

Today's program

SETH KNOPP, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Yellow Barn

The complete cello suites of J.S. Bach - Part II

July 18, 2020 | 7:30 | The Big Barn, Putney, VT

Glory, Glory

Odetta

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008 (1720)

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Minuet I and II
Gigue

Natasha Brofsky, cello

J.S. Bach Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009 (1720)

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Bourrée I and II
Gigue

Michael Katz, cello

(cont'd)

J.S. Bach Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012 (1720)

Prelude
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Gavotte I and II
Gigue

Natasha Brofsky, Michael Katz, Gabriel Martins,
Aaron Wolff, cellos

Program Notes

Only two portraits exist of J.S. Bach. In both canvases he stares at his audience, controlled and austere. Rather little is known about the man in these portraits. On one hand, historians know the cities where he lived, the years he lived there, and the people for whom he worked and with whom he lived. On the other hand, very little exists in the way of private correspondence and anecdotal knowledge. Small glimpses and clues into the lives of famous artists are treasured by performers and audiences as a way of making these men and women relatable. Unlike composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, and the Schumanns, Bach's self-represented voice exists only in his music.

When listening to Bach's music, one immediately thinks of the intersection of logic, function, and spirituality. Although these traits often conflict, as the Bach scholar Christoph Wolff writes, one can "[understand] his art as a paradigm for reconciling what would ordinarily be conflicting stances."

Today, Bach swamps social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Musicians post daily Bach videos, pictures of solo driveway performances for their neighborhood, meaningful recordings by favorite artists, livestreamed entire suites, partitas, and sonatas from their apartments. This is for a variety of reasons—the first being that Bach is responsible for a large and unprecedented body of solo instrumental music. The second, and rather more important reason, is that the architecture and craftsmanship in Bach's music is reassuring to a world with an unclear future and irreparably shaken trust.

The Bach Cello Suites were written around 1720, during which time Bach lived in Cöthen under the employment of Prince Leopold. It was during his employment in the Cöthen court from 1717 to 1723 that Bach wrote secular, solo instrumental music. Prince Leopold valued the arts greatly, and Bach enjoyed a prosperous and harmonious relationship with his employer until Leopold's marriage led Bach to seek new employment in Leipzig.

Also in 1720, Bach lost his first wife. At the time of her death he was away from home on business and did not return until after her burial. He married again in 1721, to the then twenty-year-old Anna Magdalena Wilcke.

Anna Magdalena plays an important role in the history of the cello suites. A highly skilled soprano and copyist in her own right, she brought her musical skills to her

marriage. No original manuscript survives in Bach's own hand of the cello suites. The two most reliable primary sources are Anna Magdalena's copy made between 1727 and 1730 and Johann Peter Kellner's, another noted copyist of the time. Because of her proximity to the original source, and because Kellner's manuscript is incomplete, historians agree that Magdalena's is the most reliable copy.

Possibly because so little personal information exists on this man so beloved for his music, and because husband and wife, as well as their ten surviving musical children (between his two wives, J.S. Bach fathered twenty children, ten of whom survived to adulthood) joyfully benefited and took inspiration from each other, the Bach family's lives have been fabricated and imagined in myriad sources. In 1890, the author Elise Polko conjured a domestic scene in the Bach household: Anna Magdalena sitting with a three-year-old son on her knee at the table, C.P.E. showing his father compositions and asking for his opinion, J.S. Bach next to his wife, with "his black, fiery eyes [that] had an indescribable power, which was almost impossible to resist. You were compelled to look at them again and again; you felt as if you were about to learn from them something of unearthly beauty." Other sources say that, despite his reserved portraits and piercing black eyes, J.S. Bach had a lively, even very occasionally raunchy, sense of humor; perhaps he was not always as pious as those austere portraits suggest.

In the end, it does not matter. The most trying and beautiful part of Bach's music is that, even with all its logic, it cannot be explained. It is so easy to assign personalized human emotions to the man and his family, try to make his heavenly music somehow more explicable. The best one can do is listen with wonder to his music as it is, and rather than trying to hear the man behind the music, listen in awe to the gift he gave the world.

—Annie Jacobs-Perkins