

Introducing the Bach Suites

By Cornelia Watkins

My first in-depth experience with the Bach Suites happened in college under the expert guidance of David Wells. David was a protégé of Diran Alexanian, a disciplined and analytical master of the cello and a scholar of the Suites. Alexanian's cerebral interpretation of each resulted in two books: a massive, intricately detailed treatise on cello technique, and a bizarre-looking version of the Suites. While David only nudged his students toward the treatise, he insisted that we study the Suites directly from Alexanian's edition. Surely he saw our eyes crossing as we struggled to interpret the extra-terrestrial notation, but fortunately the combination of David's intelligent teaching and very human interpretation made the approach both comprehensible and compelling.

While that was my college experience, I now teach mostly pre-college students who are often far more advanced than I was at their age. By the time my students are in middle school, they have heard the Prelude to the first Suite and they want to play *that* piece. They don't know why, they just do, and at least technically speaking, most are ready. So when I finally agree to let them, it is indeed an exciting occasion, and a genuine rite of passage for young cellists.

I am intrigued by this "coming of age" moment and have worked to find ways for adolescents to understand the Suites from the inside out, rather than simply offering them a superficial pass through the notes. If we teachers are willing to work slowly and deliberately through the musical concepts that comprise these pieces, we will have laid a foundation for our students to understand and interpret Bach as they mature.

My goal is to create an in-depth yet understandable introduction to the suites for students who have little or no experience with music theory. Because the notes are technically accessible, there actually is time to teach theory basics while digging deeply into the music itself. Of course technical issues like string crossings and intonation need to be addressed, and perhaps a few dynamics could be dictated—but those are all tools, and not the heart and soul of the music. In other words, this is not a paint-by-numbers approach to the music, but the start of an inside-out investigation of these brilliantly crafted compositions.

A few notes before we begin:

- While many of us were taught to play the Suites in a more Romantic style (with legato articulations and a denser tone), I encourage my own students towards a lighter, freer technique, bowings that honor the manuscripts, and tonal qualities naturally borne from playing Baroque instruments and bows.
- Editions with minimal edits (or none at all) allow more mental space for exploration and more physical space for analysis and pencil marks.

- Bowings, specific articulations, and tempi are deliberately not included in this presentation. While these factors are hardly unimportant, teachers and newly engaged students can make such decisions after exploring the movements slowly and thoroughly.
- Finally, one “Rule of Thumb” regarding final tempi choices: they should not too fast to accommodate expressive nuances, just as expressive choices should not be so prevalent as to destroy the vital sense of pulse—we must always be in search of a balance between these elements.

Theory Basics

If your students don't know about harmonies and harmonic progressions, they'll need a simple primer. Students can write a one-octave G scale, labeling each step with a Roman numeral. Show you student how to write a triad based on each step of the scale. Introduce the terms Tonic, Dominant, and Subdominant—you can add to this later as you work. Have the student play these triads on the piano (or in a pinch, play them on your cellos—your student can play the root, and you can fill in the third and fifth). Listen to the major, minor, dominant seventh, and diminished qualities, and discuss why they sound this way. Adjust the Roman numerals from upper case to lower case when appropriate. Create a simple inversion worksheet so students can practice “triad restacking” of inverted chords and open spellings. Students don't have to understand everything perfectly the first time, but you will want to keep these worksheets with their music for future reference.

Prelude

Harmonies: The following are ways to frame and interpret Bach's harmonic progressions:

- **I** (Tonic) = home; most relaxed or resolved
- **V⁷** (Dominant seventh) = yearns for resolution
- **vii^{o7}** (Diminished seventh) = functions much like a dominant seventh, but the minor thirds and resulting extra leading tone makes this chord more intense and mysterious
- **IV** (subdominant) (or substituted **ii**) = one step farther away from resolution than the dominant, as it usually must move through **V⁷** to resolve to tonic.
- **vi** = often a surprise substitute for tonic; used to extend phrase in an unexpected way (try annotating music with “**vi** !”)

Look at the first five bars of the Prelude to see these functions in action:



When interpreting harmonic progressions dynamically, changing an intensity level at the moment of a chord change is less effective than leading towards that harmony change. Like a dynamic story-teller who can lead listeners to anticipate what is to come with inflection and nuanced timing, a musician can guide his audience toward a harmonic change with small crescendos and diminuendos, and even subtle variations in timing.

Pedal (or pedal point) = A note that is sustained for an extended time (usually several measures) while other notes change around it. Bach played the organ, and on that instrument he literally put his foot on one pedal and played other notes on the manuals. He recreated this effect for the cello by repeating one note again and again. The example above is an example of **pedal point**, used in this instance to introduce and reinforce the tonality of G.

Explore on your own: Find other sections of the Prelude where Bach uses **pedal point**.

Voices and Voice leading = Notes in a phrase which have distinctly different functions, and often move in separate directions. Two or three voices can often be identified in the Suite: melody, bass line, and sometimes a middle voice. These are traced more easily in chordal movements like the Sarabande, but can be found almost everywhere you look, including the first five bars of the Prelude. We often get so caught up tuning the opening chords or making even string crossings that Bach's masterful voice leading goes unnoticed.

Explore on your own: To start hearing voices (!), start by playing the most obvious bass line (the pedal G). Next play the "melody" (BAB, BAB, CBC, CBC, etc). Now, play the middle voice that lies on the D string...aha! And that scale doesn't stop at the G—it moves back down to the F# at the end of the 4th measure. But does it actually end there? In the fifth bar we have the E, and if you keep looking to the end of the bar, the D C# B leads us on towards a new bass note of the C#.

Dissonance: Bach uses **dissonant intervals** (tritones, major sevenths, and major or minor 2nds or 9ths) to heighten harmonic tension. For instance, look at the intervals in m. 3 (and later in m. 18)—both a major seventh and a tritone are used to ensure maximum tension and inevitable resolution. Play each interval as a double-stop (the pedal G with the F#, then the F# with the C) and listen deeply not only to the

dissonance, but how the F# reaches toward a resolution on the G, and how the C leans back toward the B.

Explore on your own: How many more dissonant intervals can you find in the Prelude? Look at the music and circle what you see, then play through the movement to hear how those and other dissonances intensify the music and yearn for resolution.

Leading tone = The seventh step of a scale that “leads” the music and our ears toward resolution.

Just as the F# is the **leading tone** in the key of G, **accidentals** almost always serve to create new **leading tones** (indicating **secondary dominant** or **diminished** chords) which shift the tonality towards a new, albeit temporary, resolution. These can be musically expressed with the same tension-release approach used in the first phrase. Even if younger students are not ready to analyze more complicated chords, they can interpret **leading tones** by intensifying the altered pitch and feeling the pull towards its upwards or downwards resolution, which usually occurs in the next bar, as in the next example.



- Now circle every low (open string) G in the Prelude that lands on a beat (i.e., on the pulse, not after it). How many are there before the fermata? How many are there after the fermata?
- Why do you think there are so many before the fermata, but none after that until the final measure? Do you think Bach deliberately saved the G to the last chord? Look at the sequence that begins in m. 29. Had the sequence come to its logical conclusion in m. 31, what note would the sequence resolved on, and on what beat?



Here are some basic guidelines for analyzing this type of writing; in the example that follows the first phrase is annotated accordingly:

- Each scale and arpeggio is a distinct musical gesture, even when two gestures share a common tone.
- With the exception of a “do-ti-do” ending, any directional change indicates a new gesture.
- Any scale or arpeggio that begins with a skip is considered separate from the previous scale or arpeggio.
- The lowest note (or notes) of any gesture will likely be significant to the harmonic progression.

Once the individual gestures are evident, use them to help determine harmonic progression between the previously identified cadences and tonal centers.



Explore on your own: In the first half of the Allemande, circle the lowest note you can find in each measure, even if you don't consider them particularly low notes. Now play only those notes. (Hint: Try playing those notes in the same octave.) Can you find evidence of a well-crafted bass line?

Voicing: In the Allemande, the bass **voice** is sometimes enveloped by a melodic line, sometimes more obvious when separated by skips. To help make these harmonically important notes audible in performance, try playing them more rounded and separated, as opposed to using more elongated strokes for the melodic lines.

Pick-up note (anacrusis) = A note (or notes) that begin a phrase before a strong beat. When a movement begins with a pick-up note, subsequent phrases are also likely to begin with a pick-up note. In fact, many of the smaller musical gestures of a phrase are organized with the same pattern, even if these are less obvious than the first.

Explore on your own: Find the phrases and smaller gestures in both the Allemande excerpts that begin with a single sixteenth note pickup, and mark them with an arrow.

Rhythmic flow: Subdivided notes, such as sixteenths, move toward longer notes (such as quarters or eighths) to create a natural sense of flow.

Melodic direction is the ascent or descent of a melodic line used to guide phrasing. Musical gestures sharing a common tone are made meaningful in performance when the timing and dynamic contour are nuanced accordingly. Experiment with these scenarios as a starting point:

- The note at the top of an ascending line that is also common with the beginning of a descending one can be compared to the crest of a hill. On a bicycle you exert some effort to reach the crest, but regain momentum and direction going down the other side.
- Scales or arpeggios that descend to a low note and rise again often share a common tone as well. Imagine the experience of swinging, and how the centripetal force at the lowest point of the arc increases the feeling of weight just as the swing pulls upward again.



Separate musical gestures are phrases or smaller sections of music that are *not* directly linked to another. The most obvious of these occur at half or full cadences, where rhythm or harmonic factors make clear which notes complete the old phrase and which begin the new. However, many more subtle versions of separate gestures do occur mid-phrase, when an interval skip starts a new group of notes—these require a lighter interpretive touch.

Explore on your own: In the final excerpt below, explore how you want to complete the A minor cadence before starting the next phrase, and then compare that to the phrasing nuance needed in the sequence that follows. Try reading this sentence aloud, considering the momentary pause you insert at the previous comma, and then apply that inflection to each new gesture of the sequence.



and Onward...

After delving into the first two movements, students now have gained some foundational understanding of Bach's music. In fact, students who catch the "analysis bug" usually memorize the Prelude and Allemande with relative ease, and, especially considering their youth and inexperience, perform them with remarkable nuance. Of course, don't stop here: venture on, encouraging your students to apply their newfound knowledge to explore the remaining four movements. As you move ahead, though, don't forget to look back. When your student identifies a pedal point in the Courante, discovers great voice leading in the Sarabande, recognizes sequences in the Minuets and anacruses in the Gigue, refer to earlier movements to highlight and reinforce your student's understanding, and perhaps make one of numerous connections yet to be discovered.

If this approach is something you want to offer students, be sure to make it your own first. Take yourself through this extended lesson, adjusting terminology, adding or subtracting concepts, and rearranging the order as you see fit. Consider creating your own "**Explore**" checklist and send students on a "treasure hunt" with each new movement. Most importantly, don't feel the need to cram all of this into a few lessons—one or two concepts at a time is usually plenty, giving students the intervening week to experiment with them before the next lesson.

And if in doubt, consider it this way: just as a young actor studies Shakespeare's unique vocabulary and sentence structure to perform *Romeo and Juliet* for the first time, a novice cellist who learns the language of Bach will grow in musical independence and maturity with the first Suite. Perhaps there are some middle school cellists for whom this more substantial approach is not appropriate; but in my experience, students are stimulated by the challenge of exploration, enthusiastic about their newfound discoveries, and more than satisfied with this first leg of their life-long journey with the Suites.