. For No. 5, in C minor, the player is allowed to lower the tuning of the top string from A to G. This produces some different, rather surprising resonances, especially in the Allemande. Yet many players choose not to retune, since the music is perfectly accessible in the standard tuning.

The Suite No. 6 was written for a cello with five strings, not the usual four. With an extra E-string, this opened up a higher range. Some cellos at that time were built to smaller dimensions, known as a “cello piccolo” (this was called for by Bach in some of his cantatas). Such an instrument was played on the arm, like a viola, and usually played by a violinist or viola player. Undaunted by the greater range of this Suite, most modern players are happy to tackle it on the conventional cello and simply move up to the higher positions on the top string.

PRIVATE THANKS

These solo Suites were never intended to be played in public. It is private, intimate music, displaying many layers of feeling in a musical language of the highest sophistication, as in all Bach’s music. Cellists have always found solace and a certain charge in these Suites, yet the music is so all-embracing that those of us who do not play the cello deserve, and perhaps even need, to share in this miraculous world. Thank you, Bach, for writing them, and to history for preserving them. Thank you, Pablo Casals, for finding them and showcasing them to the world in the 20th century. And thank you, thank you, thank you . . . to all who play them and program them and offer them to us.

—*program note by Hugh Macdonald © 2021*

WHAT THE ARTIST SAYS . . .

Alisa Weilerstein has described the differing natures of these six suites with the following descriptive words:

Suite No.1: purity, innocence, childhood, possibility

Suite No. 2: darkness, angst, adolescent dramatic tortured feelings

Suite No. 3: regal, secure, adult, coming into its own, larger than life, confident, stately

Suite No. 4: gateway to complexity, wild prelude, wiser than the 3rd suite

Suite No. 5: loneliness, isolation, devastation, sinking to depths...

Suite No. 6: optimistic nostalgia, generosity, wisdom, benevolence, release/relief, deep satisfaction

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RECITAL ARTIST: ALISA WEILERSTEIN

A M E R I C A N C E L L I S T Alisa Weilerstein is internationally praised for her technical assurance and impassioned musicianship. The Cleveland native made her Cleveland Orchestra debut at age 13 in October 1995. Her most recent performances as a concerto soloist with the Orchestra were in March 2018.

Ms. Weilerstein is applauded among the foremost cellists of our time. Known for her artistry and emotional investment in her art, she was recognized with a MacArthur “genius grant” Fellowship in 2011. Today, her career spans the globe, taking her to the most prestigious international venues for solo recitals, chamber concerts, and concerto collaborations with preeminent conductors and orchestras worldwide.

Bach’s six suites for unaccompanied cello figure prominently in Weilerstein’s current programming. Over the past two seasons, she has given rapturously received live accounts of the complete set on three continents, with recitals in New York, Washington D.C., Boston, Los Angeles, Berkeley and San Diego; at Aspen and Caramoor; in Tokyo, Osaka, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, London, Manchester, Aldeburgh, Paris, and Barcelona; and for a full-capacity audience at Hamburg’s iconic new Elbphilharmonie.

During the global pandemic, she has further cemented her status as one of the suites’ leading exponents. Released in April 2020, her Pentatone recording of the complete set became a Billboard bestseller and was named “Album of the Week” by the United Kingdom’s *Sunday Times*. As captured in Vox’s YouTube series, her insights into Bach’s first G-major prelude were viewed almost 1.5 million times. During the first weeks of the lockdown, she chronicled her developing engagement with the suites on social media, fostering an even closer connection with her online audience by streaming a new movement each day in her innovative #36DaysOfBach project. As the *New York Times* observed in a dedicated feature, by presenting these more intimate accounts alongside her new studio recording, Weilerstein gave listeners the rare opportunity to learn whether “*the pressures of a pandemic can change the very sound a musician makes, or help her see a beloved piece in a new way.*”

A champion of new music, Alisa Weilerstein has performed Osvaldo Golijov’s *Azul* and *Omaramor*, as well as the world premieres of Lera Auerbach’s *24 Preludes* for cello and piano, Pascal Dusapin’s *Outscape*, and Gabriel Kahane’s song cycle *Little Sleep’s-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight*. She performed the New York premiere of Matthias Pintscher’s *Reflections on Narcissus* and the world premiere of his cello concerto.

In addition to her MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, Ms. Weilerstein’s honors include Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal prize for exceptional achievement, the 2006 Leonard Bernstein Award, and an Avery Fisher Career Grant. She has performed at the White House.

Born into a musical family, she is the daughter of violinist Donald Weilerstein and pianist Vivian Hornik Weilerstein, and the sister of conductor Joshua Weilerstein. She delights in telling the story that she discovered her love for the cello at just two-and-a-half, when she had chicken pox and her grandmother assembled a makeshift set of instruments from cereal boxes to entertain her. Although imme-

diately drawn to the Rice Krispies box cello, Weilerstein soon grew frustrated that it didn't produce any sound. After persuading her parents to buy her a real cello at the age of four, she developed a natural affinity for the instrument and gave her first public performance six months later.

Alisa Weilerstein serves as an advocate for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, having been diagnosed with type I diabetes at age nine.

Ms. Weilerstein is a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music's Young Artist Program, where she worked with Cleveland Orchestra cellist Richard Weiss. In 2004, she earned a degree in Russian history from Columbia University. She is married to Venezuelan conductor Rafael Payare, with whom she has a young child.

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The Cleveland Orchestra is proud to have its home, Severance Hall, located on the campus of Case Western Reserve University, with whom it has a long history of collaboration and partnership.