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Honors Thesis

April 14, 2021

Johan Sebastian Bach and his Cello Suites II and V: An Audio and Visual Analysis of Cello Suites II and V

Johan Sebastian Bach

Born in 1685, Johann Sebastian Bach was a keystone composer of the Baroque Music Era. Bach's works from his Fugue in D minor to his Brandenburg Concertos set the precedent for the intermittent period between the Renaissance and Classical music eras (Wikipedia). Bach's international acclaim is well-earned, to say the least. This composer truly set the tone of classical music throughout his career and continues to influence musical stylings, composition, and theory through to present day. Like many other giants of art and culture, Bach's upbringing molded and morphed him into the man whose name is so familiar to the world.

The composer's life began on the 31st of March in 1685. Johann Sebastian Bach was the last child of Johann Ambrosius Bach and Elisabeth Lämmerhirt. His father Ambrosius was a local musician in a small town in Germany in which Johann Sebastian grew up until the age of ten. Once orphaned, the young boy lived with his brother until the age of maturity.

His elder brother, Johann Christoph, with whom he lived after his parents passed, was a musician like his father. Bach's father and brother may have been the first musical influences on the young orphan but were by far not the last to form Johann Sebastian into the composer he was bound to become. While little is known about Bach's early formal education, it is clear he spent some of his earliest educational years attending the same institution as his brother, "Georgenkirche" or St. George's Church, in Eisenach, Germany (Britannica).

Johann Sebastian followed in his older brother's footsteps and began a career as a church organist early on. Working from Lüneburg to Thuringia to the courts in Weimar, the young musician began carving his space within the musical world.

From this genesis of his career with the organ in religious settings, Bach began composing music following in the footsteps of contemporary, well-established German composers. In the early years of the 18th century, Bach began writing his own compositions. Still based in religious institutions, Bach's earlier compositions were conservative in nature. During the composer's time at Blasiuskirche in Mühlhausen in Thuringia, the religious overtones of Bach's work was never clearer. While he showed promise in progressive and modern styles, Bach held steadfast to the religiosity of his formative musical experiences. Cantatas such as Cantata No. 71 and organ pieces such as Passacaglia in C Minor characterize Bach's works during his tenure at Blasiuskirche. This time in the young composer's life is often referred to as the "Mühlhausen period" (Brittanica).

After controversies and dissent from Bach at Blasiuskirche, Bach moved on to perform in the orchestra and hold a position as organist for the court at Weimar. During this stint at court,

Bach began writing compositions with influence based more from Italy than his homeland. He began stretching his muscles with different avenues of creation and styles while writing his numerous Cantatas and personal works. This period was one of experimentation and novelty for Bach, reaching for different inspirations beyond those with which he was familiar. After yet another stirring of dissent, Bach moved on from the courts at Weimar to accept a position as musical director for Prince Leopold of Köthen (Brittanica).

The “Köthen Period,” as many call Bach’s time as musical director under the prince, was characterized by Bach’s work with his emergence of compositions for string instruments. Bach himself was proficient at the Viola and this fascination during the Köthen Period bore fruit with the completion of the Brandenburg Concertos in 1724. Bach also furthered his keyboard compositions and Cantatas amidst his time with the prince’s orchestra. Clavierbüchlein for W.F. Bach, the first of the two books of Das Wohltemperierte Klavier, and numerous works for the French Suites, the Inventions were born of this era (Brittanica).

In July of 1720, Bach’s wife, Maria Barbara Bach, passed away and by December of the following year, Bach was wed to Anna Magdalena Wilcken. “Apart from his first wife’s death, these first four years at Köthen were probably the happiest of Bach’s life. He was on the best terms with the prince, who was genuinely musical; and in 1730 Bach said that he had expected to end his days there. But the prince married on December 11, 1721, and conditions deteriorated. The princess [...] required so much of her husband’s attention that Bach began to feel neglected.” (Wikipedia)

Despite these troublesome setbacks and disagreements, Bach remained under the prince's charge until late in 1728. Once the prince died, Bach was yet again on the road to another location, this time the composer and father of two became the director of music for the town of Leipzig, Germany (Brittanica). Although he oversaw four churches in the town and conducted at three, Bach found time to finish the first version of the Magnificat as well as time to compose an abundance of Cantatas as well as the "Sanctus" of the *Mass in B Minor* (Brittanica).

Bach did not spend his last days in the prince's service, as he had hoped. Rather, the renowned composer passed away on the 28th of July in 1750 in the town of Leipzig. While little is known about the illness which made Bach unable to complete *The Art of the Fugue* and which eventually claimed his life, it is clear that the musician's musical career came to a halt shortly before his death. While Bach's nomadic lifestyle and well-known penchant for dissent and mischief compose a life on the move, the composer's musical styles were all the better for it, allowing him to unabashedly explore various influences and styles. The innumerable works by the talented organist and violist stand as a votive to the life of a man immortalized today as one of the greatest composers in history.

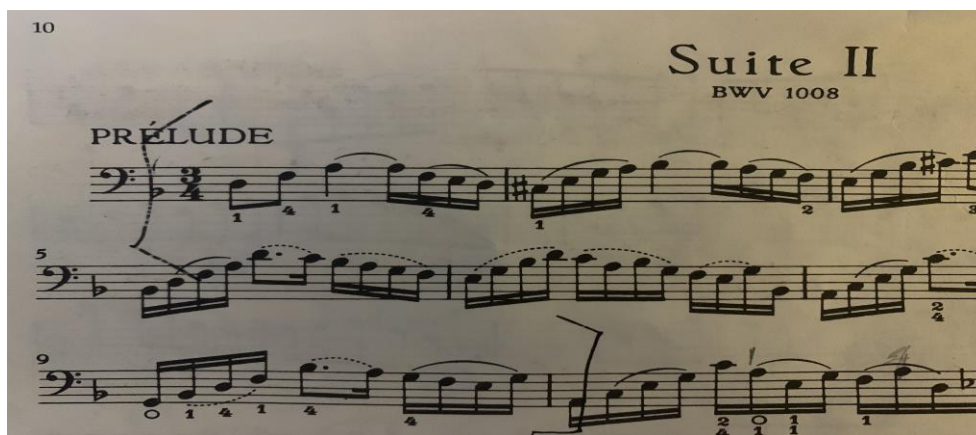
Suite II, D minor

Prelude

The second cello suite written by Johan Sebastain Bach is written in the key of D minor. According to Stanford commentary on these selected musical works, the key of D minor is "a

key of seriousness, sadness, tragedy, loss, and strength". The opening motif sets the scene for the dark key. Bach writes out a perfect D minor triad as the opening foundation for the suite. Furthermore, writer Christopher Costanza states, "from the first 3 notes of this intensely emotional prelude we feel immersed in a dramatically dark d minor world. These notes, D-F-A rhythmically, eighth-eighth-quarter, with an emphasis on the third note, which is beat 2, constitute a d minor triad, asserting the tonal center and immediately setting the tone for things to come."

The second beat of the first bar is the note A, and it is tied to the third beat which stretches the preceding beat. After this note is held, Bach writes a descending sixteenth note pattern down to a C#.



According to Costanza, "Then, in measure 2, beat one consists of four 16th notes, C#-E-G-A (a V7 chord in the 1st inversion) leading to a B-flat on beat 2, which, as in measure 1, is a quarter note tied into the 3rd beat, again emphasizing the 2nd beat of the measure." As measure three begins, Bach writes an inversion of the previous measure this time ascending. Here Bach is beginning to construct arch like phrases that will be heard repeatedly throughout

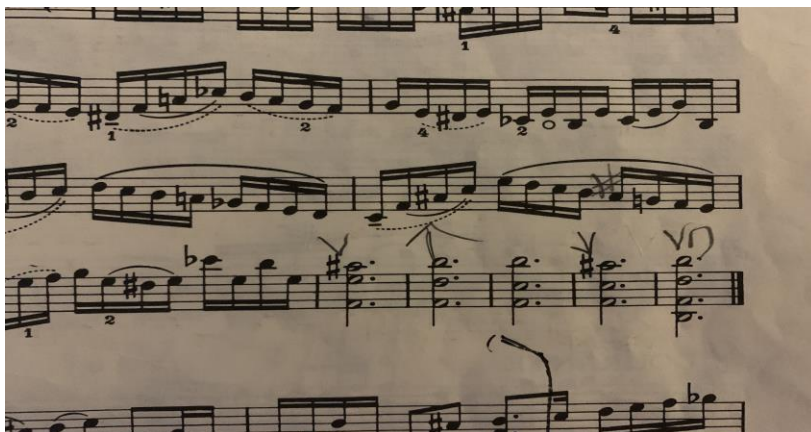
the prelude. As Bach continues to write, the first sequence emerges. In measure four, on the second beat Bach writes an E flat dotted eighth note that sounds like a suspension. In measure five, the suspension lowers to a D. This happens again in measure seven but this time on a C. Lastly, measure nine features a B flat dotted eighth note.

The culmination of this first sequence ends on a low A played on the G string. Costanza says, "In effect, those 1st four measures are an introduction, foreshadowing the overall mood of the movement." This is true and is further developed as the prelude evolves. After the first twelve measures, Bach cadences to F major. The key of F major is outlined in the same manner as the opening in D minor. The key of F major is relative to D minor which is fitting for this continued sequence.

As the prelude develops, Writer Costanza encourages listeners "to focus not only on the harmonic progression and rhythmic flow of the music, but also on Bach's incredibly ingenious use of multiple melodic and accompaniment voices." Furthermore, "It's particularly interesting to listen very closely to the bass line and its direction, often scale-wise in motion. As we monitor our bass line in this incredibly rich music, we find it leading, gradually but consistently, to the all-important pitch "A," the dominant of d minor." As mentioned before Bach was an organist by trade. While he did also play the violin, Bach loved the organ. Many organ tendencies are heard throughout this suite in the form of pedal tones. A pedal tone is the underlying pitch that the rest of the music rests on. Bach chose to employ the pedal tone A due to the fact that it is the dominant pitch of D minor.

In measure forty, Bach again restates the opening motif this time starting on a low C#. This draws the listeners ear in. Two measures later, the pedal tone of A reigns supreme. As the sixteenth notes continue in an ascending pattern, the open A string of the cello keeps the pitch centered. As I play this passage, I often hear a low organ pedal A sweeping across the melodic progression until it culminates at a high G and then unwinds back to the chilling C#. This time, Bach leaves the listener confused with an unresolved chord. The following measure begins on a B flat which is one and a half steps below the C#. This brings resolution to the previous chord. As the movement begins to come to an end, Bach opens one last sequence among the flowing sixteenth notes.

Oddly this time the sequence is rising one pitch at a time beginning on the note E. The last motif Bach uses is an alternation between D, B flat, C and A and then again but a half step higher with the notes E flat, G, D and G. The final five bars are dotted half note chords played in a stately fasion ending in the original key of D minor.



I often think of this prelude as a roller coaster ride in the most sophisticated sense. A collection of pedal tones, sixteenth note sequences, and stately chords are the fundamentals of this prelude.

Allemande

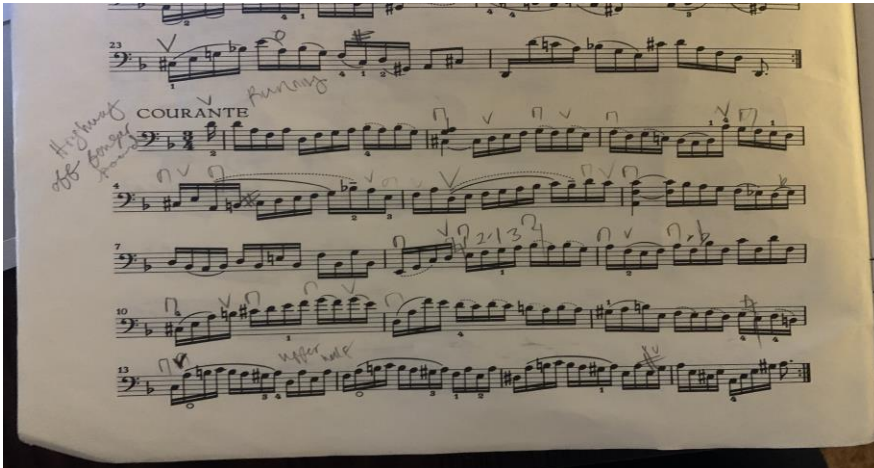
The allemande is also written in the key of D minor. It opens on an upbeat written as a sixteenth note. This upbeat is followed by a D minor chord that sets the tonal structure for the movement. Costanza says that “the definitive, deep, rich quality of this four-voiced downbeat gives the movement a clearly assertive start.” Bach regularly writes a motif containing a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note that leads into flowing sixteenth note passages. These lengthier passages are broken up by the aforementioned motif. Interestingly, Bach only writes two four note chords into the entire Allemande, however, this four voice part writing stays with the listener throughout the movement. As the movement develops, multiple three note chords are written but the four voice parts remain in our ears.

In measure nine, Bach employs a free writing style with a chromatic flurry of thirty-second notes. This is new material that was not previously used in any of his previous movements or suites. This adds an exciting moment to the already fiery dance movement. Constanza writes “An interesting technique Bach employs in this movement is the use of a four-note descending scale motive as a cadence point, as in measure 4 (beat 3; this one leads to the 2-note chord on beat 4), measure 6 (beat 3; we hear the mordent on the G eighth note to feel the sense of A-G-F#-E), measure 14 (beat 3), measure 20 (beat 1), and measure 22, (beat 1). This technique appears at other strategic places in Bach’s music, but it’s very clearly stated in

this movement.” The quote from Costanza’s research points out a particularly insightful point. Bach uses mordents to incorporate more notes and add drama to his perfectly structured writing.

Courante

The Courante, like the previous two movements is written in the key of D minor as well. This movement is flashy and showcases the performers' ability to maneuver across the finger board. In this movement we also see a three-note chordal structure.



“From the 3-note chord on beat 1 of measure 2 we sense a 3-voice structure; musical arrival points throughout the movement are marked by 2- or 3-note chordal writing (measures 6, 18, 21 – just a sixteenth note double stop here! –and 22). The motion, both rhythmic and harmonic, feels fast throughout, and so we’re left with an exciting and often breathless musical statement. Of note are the rollicking passages of bariolage bowing (a back and forth alternating of strings for coloristic effect) in measures 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31. Listeners

and performers alike must catch their breath after this movement before continuing with the poignant Sarabande!" (Costanza 2012)

Sarabande

My favorite movement of all the suites must be the Sarabande from the second suite in D minor. This movement is somber and melancholic. Other characteristics of this movement are "dark, rich, and deep" (Costanza 2012) Furthermore, "This Sarabande is the emotional centerpiece of the entire suite. The tone of the movement is somber, and the emotional content is as meaningful as we experience anywhere in the suites." The rhythmic emphasis in this movement falls on the second beat of the 3/4 meter.

The first half of this movement consists of repetitive figures that are nearly identical in rhythm. The first phrase leads the listener to a dominant five chord but soon returns to the original key of D minor by measure 5. Researcher Costanza lays out the rest of the movement as follows, "The 2nd phrase begins much like measure one (the only difference is that the 2nd phrase begins with a rich 3-note chord - a first inversion d minor, with a deep low F in the bass), and during its 4 measures takes us to F Major, the relative major of d minor. The 3rd phrase stays in F Major and ends with a perfect cadence in that key." Furthermore, "The 2nd half of the movement returns to the 2nd beat emphasis idea we experienced at the start of the movement; we're now in F Major, but already on the 2nd half of beat one we get a sense of modulation, with hints at g minor. In fact, we do experience g minor in a very full, clear way when we arrive at the downbeat of measure 16. Measures 17- 20, through mostly 8th note melodic writing, take us to an A-7 chord, the dominant 7th of d minor.

Then, a beautiful and dramatic surprise: we experience a deceptive cadence on measure 21 (the A-7 chord in measure 20 brings us not to d minor but to B-flat Major).” As this material ends, the movement is almost done. Bach leads us to a poignant chordal phrase that ends on a single D and then drops an octave lower with the same note. The oscillation between C# and D creates a sense of unrest and anxiety, but the listener is put back at peace with the lowest sounding D on the cello restating the foundational key of D minor.

Minuet I and Minuet II

Minuets are dance movements typically written in 3/4 meter. Bach traditionally writes not one but two minuets in each suite. These movements are characteristically shorter in length and emphasize the first beat in the measure. “The minuet movement of this suite begins very confidently with a solid d minor triad, firmly establishing a strong, bold, and intense character based on 3-voice construction. Three-note chords occur throughout the 1st minuet, making the multi-voice writing very clear and the harmonic progressions immediately recognizable. The bass line in this minuet is particularly interesting: it’s primarily characterized by descending scale-wise motion, with occasional and meaningful exceptions. In essence, that bass line defines the shape and direction of entire minuet.” (Costanza 2012)

The second of the 2 minuets is in direct contrast to the 1st: in D Major, very melodic, gentle, and containing only one chord (an A-E double-stop at the close of the 1st section). This is interesting because all the movements leading up to this one are in D minor. It is not uncharacteristic to write in the parallel major. This brings life and a refreshing sound to the ear. However, this only lasts for 24 measures. “The 2nd minuet provides a perfect and well-timed

balance to the intensity of the 1st; it's beautifully simple, appealing, and inviting, so that the return to minuet 1 that follows is delightfully shocking." Traditionally, performers should repeat the minuet in a Da Capo style. This means to re play the first minuet without any repeats. This recapitulation brings us back to the key of D minor and sets us up for the material to come in the gigue which is written in the original key of D minor.

Gigue

The final movement of Bach's second cello suite in D minor is raucous. The movement is written in D minor as previously stated. The emphasis is on the first beat in the measure. This movement begins on an upbeat similar to the allemande, however this time it is an eight note not a sixteenth note. Bach writes the pick up note as an A and the first beat of the next bar as a D establishing the minor key. Interestingly, the following two notes are not in the key of D minor, for they are transposed by half steps moving in opposite motion. This creates tension within the music but only lasts a short time. The next notes bring us back to the original tonal center. According to Costanza, "The movement is very much a virtuosic display of sequential writing, often single-voiced, but very effectively harmonized at key points (such as the sequences at measures 17-24 and 25-29). After the exhilarating buildup to the G-sharp-F chord in measure 29, the first half cadences in A minor/Major (the 2nd to last measure feels as though we've reached A minor, but the C-sharp at the end of the measure is a Picardy 3rd, which "majorizes" our otherwise minor key ending)."

"The 2nd half of the movement begins very much like the 1st (now in F Major, the relative major of our home key), and continues with the same rhythmic excitement we've

experienced in the 1st half. This movement truly is a wild ride of energy and drive, filled with a sort of confident sensibility that rounds off the intensive emotional experience of the suite.”

When studying this musical masterpiece, this movement gave me a lot of energy. I often pictured rowdy beer-clashing pals meeting up in a pub and eventually dancing to this music. All in all, this suite is the embodiment of D minor. At times it is melancholic and reflective while at other times it is uplifting and driving. As we begin the discussion over the fifth suite the similarities and grave differences will begin to emerge. I have chosen the fifth suite as a comparison due to the fact that it is also written in a minor key, however, from the first notes, the complexity is insurmountable.

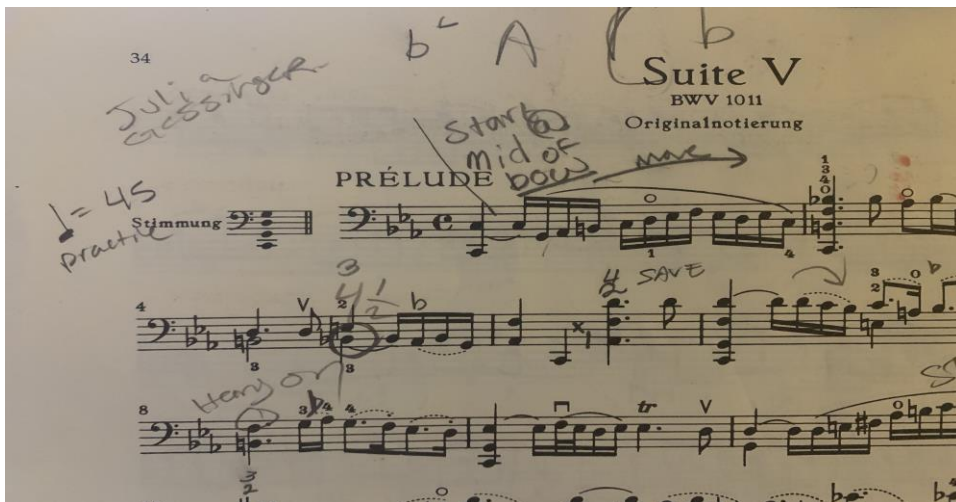
Suite V, C Minor

Prelude

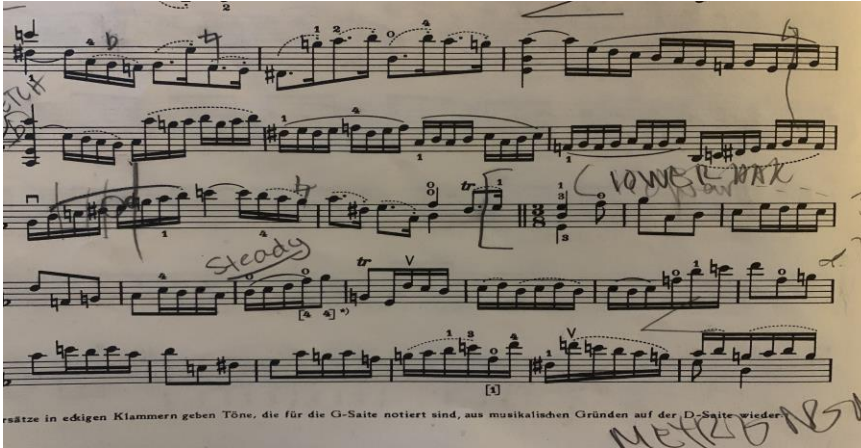
The prelude to Bach’s fifth cello suite is a grand prelude and arguably the most complex prelude of all six suites. According to Bach’s notes, “In this suite we’re told to retune the cello (called scordatura), specifically, to bring the pitch of our A string (the highest string on the instrument) down one whole step, to a G, giving us these open strings: G-D-G-C. This tuning causes the cello to vibrate and resonate quite differently from the way it does with the normal A-D-G-C setup; one can pretty easily detect the dark pureness this arrangement provides. In general, the scordatura tuning presents significant challenges to the performer – all notes played on the A string must be fingered one step higher than normal. In the score Bach handles this by notating each and every pitch played on the A string– now the “upper” G string - one

step higher than the actual pitch, so that, when fingered on the retuned string, we hear the proper pitches. But this can be mighty confusing and disorienting to the performers' trained ears!" (Costanza 2012)

The performer, however, has the option to perform the fifth suite scordatura or not. I have chosen to perform the prelude on a traditionally tuned cello. The strings pitches are C-G-D-A. The manuscript I studied was transposed up a whole step to account for the higher A string pitch.



The fifth suite prelude is not only a prelude but also a Fuge. After only a twenty-six-bar prelude, Bach begins writing a Fuge. This Fuge then lasts for more than 200 bars.



The prelude begins with a chord but not a complex chord. Bach writes a low open C string note paired with a C one octave higher. Like the second suite, Bach sets the tonal center of the movement early. Bach writes in the French overture style by implementing a dotted eighth note rhythm.

This prelude according to Constanza is a, “harmonically rich and tonally resonant journey to a half cadence, leading directly into the fugue. We experience a strong sense of improvisatory writing here – sweeping scale figures lead to rich chords, and dotted rhythms take us through an always interesting array of harmonies.”

The prelude is harmonically complex and very rich. Bach writes complex chords that are followed by a flurry of chromatic sixteenth notes leading to the next chord. At its most intense, Bach writes a high F natural and then a multiple octave jump to a low open C in measure 18. Before the Fuge begins, Bach cadences again with the French overture dotted rhythm.

The Fuge then begins. This is the only Fuge ever written in all of the cello suites and one of very few Fuges in all of his solo literature for cello and violin. This Fuge does not implement many chords, but the skips in ranges give the listener the sense of multiple voicing parts. “In

other words, he sets up the progression of the music so that our brains capture the sense of the harmony and multiple voicing, even though throughout most of this fugue Bach has written only one musical line at any given time.” (Costanza 2012)

Allemande

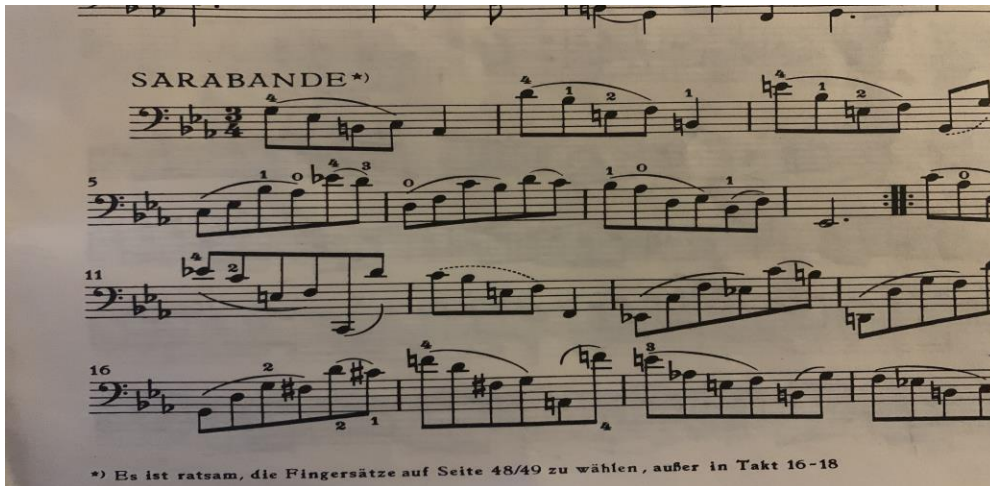
Bach writes the allemande for the fifth suite in C minor which is fitting given the key of the prelude. Costanza says, “This is a very stately movement, serious in mood and characterized by the prolific use of the dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm, consistent with the French overture style of the Prelude.” Bach breaks away from the single voice writing in the Fuge and implements multi voice part writing in this movement. Bach researcher Costanza notes, “The movement is clearly conceived in four voices, as evidenced by the frequent appearance of 4-note chords. As we so often hear in these suites, the bass line progression is particularly prominent and meaningful, and acts as a unifying element throughout the movement. Of greatest importance, I feel, is the deep, dark, resonant, and primarily somber tone of this allemande, a sort of walk down a path of the unknown.” Furthermore, the second half of the allemande begins with a three voice chord, this time a step higher than the opening. This creates tension in the ears of the listener. As previously stated this is a somber movement that leaves listener subdued. Overall, as the suite develops, the mood remains similar. Not flashy, but thoughtful and reflective.

Courante

Interestingly, the courante from the fifth suite is written in an uncommon 3/2 meter. This is the only courante of the 6 in 3/2 meter; the other 5 are in the more traditional 3/4 meter. Some say this movement is direct and to the point. I agree with those claims but would also argue that the implementation of the trills brings the listener away from the structured courante. Costanza writes, "The phrase endings are clean and almost abrupt; one gets the feeling of efficiency, compact energy, and intensity, much like a high-strung and determined individual. At the same time, we sense a strong dance rhythm throughout, and the movement is intricately structured in its multi-voiced layout." More than ever, Bach implements the multi voice part writing.

Sarabande

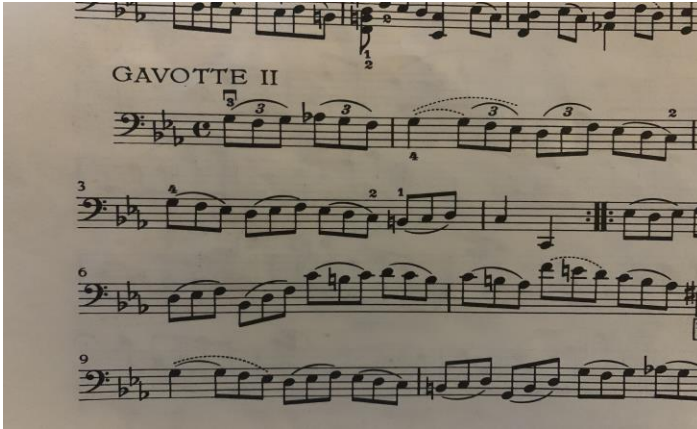
Flowing in style and unlike any of the other movements in this suite, the Sarabande brings a point of relief after the multi voiced and varied prior movements. Costanza says, "Many consider this Sarabande, a very unusual, sparse, and pure movement, the very heart and soul of the six suites. It is truly mysterious on a number of levels; it's the only Sarabande – in fact, one of only 4 movements in the entire cycle of six suites – with absolutely no appearance of chords." This is particularly important because the fifth suite unlike the second suite is extremely complex, however, this Sarabande breaks the norm. Furthermore, "We can imagine a multi-voice structure, but all harmony is created through implication, never with an obvious spelling of a chord progression."



The Sarabande however does still retain the traditional 3/4 meter and slow tempo. Costanza states it beautifully when he said “Overall, we have a very stark, minimal, severe, intensely beautiful, and in some ways quite simple movement that in the end is devastating, sometimes even painful to experience. And yet it’s perfect in its emotional effect and balance within the suite.” This movement offers a sense of reprieve for not only the listener but also the performer.

Gavotte I and Gavotte II

Another point of comparison is the fact that in the fifth suite instead of two Menuets, Bach writes two Gavottes. The two gavottes are up beat and full of complex harmonization. The first Gavotte features three voice writing while the second does not. The first is written in common meter whereas the second is written in in common meter but also written in triplet form. The second Gavotte feels like duple triplets.



Both Gavottes are written in C minor but harmonically progress throughout the music.

The same rules apply to the Gavottes as do the rules for the Menuets. After the second Gavotte is played, the performer should play in the De Capo style by returning to the first gavotte and playing through without repeats before entering the final Gigue.

Gigue

We have finally reached the end of our musical discovery as we discuss the Gigue of the fifth suite. Constanza writes, "While in compound meter (3/8 in this case) and full of snappy dotted rhythms, this gigue is not about drive and lively, energetic dancing. As with other movements in this suite, the significance of the key of C minor cannot be underestimated, and the effect of the mood and tone of that key affects this gigue by pushing it in the direction of resignation and acceptance of fate, not celebration." This is quite unlike the D minor gigue that was more reminiscent of a social gathering. Like Constanza said, the key of C minor has much to do with the feeling and meaning behind the music.

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