

Bach's Cellos Suites on the Horn

by Daniel Katzen

Since the mid-20th century, when Wendell Hoss transcribed the legendary Suites for Cello Solo by J. S. Bach for horn, we horn players have been drawn to the allure of making them “our own.” Let’s face it – we missed a large collection of the great composer’s talents by not having valves. Since the horn was not reliably chromatic until Wagner, hornists could not undertake the challenges of Bach’s cello suites (not the least of which would have been dealing with the ire of every cellist who found out about our poaching!).

Hoss did us all a great favor by introducing us to a version of the Suites that made some sense to performers on the modern horn. He showed us his ideas of how to play double-stops (use grace notes), long-winded phrases for short-winded hornists, and translating tricky passages into more-manageable-sized chunks, and with rewritten sections which would otherwise be left unplayable. However, he took the notes he saw and kept them as printed (but up an octave) which makes them a perfect fourth too high, thus taking them out of the true cello range and transposing their keys from Bach’s original intentions. This led to the loss of two important features of playing the Suites on the horn: the opportunity to work in depth on our low register flexibility and response, and coming to musical terms with the ingenious counterpoint and harmonic versus melodic lines of large numbers of notes.

Michael Höltzel, my freshman-year horn teacher at Indiana University, introduced me to Hoss’s transcriptions. He was passionate about the musical pleasures inherent in playing this music. I, too, took much pleasure in playing these works and dabbled in them for a few years. When I realized, through working with Dale Clevenger, that my embouchure did not have the ability to play much below the treble clef, Bach’s Suites became a great vehicle (along with Kopprasch and Singer) for opening up my low register and solidifying my embouchure change. I credit my development as a second horn in large part to my relationship with the Bach Suites.

The biggest challenge in working on them is that the horn is a melodic, one-note-at-a-time instrument. The chords Bach chose, for emphasis or added colors, are among the most interesting facets of these pieces, and we do a great disservice to them if we play with only a melodic version. Much can be learned from grappling with where to place breaths, and which double- and triple-stop notes to play, by analyzing the lines and harmonies implied in the original key’s cello parts. I often change long-held opinions – when I return to one of the suites and realize that decisions I made years earlier now look like just a good starting point for understanding Bach’s intentions (and those of countless great cellists who have interpreted them in masterful ways).

The work involved in decoding these musical ambiguities led me to memorizing the six Suites for performances and recordings at the New England Conservatory and at performances on college campuses across the country. I never cease to be awed by their difficulty and mystery, and the out-of-body experience of being part of the messenger of the music.

I heartily recommend to my students to take a good original-key cello part, as well as the Hoss horn-friendly edition, and play through single movements that seem to be accessible. Poring over the myriad of notes and the plethora of interpretation options leads one to delve deeper into the music, in an architectural fashion, searching for structural directions and their obvious conclusions. Starting with the *Allemande* (after the *Prelude*) gives one a more coherent format that makes the landscape somewhat more obvious.

It’s best to get a cello edition that has few articulation or dynamic markings so you can come to your own musical conclusions. Be sure that the Fifth Suite is notated in “normal” tuning, rather than scordatura notation, which has the cello’s top a string tuned down to *g*’ for a deeper tone. Be sure that the top note of the first chord in the second measure of the Fifth Suite’s *Prelude* movement is notated as an *a*’, not a *b*’. That signifies that you are looking at a “normal-notation” edition. Schirmer and International do not have the normal notation; Peters and Henle Verlag do have the correct pitch notation.

Always play with a pencil on your stand, and play in both the horn and the concert keys until you have a good sense of how the tunes come and go. Write in your choices of fingerings, breaths, note choices, articulations, and dynamics as a sort of personal history of what you think you’ve decided (you’ll more than likely change them after awhile and it’s instructive to see what you formerly thought). The suites have been recorded by a number of cellists and I suggest you listen to as many as possible (Yo-Yo Ma, Lynn Harrell, and Mischa Maisky are some of my favorites) – try to emulate their musicality rather than copying it.

Marilyn Bone Kloss wrote an article in the November 1994 issue of *The Horn Call* compiling observations and opinions of a variety of horn players who had been playing the Suites for many years. This followed a presentation I made to a gathering earlier that year of readers of Marilyn’s newsletter *Cornucopia*. During that performance, master class, and discussion, many interesting issues arose about how to perform and approach the Bach Suites.

Many informative articles about the Suites can be found on the internet. I would suggest beginning with the *Wikipedia* article for general information and then, if you want to learn more, the Internet Cello Society (cello.org/newsletter/articles/angst.htm) includes an article “Interpretational Angst and the Bach Cello Suites” by Tim Janof. BSO bass trombonist Douglas Yeo’s website (yeodoug.com/resources/faq/faq_text/bachsuites.html) discusses the Suites. Finally, the fascinating book, *The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece* (Grove Press, 2009) by Eric Sibling, endeavors to tie together the personal, musical, historical, and philosophical ramifications of the Suites in Pablo Casals’s (and J.S. Bach’s!) life.

On page 19 of this issue is information on the first CD of two of the Suites in my own transcriptions, which are now available (dkmusic.biz or dkatzen@email.arizona.edu). Wiley



Ross masterfully engineered the recording at the University of Arizona Recording Studio. The second CD should be out by Spring 2013 and the third by the end of the year.

I wish for all who accept the challenge of the Bach Suites on the horn, musical enlightenment instead of bravado, beauty instead of strength, and joy instead of arduousness. Happy trails!

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Strauss Concerto notes continued from page 67:

²⁵Source: Program of the Extra-Concert, Meiningen Museums, Music History Department.

²⁶Oscar Franz (1843-1886) was in 1864/65 a candidate for the Royal Orchestra in Dresden. Next, until 1867 he was a Court Musician with the Court Opera in Stuttgart. From June 1, 1867 until his death in 1886 he was a Chamber Musician of the Royal Music Orchestra in Dresden. Strauss's Serenade Op. 7 was already premiered in 1882 by wind players from this orchestra and was performed again in 1883.

²⁷Provided with a title page are the score, the piano reduction, solo part and timpani part.

²⁸Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss, Youth and Early Apprentice Years*, Atlantis Zürich / Freiburg in Breisgau, 1976, p. 93: "The new edition can only have been intended for printing. Probably it was done on the advice of the composer's father."

²⁹Oscar Franz died 8 ½ months after this performance.

³⁰In the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*, Franz Strauss performed the first horn part!

³¹See Footnote 16.

³²Strauss also wrote reduced scores or piano sketches.

³³See "Comments on the autograph" with NB 2.

³⁴Foreword to the new edition, p. 6, line 4.

³⁵Long-term research project *Critical Edition of the Works of Richard Strauss* at the Institute for Musicology of the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich. The sponsor of the project is the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.



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