



WASHINGTON BACH CONSORT  
Dana Marsh, Artistic Director

# Bach's Cello Suites performed by Wade Davis

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)  
Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011  
Suite No. 3 in C major, BWV 1009

Thursday, March 25, 2021  
8 p.m. on YouTube  
Recorded at St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
301 A St SE, Washington, DC 20003

# PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Suite No. 5 in C minor, BWV 1011

*Prelude ~ Allemande ~ Courante ~ Sarabande ~ Gavotte I/II ~ Gigue*

Suite No. 3 in C major, BWV 1009

*Prelude ~ Allemande ~ Courante ~ Sarabande ~ Bourrée I II ~ Gigue*

## SIX SUITES FOR SOLO CELLO

### SIX . . .

Much of the best-known instrumental music of the early eighteenth century comes in sets of six. Among J. S. Bach's works there are the six suites for solo cello, the six sonatas and partitas for solo violin (three of each), six French suites, six English suites, six keyboard partitas, six Brandenburg concertos, six organ sonatas, and six chorale settings transcribed for organ ("Schübler"). Concertos by Antonio Vivaldi and George Frideric Handel, sonatas by Archangelo Corelli, and pretty much everything published by Georg Philipp Telemann was issued in groups of six or twelve.

A composer might compose the six pieces in a set to provide variety, or to survey a type or genre. The composer might order the pieces in a significant way, creating patterns of key, scoring, technique, or other musical parameters. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon because it is unlikely that the most common way of performing works from a collection was to play the entire set at one sitting; it is more probable that musicians used one at a time. The compilation of musical works into sets of six and their ordering in sometimes arcane ways was thus symbolic even apart from the effect of the works in performance. The context of an individual sonata or concerto in a collection or its place in the group is not necessarily audible from the performance of that work by itself; this is a way in which musical symbolism can paradoxically be distinct from the sound of a composition.

Part of the reason for the common grouping in sixes was commercial convention—purchasers in the ever-growing market for printed music expected to find six or twelve pieces, much as we expect to find a dozen eggs in a carton. (Or at least multiples of six; one occasionally sees packages of eight eggs but they look slightly wrong.) But part of the reason was that a group of six pieces was more than a set—it was a Work ("Opus"), and the number six helped make it that. The word opus is significant because it came to signify a complete creation, and probably had connotations of the creation of the world, the greatest Work of all.

A set of six or twelve compositions of a particular type also put a focus on the kind of music represented in the collection—not just on its pieces but also on their genre identity. A single suite is just a musical work, but a set of six suites helps define a genre. The group of six sets up and reinforces expectations and conventions, and the context of a work in a collection emphasizes the identity of the piece as an exemplar of a type—as an individual with a context. This can point, in turn, both to what a particular work shares with others in the collection (and outside it), and what makes it individual and distinct.

Musical thinkers and writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were obsessed with classification—with the creation of schemes of organization for types of music, a close parallel to the scientific pursuit of the cataloging of nature in the same period. Musical taxonomies were reinforced by the gathering and publishing of groups of pieces; each collection was a kind of reassurance that there were indeed definable and distinguishable types, and they came in groups of six. In this regard, Bach's six suites for cello have a clear context.

### ... SUITES ...

Each of Bach's six suites for solo cello is a fairly conventional set of dances of French courtly origin. At the core are the four dances of the standard German version of the suite: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue. Built into this grouping is variety of musical meter and of tempo. Allemandes are slow dances in duple meter; Courantes are fast triple-meter dances; Sarabandes are slow pieces in triple meter; and Giges are lively movements in so-called compound meter—duple with a triple subdivision. Each of the dances unfolds in two sections, each repeated. The first section presents an idea and metaphorically travels somewhere with it, arriving at a resting point. The second returns home, usually with a sense of diversion to somewhere even more distant in harmony and expression.

The convention, regularity, and uniformity of these dances, both in their rhythmic and metrical organization and in their form encourages a very particular kind of creativity on the part of the composer, who is inevitably following in the steps of hundreds of others and of thousands of suites. But just as the point of all those still-life paintings is not just to have more pictures of fruit, a suite, even a conventional one, is more than just a predictable succession of dances. The interest lies in the kind of material a composer invents, the ways in which it is developed and manipulated, how it is adapted to the potential of an instrument, and so on.

Before the Gigue in each of the six cello suites, Bach inserts a pair of additional dances designed to be played *alternativement*—the first, then the second, then the first again—a typical disposition. In two of the suites, those additional movements are minuets; in two they are Bourées; and in two they are Gavottes. Those are the three principal other dances (besides the Allemande, etc.), making the six works even more representative of the genre

of the suite. And the architecture of the dances in alteration, building a large-scale ABA organization, invites yet another level of listening.

Each of the six cello works opens with a prelude. These are of various types. Some, like the first and fourth, are the kind now known as “pattern preludes” in which variants on a musical cell are repeated throughout the movement. Others, like the third, announce themselves as explorations of the instrument; this piece outlines the range of the cello from top to bottom in its first measure, then uses continuous fast motion as a vehicle for harmonic exploration. The fifth is cast in two sections, one slow and stately and featuring long-short rhythmic patterns, the other faster. This is the type known as an *ouverture*, frequently found as the first movement of keyboard and ensemble suites.

In all these features, Bach’s works have a clear context, as well, in German dance suites.

### ... FOR SOLO CELLO

To begin with, the identity of the “cello” is open to some interpretation. The sixth suite was composed for a five-string instrument, and the fifth calls for a re-tuned top string on a more conventional four-string instrument. It is even possible that some might have been played on a smaller cello, sometimes called a violoncello piccolo, that was worn strapped to the chest and played on the shoulder like a large violin.

But in calling for a cello of any kind, Bach’s collection departs from norms. There was a small repertory for solo cello from Italy in the late seventeenth century, though it is not clear whether Bach might have known any of it. And the cello began to be used as a soloistic instrument in ensemble music in the early eighteenth century, including in vocal concertos (“cantatas”). But Bach’s six suites, for the instrument on its own, are believed to be without precedent in the German repertory, and had no immediate successors—or even many after their publication in 1824 and 1825.

The six solo suites represent Bach’s extension of the expectations of the cello as a solo vehicle. In writing these works, Bach puts the cello on a par with the violin (for which he wrote a set that mixes sonatas and suites), the transverse flute (for which he wrote one solo partita), the lute, and especially various keyboard instruments (for which he wrote numerous sets). If modern listeners want to hear these works against an eighteenth-century backdrop, their context lies in music for other instruments.

Daniel R. Melamed

# MEET WADE DAVIS



Cellist **Wade Davis** is in high demand as a solo performer, collator, and educator. He holds degrees from the College of Charleston and Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University and has attended Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute, the American Bach Soloists Academy, and the Seattle Opera's Accademia d'Amore. He performs regularly with the Folger Consort of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, and the Washington Bach Consort in addition to his own baroque chamber music ensemble, *S'amusant*. He has been a

featured performer at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival, the Colour of Music Festival, and the MOJA Arts Festival.

In May of 2020, Wade was the cellist for the "Swans for Relief" video curated and produced by Misty Copeland of the American Ballet Theater and Joseph Phillips of Ballet Philippines. In October, he hosted a six-episode Virtual Fall Season with Launch Global, complete with dancers, choreographers, and a new work written for baroque cello.

Wade maintains a virtual studio of private cello students, ranging from beginners to advanced students and professionals.

# DANA MARSH, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



**Dana Marsh** began his musical training as a boy chorister at St. Thomas Church Choir School in New York and at Salisbury Cathedral in England. He earned his undergraduate degree in organ performance at the Eastman School of Music and received masters and doctoral degrees in historical musicology from the University of Oxford. Praised by *The Los Angeles Times* as an "energetic and persuasive conductor," and by *The Washington Post* as "a superb choral conductor, energetic and precise," Marsh has entered into fruitful collaborations with the London Mozart

Players, Studio de musique ancienne de Montréal, the Choir of St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, the Portland Baroque Orchestra, and the Musica Angelica Baroque Orchestra, among others. As an acclaimed countertenor soloist and consort singer (1992–2008), he performed with the American Bach Soloists, Concert Royal of New York, New York Collegium, Seattle Baroque Orchestra, and the Academy of Ancient Music. As a singer/soloist with the Choir of New College Oxford while undertaking his D.Phil. research, he toured frequently with the Academy of Ancient Music, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and the European Union Baroque Orchestra, recording 15 discs with New College Choir, one of which won the Gramophone award in early music in 2008. Marsh was Assistant Director of Music and Director of Chapel Music at Girton College Cambridge, and he currently serves as Director of the Historical Performance Institute at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

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