



Johann Sebastian
BACH

Cello Suites • 1
Nos. 1, 4 and 5

Arranged for theorbo and performed by
Yasunori Imamura



Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Cello Suites Nos. 1, 4 and 5 in arrangements for theorbo

In his interpretations of the rich music of J.S. Bach's *Cello Suites*, lutenist Yasunori Imamura has chosen to present the works performed on the theorbo, a long-necked Baroque instrument similar to the chitarrone. When performing Bach's *Cello Suites*, Imamura did not want to lose the deep, rich, and soulful resonance of the cello. Therefore, instead of the lute, which has a higher range, he chose the theorbo, which has a similar range to the cello. Incidentally, the cello's lowest open string is C2 and its highest open string is A3, while the theorbo's lowest note is G1 and its highest open string is B3. This imparts to the music unique timbres and resonances, bringing us into a new relationship with this wonderful music.

The *Cello Suites* were hardly known even among professional musicians for a century and a half after their composer's death. It was the great Spanish cellist, Pablo Casals, who discovered (on the day his father purchased for the young prodigy his first full-size cello) a copy of the *Six Suites for Violoncello* 'at an old music shop near the harbour' in Barcelona.

Casals studied and worked at these pieces every day for the next twelve years and waited until he was 25 years old before he dared to perform them in public. As Casals explained in his autobiography:

Up until then no violinist or cellist had ever played one of the Bach suites in its entirety. They would just play a single section – a Sarabande, a Gavotte or a Minuet. But I played them as a whole: from the *Prélude* through the five dance movements, with all the repeats that give the wonderful entity and pacing and structure of every movement, the full architecture and artistry. They had been considered academic works, mechanical, without warmth. Imagine that! How could anyone think of them as being cold, when a whole radiance of space and poetry pours forth from them! They are the very essence of Bach and Bach is the essence of music.

(*Joys and Sorrows, Reflections by Pablo Casals*, as told to Albert E. Kahn, London: Macdonald, 1970, pp.46–47)

Bach is believed to have written the *Cello Suites* while at Cöthen, a town in Saxony some 19 miles north of Halle, where the composer was employed as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, between 1717 and 1723. The original manuscripts for these have been lost and the earliest source is in the handwriting of Bach's wife, Anna Magdalena.

Structurally, each of the six suites contains six movements, beginning with a prelude and ending with a gigue, while in between are old court dances: allemandes, courantes and sarabandes. Following the old dances Bach brought into the suite a more modern dance, either a minuet, a bourrée, or a gavotte.

The allemande was a popular dance form originating in Germany in the 16th century, and by the 18th century had become a stylised concept well removed from dancing. The pace of the dance is quiet and steady. The courante is invariably rigorous and rapid, providing a contrast to the allemande. With the courante's title derived from the French verb 'to run', this is a bubbling, effervescent movement of a brilliant kind. The sarabande, a slow, stately dance which originated in Spain, is the emotional centre of the suite, with enormous depths of stillness, sadness, and expressiveness. Its characteristic feature (similar to the Polish mazurka), is that with three beats to a bar the middle beat is the accented one.

Minuets, bourrées and giges remind us of the rhythmic momentum of the original dances. The minuet (*Suites Nos. 1 and 2*) is a graceful movement with three beats to a bar, sometimes followed by a second minuet, the first minuet then being repeated. The bourrée (*Suites Nos. 3 and 4*) is another French dance, similar to the gavotte but quicker, followed by a second bourrée and then the repetition of the first. The gavotte (*Suites Nos. 5 and 6*) is bright in mood and starts halfway through the first bar providing an energetic rhythmic pulse.

Suite No. 1 has an introductory movement in arpeggiated form which has gained great popularity. The *Allemande* and *Courante* are followed by a dignified *Sarabande*, with a repeated *Menuet I* framing *Menuet II*. The suite ends with an extremely lively *Gigue*.

Suite No. 5, BWV 1011, originally in C minor, also exists in a lute arrangement, *BWV 995*. On the autograph copy is the heading *Pièces pour la luth à Monsieur Schouster par J.S. Bach*, though Monsieur Schouster's identity (despite various well informed researches) has never been authoritatively established.

The *Prélude* actually consists of a prelude and fugue, the prelude being in a quasi-improvisatory style followed by the more tightly organised texture of the fugue. In connection with the fugue Pablo Casals commented that 'all the entrances of this subject...must retain this feeling of linear polyphony'. The *Allemande* of this suite is not the flowing type but more fierce with its dotted rhythms and strong statements, the somewhat florid decorative line providing an effective contrast after the straight logic of the preceding fugue. The *Courante*, in 3/2 time, is of the French variety with strong phrases, dotted rhythms and various complex rhythmic shifts of emphasis. The second half refines the rhythmic complexity with the intricate filigree of ornamentation.

The *Sarabande* has intense feeling and profundity, its austere texture creating an organic web of sound haunting in its effect. *Gavottes I* and *II* are especially well-suited for the theorbo. The first represents the light dance element of the gavotte form, while the second, in the same key as *Gavotte I*, mutates into lively triplets. The *Gigue* offers dotted notes in every bar conveying a sense of latent energy in headlong momentum.

Suite No. 4, BWV 1010 was originally written in the key of E flat major. In the *Prélude* (in Anna Magdalena Bach's copy entitled *Preludium*), following the opening shapes of descending quaver patterns the music breaks from time to time into rapid semiquavers providing a vivid climax. The great French cellist Paul Tortelier commented about the *Prélude* that 'It has beautiful things to say, and it says them simply and fully'.

The *Allemande* is rhythmically varied, bringing together many different elements. Flowing semiquavers alternate with steady quavers while many of the phrases echo the downward sweeping curves of the *Prélude*. The *Courante* takes the mixture of note values further, with the addition of subtle triplets added to a brilliant blending of semiquavers and quavers.

The *Sarabande*, characterised by its use of dotted note patterns structured round the ordered harmonic progression of the chords, increases in rhythmic complexity as the movement progresses. After the serious gravity of the *Sarabande*, the first of the two bourrées is positively skittish with ascending and (later) descending flourishes between the dance-like quavers. In contrast the second *Bourrée*, which is extremely compact, enacts a more simple structure of straight crotchets and lyrical quavers. The *Gigue* in 12/8 time is ebullient and witty, its vitality exemplified in its perpetual motion of vivacious triplets.

Graham Wade

Yasunori Imamura



Yasunori Imamura (b. 1953) studied lute with Eugen Müller-Dombois and Hopkinson Smith at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, where he received his soloist's diploma. He subsequently focussed on interpretation and thoroughbass with Ton Koopman and Johann Sonnleitner, and composition with Wolfgang Neining. Today, Imamura is recognised as one of the prominent figures of the lute, as a soloist as well as a continuo player. He is professor of lute at the Conservatoire et Académie Supérieure de Musique, Strasbourg, as well as at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, and regularly gives masterclasses across Europe and the Far East. His solo recordings have been awarded numerous accolades, including a Diapason d'Or for *Weiss: Lute Sonatas, Vol. 1* (Claves) in 2006, and a Crescendo 'Joker' for the second volume in the series in 2008.

He received the Cultural Achievement Award from the Canton of Solothurn (Switzerland) in 2010. Besides his activities as a soloist, Yasunori Imamura has collaborated as a continuo player with artists including Cecilia Bartoli, Teresa Berganza, Núria Rial, Marc Minkowski, Michael Schneider, Maurice Steger, Martin Gester and Alan Curtis, and has made over 150 recordings. In 1997 he founded Fons Musicae, performing throughout Europe and the Far East. To date, the ensemble has made six recordings, and has received various international awards and commendations. www.yasunoriimamura.com

Yasunori Imamura, whose recording of Bach's complete lute works has been described as a 'magnificent interpretation' (Naxos 8.573936-37), turns his attention to the *Cello Suites*. Imamura has chosen to perform these iconic suites on the theorbo, the most important plucked instrument in the lute family, with a range very similar to the cello. Certain technical elements, such as the playing of arpeggios are, in fact, easier on the theorbo whose unique timbres and resonances bring a new sonic quality to these much-loved works.



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Cello Suites • 1

**Cello Suite No. 1 in G major,
BWV 1007 (c. 1720)**

18:15

- 1 I. Prélude**
- 2 II. Allemande**
- 3 III. Courante**
- 4 IV. Sarabande**
- 5 V. Menuet I–II**
- 6 VI. Gigue**

2:30
5:05
2:43
2:44
3:29
1:44

**Cello Suite No. 4 in E flat major,
BWV 1010 (c. 1720)**

25:35

- 13 I. Prélude**
- 14 II. Allemande**
- 15 III. Courante**
- 16 IV. Sarabande**
- 17 V. Bourrée I–II**
- 18 VI. Gigue**

3:58
4:57
3:57
3:51
5:42
3:10

**Cello Suite No. 5 in C minor,
BWV 1011 (c. 1720)**

25:15

- 7 I. Prélude**
- 8 II. Allemande**
- 9 III. Courante**
- 10 IV. Sarabande**
- 11 V. Gavotte I–II**
- 12 VI. Gigue**

6:15
6:09
2:30
3:16
4:34
2:31

Arranged for theorbo
by Yasunori Imamura, 2021

Yasunori Imamura, Theorbo

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Theorbo by José Miguel Moreno **1–6** **13–18**, Hendrik Hasenfuss **7–12**

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