

**University of Pécs Faculty of Arts Doctoral School**

## **Theses**

**The appearance of the Suite as a genre in Bach's life work,  
the presentation of the Six Solo Suites for a violoncello  
(BWV 1007-1012)**

**The edited synopsis of a DLA dissertation by  
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## 1. Introduction and Bach's life in Köthen

“Nicht Bach, Meer sollte er heissen!” - “He should have been named the Sea instead of a Stream!” - summarized succinctly Ludwig van Beethoven the influence of Bach's art for posterity.<sup>1</sup> The aim of my thesis is – in the light of the works of Pablo Casals and Albert Schweitzer – to present an academic research on Bach's suites in general while focusing on the detailed analysis of the six cello suites in particular. This present paper provides an edited synopsis of my research thesis.

Dénes Bartha, in the introduction of his book on Bach, points out that Bach was a perfect realist not only in his lifestyle but also in his music.<sup>2</sup> He was not a romantic dreamer like many of his followers. Bach always worked as an employee, keeping a family tradition and lived in line with the customs of his contemporaries. He composed nearly all of his works for commission and according to the wishes and expectations of his employers. When he worked for the church as an organist in Arnstadt or as musical director of Thomas church in Leipzig, he composed large volumes of organ pieces and music featuring religious themes, but during his years in the court of Köthen, he composed mostly secular and especially instrumental pieces. I propose to examine the suites Bach composed in his Köthen period, the four orchestral suites (BWV 1066-1069), the English and French suites for keyboard (BWV 806-811; BWV 812-817), three partitas and three solo sonatas for violin (BWV 1001-1006), and the main topic of my thesis, the six solo suites for violoncello (BWV 1007-1012). After the introduction of Bach's years in Köthen, in the subsequent chapters I discuss the development of the suite as a genre, and give a general description of the suites mentioned above from a critical-analytical perspective. I believe that it is only possible to draw a realistic conclusion about the rich diversity of this genre if we examine the full cycle of these works. I then turn to the central part of my study, the detailed dissection of the movements of the cello suites, the analysis of their harmonic structure and musical forms. In the absence of an original autographic manuscript by the composer I examine the four surviving copies of source material and also compare some of the more important printed editions. In the final part of my thesis I review a few most relevant and recent international research publications. The

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<sup>1</sup> In the introduction of his book on J. S. Bach Dénes Bartha quotes extensively from famous people like Goethe, Beethoven, A Schweizer admiring the work of Bach. Dénes Bartha *J. S. Bach Gondolat* Budapest 1960 p. 5 (in following footnotes: *Bartha*)

<sup>2</sup> *Bartha* p. 7

richness and diversity of this field is well illustrated by Austrian musicologist and Bach scholar Walter Kolneder when in 1982 he wrote: “A review of the books and studies on Bach is barely possible even for professionals, as nearly a hundred titles are added to the literature each year.”<sup>3</sup>

I do not aim to follow the locations of Bach’s activities in my study, however, considering the fact that all the pieces I chose to be the topic of my dissertation were composed in one short period, it is crucial to take a closer look at those years (between 1717 and 1723) he spent in Köhthen. Biographers tend to agree that these six years were the happiest and most joyful period in Bach’s life.<sup>4</sup> According to a letter Bach wrote in 1730 in Leipzig to his long-time friend Erdmann: “There I was serving an eminent duke who not only loved music but was also quite knowledgeable about it, and I was hoping that I can remain in his court all my life.”<sup>5</sup> The Lutheran Bach hardly composed any religious music in the Calvinist court of Köhthen. He did not have many obligations and had the opportunity to spend all of his time with composing music as he pleased. He gave his attention to developing the court orchestra, which had 18 members, and with the support of the Duke Lipot, the 32 years old Bach was more inspired than ever. Two thirds of his instrumental music (not including his organ works) and orchestral pieces were composed in these years.

## **2. The general characteristics of the genre of suite**

The suite was the most popular and frequently used genre of music of the baroque period and practically it became the entertainer genre of baroque. The word itself is originating from French language and means a ‘series’ of something. Initially suites were collections of ballet music used by French and Italian opera choreographers, which shows that “they are suitable

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Kolneder *Bach lexikon*. Gondolat Kiadó Budapest 1988 p. 11

<sup>4</sup> Bartha p. 129

Imre Földes: Bach I. Brandenburg Concerto *A hét zeneműve*, Zeneműkiadó Budapest 1976/1 p. 42

Antal Boronkay: Bach VI. Barnademburg Concerto *A hét zeneműve*, Zeneműkiadó Bp. 1973/1 p. 133

<sup>5</sup> Bartha p. 132

for pleasure, entertainment and fun”.<sup>6</sup> Antal Boroknay highlighted in one of his studies published in the Hungarian magazine *A hét zeneműve* (Music of the Week) that “all the nations, that had an advanced level of music, helped the birth of the genre of suites”.<sup>7</sup> The genres of *Pavane*, the *Galiarde* and *Pastamezzo* and the dance-pairs of *Slatarello* were formed in Italy. The closing dance movement called *Gigue* originates from England (the original English name was *Jig*) while the *Sarabande* comes from Spain and the *Courante* with most of other inserted alternating movements are from France. The birth of the important opening movement of the *Overture* introducing the arrival of the king is related to the composer of Louis XIV, Jean Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) from Florence. The opening dance, the *Allemande* and the concept of the unified musical forms, the four basic dances of suites, are originated from Germany. These four basic dances *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue* are mostly permanent, and represent a kind of internationality regarding their origin, even though their names are French. By the beginning of 1700s these core dances were not actually danced at all, but existed only as instrumental music. Due to this fact, their musical material and rhythm became more complex in contrast with some of the alternating dance movements still remaining more suitable for dancing. My full thesis follows with the presentation of the special characteristics of the genre of the suites, discussing the most typical features of the dance movements in the four orchestral suites, and the English and French suites. I make a comparative study of the tonality and movement structure of the suites. In the present synopsis, due its limited volume, I feature only one of these comparative tables of the four orchestral suites as an example.

<b>C-Major Suite BWV 1066</b>	<b>B-minor Suite BWV 1067</b>	<b>D-Major Suite BWV 1068</b>	<b>D-Major Suite BWV 1069</b>
Overture	Overture	Overture	Overture
Courante	Rondeau	Air	Bourrée I-II
Gavotte I-II	Sarabande	Gavotte I-II	Gavotte
Forlane	Bourrée I-II	Bourrée	Menuet I-II
Menuet I-II	Polonaise-Double	Gigue	Rejouissance
Bourrée I-II	Menuet		
Passepied I-II	Badinerie		

Table 1: The keys and movement structure of the Orchestral Suites

<sup>6</sup> Nikolaus Harnoncourt: *A beszédszerű zene* Editio Musica Budapest 1988 pp. 198-206

Harnoncourt’s remark is with reference to Praetorius *Terpsichore* (1612) p.199

<sup>7</sup> Antal Boroknay: J. S. Bach C major cello suite *A hét zeneműve*, Zeneműkiadó Budapest 1974/4 p. 95

The table above illuminates some of the characteristic features of the suites. The opening movement in every case is lengthy, three-part French overture. Bach actually named his orchestral suites *Overtures* after this movement. The mentioned core movements occur only rarely, and instead we can find an abundance of different French dances and character pieces. Because of the loose frame of the genre, with regard to the order of movements and the free instrumentation, we can assume that Bach did not compose these suites by following any particular model. There is a fifth, still existing G-minor orchestral suite (BWV 1070), but the genuineness of this work has not been proved, therefore it does not officially belong to the set of four orchestral suites, either in music editions or in subsequent sound recordings.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The violin solo sonatas and partitas

This set of six solo works is forming one series, but the pieces within the cycle are belonging to two distinctly different genres. The sonatas originate from the Italian *sonata da chiesa*, with their strict structure of four movements, featuring slow-fast and fast-slow movement pairs, while the partitas belong to the genre of *suites* with dance-form movements as discussed above. These pieces were not composed for commission. Bach, being a competent violinist, challenged himself to explore the realization of a suggested polyphony while using a single solo string instrument. The analysis of the *Adagio* movement of the G-minor sonata provides an example from this chapter.

Substantial chords characterize the first movement of the G-minor sonata. Bach notates precisely the richly decorated interconnecting scales enhancing the harmonic content, which is unusual for the period. This implies that Bach actually wanted to limit the performer's customary freedom in improvising the embellishments. (See the sample of the score below.) However, within the three parts of the *Adagio*, at the return of the first "A" part from bar 14, Bach gives an alternative solution for decorating the harmonic structure. In the middle section of the movement the diminished chords leading through various keys are suggesting a character of a *prelude* or *fantasia*.

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<sup>8</sup> Imre Földes: *J. S. Bach élete és művei* Tankönyvkiadó Budapest, 1976 LFZF kézirat p. 150



Score sample 1: The opening bars of the G-minor Adagio

#### 4. The detailed analysis of the six cello suites

“The purpose of analyzing a musical work is to understand its components in terms of their relationship with each-other and their role in the context of the piece as a whole.”<sup>9</sup> I based my analytical perspective and use of theoretical concepts on the published writings of Gárdonyi and Schönberg with regard to the analysis of musical forms and understanding of the basis of composition.<sup>10</sup> I used a method of comparing movement types, preludes and various dance movements of the six suites, instead of analyzing the suites in sequence. I also paid particular attention to follow the systematic *plagal* harmonic structures of baroque dances and to highlight possible exceptions. I give an insight into this chapter through the analysis of the G major *Allemande* and the comparative harmonic analysis of the interchanging pairs of dances of the *Menuet*, *Bourrée* and *Gavotte*.

All six *Allemande* movements of the cello suites feature a two-part form and a calm, melodic, narrative content, which is typical of the Italian *allemande*. Within the first four bars of the G-major *Allemande* the tonic scale function is established by going through all of the suggested functions of a full authentic circle of keys (T-S-D-T). The musical line then touches the parallel key of E-minor and through the secondary dominant arrives and remains in the dominant key of D-major until the conclusion of the first part at the repeat sign. The closing of the first part is affirmed with a regular cadence of dominant key. Bach requests to repeat both parts of the movement. Performers usually oblige to repeat the first part but at times they

<sup>9</sup> Zoltán Gárdonyi: *Elemző formatan* Editio Musica Budapest 1979 p. 7 (in following footnotes: *Gárdonyi*)

<sup>10</sup> *Gárdonyi*, and Arnold Schönberg : *A zeneszerzés alapjai* Zeneműkiadó Budapest 1971

might omit the repeat of the second. The second part continues from the dominant key and by using motifs and sequences touches several other keys. Bar 24 arrives to the turning point of the movement by a cadence in the subdominant parallel A-minor. From bar 26 Bach uses new rhythmical elements making the last part of the movement particularly dance-like in character. He marks out the way of retuning to the tonic key through each bar by using the eighth notes on the first beat and the first note of the second beat in the following sixteenth notes sequences, arriving to the tonic key again in the middle of bar 29. The following example from the score is showing this last development:



Score sample 2: Part of the G-major Allemande

All is left from the movement is to affirm the closing by reinforcing the tonic key with a cadence. In each cello suite between the *Sarabande* and *Gigue* movements we find alternative inserted pairs of movements of different characters: in the G-major and D-minor suites a pair of *Minuets*, in the C-major and E-flat major suites a pair of *Bourées* and in the C-minor and D-major suites a pair of *Gavottes*. These movements provide great variety in the suites and the following table shows the differences in length as well as the outline of the harmonic structure and melodic content.

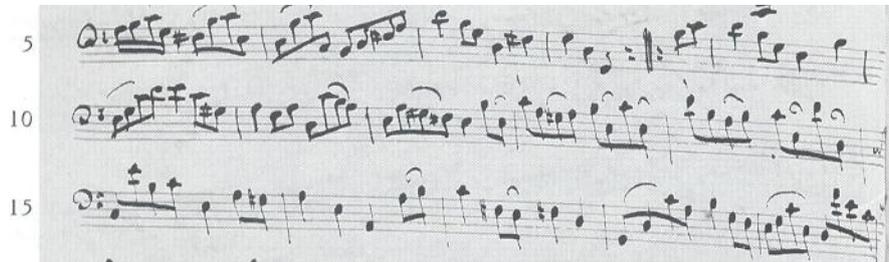
<b>Name of movement-pair</b>	<b>Movement I. Plan of form and key sequences</b>	<b>Movement II. Plan of form and key sequences</b>
G-major suite, Menuet I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / C :
	:G—V. :  :—e —G:	:g—V. :  :—B  —g :
	8 bars  8 bars  8 bars	8 bars  8 bars  8 bars
D-minor suite, Menuet I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / C :
	:d—V. :  :—F —d :	:D—V. :  :—h  —D :
	8 bars  8 bars  8 bars	8 bars  8 bars  8 bars
C-major suite, Bourrée I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / C :
	:C—G:  :—a —C :	:c—Es:  :—g  —c:
	8 bars  8 bars  12 bars	8 bars  8 bars  8 bars
E-flat major suite, Bourrée I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / A! :
	:Es—B:  :—c  —Es :	:Es—Es:  :—EsV. —Es:
	12 bars  12 bars/26 bars	4 bars  4 bars  4 bars
C-minor suite, Gavotte I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / Av / C / Avv :
	:c—g:  :—Es  —c :	:c—c :  :Es-g c---c  - f -  g ---- c:
	12 bars   12 bars  12 bars	4 b.   4 b.   4 b.   apx 6 b.   apx. 4 b.
D-major suite, Gavotte I & II	: A :  : B / C :	: A :  : B / A / C /A :
	:D—V. :  :—h  —D :	:D-D:  :—D V.fok  D-D   D-D   D :
	8 bars  8 bars  12 bars	4 b.   4 b.   4 b.   8 b.   4 b.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of inserted alternative dance movements in terms of form, length and key sequences (Signs in key sequences: A = major key; a = minor key; Es = E flat major; Roman number V. = dominant function of the same key) Av = first variation & Avv = second variation

## 5. The four copies and other more important editions

The original manuscript of the cello suites, the autographic version by Bach, has been lost. This is already an unfortunate fact. As a consequence, due to some differences and contradictions found in later copies, a consistent authoritative version is not fully decidable. The cello suites survived in four substantially different copies. From these four, the earlier

ones - the work of Anna Magdalena Bach and Bach's former pupil Peter Kellner - were made at the time when Bach was still alive, however the publishers of the later copies are unknown. The third copy is the mutual work of two copiers where the change of handwriting in the first *Bourrée* movement of the C-Major Suite it is clearly visible.



Manuscript 1: Different hand writings in the notation of C-Major Bourrée I.<sup>11</sup>

Hans Eppstein only published the first critical edition, as comparative of the four manuscript copies in 1991.<sup>12</sup> “The first printed edition of the solo suites was published in 1825 in Leipzig by H. A. Probst” says Ede Banda in the foreword of his own edition. Banda's edition was shortly followed by two different editions.<sup>13</sup> Other sources, for instance D. Markevich, considers the copy published by Janet et Cotelle (Paris 1842) as the first printed edition which was prepared with cooperation of Louis Norblin (1781-1854) a teacher of the Paris Conservatoire.<sup>14</sup> I present a critical review of the later editions and group them according to their accuracy in comparison with the source material, and in certain cases highlight the clearly different aspirations of publishers.

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<sup>11</sup> *Johann Sebastian Bach Neue Ausgabe Samtlicher Werke Serie VI-Band 2, Sechs Suiten für Violoncello Solo BWV 1007-1012. Die vier Quellen in verkleinerter wiedergabe Faksimile-beiband zum Kritischen Bericht von Hans Eppstein Barenreiter, Kassel, Basel, London, New York 1991 p. 96*

<sup>12</sup> *Johann Sebastian Bach Neue Ausgabe Samtlicher Werke Serie VI-Band 2, Sechs Suiten für Violoncello Solo BWV 1007-1012. Die vier Quellen in verkleinerter wiedergabe Faksimile-beiband zum Kritischen Bericht von Hans Eppstein Barenreiter, Kassel, Basel, London, New York 1991*

<sup>13</sup> *Joh. Seb. Bach, Sechs Suiten für Violoncello allein* Editio Musica Budapest 1991 p. 12

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.cello.org/Newsletter/Reviews/bach\\_mark.htm](http://www.cello.org/Newsletter/Reviews/bach_mark.htm) (Accessed: 16/03/2011)

## 6. Survey of current international research and conclusion

In this chapter, I survey a number of totally different research perspectives from current articles by international researchers. I start by discussing an article titled “Six questions to Eric Soblin about Bach’s Cello suites”.<sup>15</sup> I follow with current debates in England, mentioning Helga Thoene’s research findings, as well as the research around the borders of performing arts and psychology of music.<sup>16</sup> Finally I comment on Yo Tomita’s lecture at Warsaw University titled “Anna Magdalena, as Bach’s copier”.<sup>17</sup> Since these studies are not available in Hungarian, I had to rely on my own translations.

With my work, my intention is to find the common ground between theory and practice, and contribute to the understanding about the cello suites in particular. As a professional cellist, performer and educator, I found this research work both useful and rewarding. I enjoyed my work in the atmosphere of the library while analyzing different editions of music sheets, or comparing information based on different points of view. I have been engaged with these wonderful artworks for nearly forty years, and was inspired to undertake formal research with regard to the origins of the cello suites, or in a wider prospective the suites as a musical genre. I close my synopsis with the words of József Szigeti: “[...] One can engage with Bach from youth till old age without ever considering the work to be complete”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Bach’s Cello Suites-Six questions for Eric Soblin* Harper’s magazine January 4, 2011 (Accessed: 20/04/2011)

<sup>16</sup> N. Cook: *Music, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1998) és L. Goehr: *The Quest for Voice - On Music, Politics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford, Clarendon 1998)

<sup>17</sup> *Understanding Bach, 2*, 59-76 © Bach Network UK 2007 <http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/>  
(Accessed:12/03/2012)

<sup>18</sup> Szigeti József *Beszélő húrok* Zeneműkiadó Budapest 1965 p. 265

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