

YO-YO MA • SIX EVOLUTIONS



BACH CELLO SUITES

Bach's cello suites have been my constant musical companions. For almost six decades, they have given me sustenance, comfort, and joy during times of stress, celebration, and loss. What power does this music possess that even today, after three hundred years, it continues to help us navigate through troubled times? What did Pablo Casals find in this music that made him devote his life to bringing it to the world? And why am I recording it for a third time?

Three memories from early life return whenever I play or hear the suites. My father taught me the first suite, measure by measure, when I was four years old, and I remember as a child the aesthetic pleasure of finding just the right space and timing between the gentle landing of the last note of the Sarabande and the slight increase of energy in the Menuet's initial lilt. The second memory is from my father, a violinist who spent World War II in both China and France. He used to tell me about the utter loneliness he felt in occupied Paris during the blackout, and how he would spend his days memorizing Bach sonatas and partitas,

then play them to himself at night. The final memory is of discovering the words of my musical hero. I was a teenager when I first read the memoirs of Pablo Casals and found a philosophy for music and life that resonated then as it does now, even more strongly: I am a human being first, a musician second, and a cellist third.

Over the years, I came to believe that, in creating these works, Bach played the part of a musician-scientist, expressing precise observations about nature and human nature. He did so in the first three suites by experimenting with all that the cello can do as a solo instrument. In the final three, he demanded even more of the cello, and of himself, asking a single-line instrument to speak in multiple voices. His compositional invention is at once explicit and implicit, requiring the listener's unconscious ear to fill in what the cello can only suggest, achieving a sonic and architectural richness that ultimately transcends the instrument itself.

This is my third recording of these works. The first time I recorded the suites I was in my late twenties; it was a time

of new purpose in my life: thanks to the extraordinary support and devotion of my wife, Jill, I had successfully undergone major spinal surgery, and we were looking forward to starting a family. Sheldon Gold, the visionary founder of ICM Artists and my manager at the time, challenged me to perform and record the suites. I felt it was a somewhat brazen idea: who was I to do what many older artists waited decades to accomplish? But I believed then, as I still do, that a recording is a snapshot of a moment, and it was music that I had been living with since I was a child. The recording captured my deep gratitude for a new lease on life.

I was entering my forties when I recorded the suites a second time. For years, I had been receiving letters from children and adults writing to say how this music inspired them. I wanted to share the suites' creative force with more people, so I decided to perform an experiment. What if I asked a number of deeply imaginative artists - choreographers, filmmakers, and a garden designer - to immerse themselves, each in a different suite? What would emerge from their art forms? The result was *Inspired by Bach*, six films documenting this process of immersion and creation.

So, why a third time?

Now that I'm in my sixties, I realize that my sense of time has changed, both in life and in music, at once expanded and compressed. I am conscious of the fact that my grandson Teddy - my daughter Emily's firstborn - will be 83 in the year 2100, and that, as I write this, we are just months away from the 100th anniversary of the end of

World War I, the Great War that was meant to end all wars.

My son, Nicholas, recently reminded me that when Fred Rogers, of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was asked where he turned in times of crisis, he repeated his mother's advice to "look for the helpers." Casals, my father and I, and countless others found a helper in Bach. Music, like all of culture, helps us to understand our environment, each other, and ourselves. Culture helps us to imagine a better future. Culture helps turn "them" into "us." And these things have never been more important.

While this will be my last recording of the suites, it is also the first step in a new journey with this music, to share it with people seeking equilibrium and solace at a moment of unprecedented change. Over the next few years, I hope to play all six suites in one sitting many times, and to do so in both familiar and unlikely locations on six continents. I share this music, which has helped shape the evolution of my life, with the hope that it might spark a conversation about how culture can be a source of the solutions we need. It is one more experiment, this time a search for answers to the question: What can we do together that we cannot do alone?

I invite you to join me on this adventure, to listen and be inspired by the helpers in your own life.

YO-YO MA
2018



Why do Bach's iconic cello suites, written three centuries ago, remain so enduring today? That Bach's brilliance is timeless, while true, seems to me a bit facile, and not specific enough. These pieces present enigmatic contradictions, posing special challenges for a performer and requiring unusual attention and immersion for a listener. The core of Bach's musical world, as would be expected in the cultural and social climate of his time and place, was his deep religious devotion and service to the church; and yet, these works, among other equally secular masterpieces that he composed during an especially fruitful period in Köthen between 1717 and 1723, achieve a profound intimacy exceptional even for his genius. There is no dramatic ecclesiastical narrative in these stylized dances - this is Bach at his most abstract, which might account for why the music seems to demand such focus from the listener. Bach's mastery of complex

counterpoint, on virtuosic display in so much of his music, from large-scale choruses to his solo organ works, does not seem at first hearing to be at the heart of these suites. And there is no question that there is the appearance of less polyphony in the cello suites than in his solo sonatas and partitas for violin, which date from the same period. In the cello suites, there is less that is explicit, more that is internalized. Nevertheless, the counterpoint in this music, the backbone of everything that Bach wrote, is in no way less sophisticated or developed.

Therein lies, perhaps, one of the secrets of these works' power, and why it strikes me as essential music for us in the 21st century. Much of the counterpoint is implied, left for the performer to make those suggested connections clear and for the listener to fill in the longer line. There is a very practical reason for this, a challenge that Bach must have embraced intentionally when he chose to write such soloistic and difficult music for the cello, which had been until then used only as an accompanying instrument to support a melody or reinforce a realized figured bass. It is difficult enough to produce three or four tones simultaneously on a violin. On a cello's longer strings, the distance between the notes requires a greater stretch of the hand to move between them, and the gaps between the strings require more time to make those connections. Furthermore, Bach left little by way of direction for interpreting the phrasing and dynamics, or even the speed or pulse of the music. Outside of the dance titles, there are no indications even of tempo.

The contrapuntal direction, the harmonic motion, and the form in the purely melodic movements like the Gigue in the E-flat Major Suite, or the Sarabande in the C Minor Suite, are all clear, but not fully spelled out. The implied connections, hidden polyphony, and artless expression require exceptional creativity from the performer and engagement from the listener, establishing an unusual relationship between cellist and audience.

Transcending even Bach's profound devoutness, these works are statements of faith pared down to their purest essence. When Yo-Yo Ma asked me to write these few sentences to accompany his third recording of the Bach suites, it gave me the opportunity to reconsider both the music and his approach to it. It is sometimes difficult to be objective about a friend with whom one has been close since earliest childhood, as is the case with Yo-Yo and me. It has always been clear to me that his generosity of spirit as a musician has been fueled by the two impulses essential to understanding these works: boundless curiosity, and a fervent need to communicate. Yo-Yo could play every note of the suites from memory even before he and I met, 55 years ago. Since then, he has continually searched for the music that happens between the notes, and the mysterious and private nature of these works now fuels his fertile creativity with even deeper breath, with even more disciplined freedom and unhurried insight than in his first two recordings of the works from decades ago, wonderful though they remain. The stylized dances that animate the

pulse of these movements were not meant to accompany actual dancing - and similarly, and to a large degree, they seem not really meant for public performance. Even at their most joyous, the music seems ill-suited to extroverted or public display; and at their most meditative, the suspension of breath and time is so intimate that listening to them can feel akin to eavesdropping. And still - their communicative power and touching humanity can bring thousands of silent and rapt listeners together at the Hollywood Bowl or London's Royal Albert Hall into a mesmerized communion with Bach. This is private music; but, amidst the noise of our time, I am convinced that the private conversation has never been more urgent and vital.

MICHAEL STERN

Michael Stern is music director of the Kansas City Symphony and Yo-Yo Ma's life-long friend and colleague.



SIX EVOLUTIONS

1.
Nature at
play

2.
Journey to
light

3.
Celebration

4.
Building

5.
Struggle for
hope

6.
Epiphany

SIX EVOLUTIONS

Here is only a partial list of the helpers who have made my life in music possible:

The kindness and refinement of my first cello teacher in Paris, Madame Michelle Lepinte, set me on my path. Thank you, Yeou-Cheng. My eighth-grade English teacher, Anne Dore Davids, was the first adult who started me thinking. My music professors in college, Leon Kirchner, Luise Vosgerchian, Ivan Tcherepnin, and Lowell Lindgren, challenged me to think differently. Leonard Rose's belief in me gave me the possibility of confidence. Lynn Chang and Richard Kogan challenged me as friends and musical colleagues. Later, David Zinman and Isaac Stern led the way through principled guidance and generosity, along with loyal colleagues Kathryn Stott and Emanuel Ax. Thank you, David Perlman. Mentors in thinking Howard Gardner and Antonio Damasio gave me context on navigating life, and Henriette and Arnaud de Vitry on living. Mr. Rogers became a life-long role model; Mary Pat Buerkle and Catherine Gevers, fellow travelers; George Akkeh, Lou Hamel, and Mark Wolf, thought partners; my colleagues at Silkroad, friends for life. Thank you, Sheryl Handler. Along the way, the Marlboro Music Festival, Tanglewood, and Mark Morris Dance Group helped form my love of life, art, and music. Thank you, Sara Stackhouse and Cristin Canterbury Bagnall. Thank you to my Sound Postings cohorts for sharing their combined wisdom, intelligence, and experience, and for being musketeers. Thank you, Jack Hornor, for living a life with honor and nobility.

Most of all: the devotion of my wife, Jill, who gave me a second lease on life and who gifted me Benoît Rolland's magic bow, with which these suites were recorded; the insightful analysis of Nicholas; and the natural intuition of Emily, helped me through thick and thin. Theirs are the greatest helping hands of all.

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This album would not have been possible without the assistance of Michael Gorfaine, Jay Cooper, and the staff of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750) • SIX SUITES FOR UNACCOMPANIED CELLO

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°1 IN G MAJOR,
BWV 1007**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
MENUETS I & II
GIGUE

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°2 IN D MINOR,
BWV 1008**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
MENUETS I & II
GIGUE

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°3 IN C MAJOR,
BWV 1009**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
BOURRÉES I & II
GIGUE

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°4 IN E-FLAT MAJOR,
BWV 1010**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
BOURRÉES I & II
GIGUE

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°5 IN C MINOR,
BWV 1011**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
GAVOTTES I & II
GIGUE

**UNACCOMPANIED
CELLO SUITE N°6 IN D MAJOR,
BWV 1012**

PRÉLUDE
ALLEMANDE
COURANTE
SARABANDE
GAVOTTES I & II
GIGUE

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Jonathan Bays Executive Producer • **Jason Bell** Photographer
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For more about the Bach suites project, visit yo-yoma.com.

