



Snap, Crackle, Bach

By Brian Lauritzen

As far as I know, cellist Alisa Weilerstein is not and has never been a spokesperson for Kellogg's Rice Krispies. But she would make a good one. After all, her first "cello" was made out of a Rice Krispies box that her grandmother created for her as a toy to help distract the two-and-a-half year old Alisa while she was recovering from chicken pox. (The endpin was a toothbrush and the bow was a chopstick.)

These days, Weilerstein plays a cello built in 1790 by the British luthier William Forster. It's an instrument that Weilerstein really makes sing. In her appearance here at The Wallis it's Weilerstein, her cello, the music of J.S. Bach, and nothing else. That gives us the opportunity to hear Weilerstein's artistry in its purest form.

The six suites for unaccompanied cello, by J.S. Bach, have been called the Everest of the cello repertoire. They have been called an icon of classical music. The British musicologist and critic Wilfrid Mellers described them as, "Monophonic music wherein a man has created a dance of God." Cellists adore them, revere them, and spend their entire careers contemplating them. (Yo-Yo Ma just made his third recording of the six suites.)

For as important as they are in the canon of classical music, we don't really know that much about them. No original manuscript of the suites exists. It's unclear exactly when they were written, though it's believed they were composed between 1717 and 1723. The order of composition is uncertain. The closest thing we have to a definitive score is a hand-written copy of the original made by Anna Magdalena Bach (Johann's second wife), but even that is still a secondary source. This has spawned numerous different editions all with different placements of slurs, articulation, bowings, and dynamic markings. Cellists' interpretations, therefore, vary greatly. Discussions about best performance practices can get quite heated.

Each of the six suites are structured in the same way: a prelude, followed by five dance movements. Bach's preludes are generally free-flowing movements which build to a virtuosic climax near the end. The format is similar, but the music is anything but. The famous G-major prelude, with its oscillating string-crossing motives, sets the stage for the cycle. Nowhere is the musical contrast more evident than between the haunting d-minor prelude and the flashy, extroverted D-major prelude. Following the preludes in each of the suites is an allemande, a German dance where couples would form a line, link arms, and walk the length of the room taking three steps and then balancing on one foot. (A livelier version of this dance used three quick steps, followed by a hop.) In addition to the halting aspects of this dance, which you can hear clearly in the E-flat major allemande, notice how each of the allemandes begins with one or more pickup notes prior to the downbeat. Often paired with the allemande, the courante picks up the tempo a bit, which makes sense given the word courante literally means, "running." The dance steps were a combination of running and jumping, as you can hear especially prominently in the d-minor courante.

Back in the day (16th century Spain), the sarabande was a slow sexy dance that was banned in Spain in 1583. In his *Treatise Against Public Amusements* (1609), the Jesuit priest Juan de Mariana said the sarabande was, "a dance and song so loose in its words and so ugly in its motions that it is enough to excite bad emotions in even very decent people." Bach's sarabandes are more sublime than sensual, though there is certainly a sultry yearning quality to them, particularly in the d-minor and C-major sarabandes. What follows are the only divergences among the dances in the suites. Arranged in pairs, we hear Minuets, Bourées, and Gavottes. In each case, we begin in the home key of the suite and in four of the

six suites we stay there. But in the case of the G-major minuets and C-major bourées, the second dance modulates to a minor key.

Each suite ends with a gigue, a lively folk dance that was imported to France from Ireland (jig). Theatre performances in France would often end with a gigue, so it makes sense that Bach would also do so here. This is the flashiest music of the suites. Still, the typical lilting triple-meter rhythms of the gigue never get lost among the pizzazz.

Finally, just a word about the c-minor and D-major suites, which are quite different from the first four. For the c-minor suite, Bach asks the cellist to tune the A string (the highest string on the instrument) down a whole step to a G. This causes the instrument to resonate in a very unique and beautiful way. It is unclear exactly what instrument the c-minor suite was originally written for. Conventional theories are that it was written for a five-string cello (with the extra string an E above the A string). Other theories include that this suite was written for the violoncello da spalla, literally "shoulder cello" which was held like a guitar (with a shoulder strap) but still bowed. In any case, the D-major suite includes a lot of music in a higher register, which lends credence to the theory that it wasn't written for a standard four-string cello and also makes this suite the most demanding by far.

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