

Bach Suites – Legend and Errors

William Primrose commented (p. 187, *Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose*, by David Dalton) that “. . . it is interesting to reflect that Richard Efrati, in his insightful study of the interpretation of the Bach solo violin and cello suites [Zurich, 1979], asks the question: ‘Is it possible that in the case of the cello suites they were originally written for the viola, for which Bach had a special liking?’ And Riemann was of the opinion that the suites were intended for the viola, ad lib. Landowska refers to the fact that ‘one should not forget that Bach’s passion for transcriptions . . . refused to allow his restless spirit to be limited to the use of any one particular instrument.’

Harking back to Efrati’s question, I find it charming to read from Anna Magdalena: ‘Whatever troubles there were, they found no place in our home. They belonged “outside,” and there they remained when Sebastian sat down beside the klavier or took out his viola.’”

In this regard, Michael Kimber proposes that the following might have been overheard at a seance in which the medium was recounting events from the life of Johann Sebastian Bach.

JSB: Anna, my dear wife, an esteemed colleague has asked me to compose for him a set of suites for solo cello, but I have so much work to do, including this commission from the Margrave of Brandenburg.

AMB: Why not transcribe the viola suites which you wrote for yourself?

JSB: That’s a wonderful idea! But when?

AMB: Don’t worry, dear Johann, I’ll do it for you.

JSB: Anna, my dear, you are an angel sent from heaven.

Later . . .

AMB: Johann, I have finished copying out the cello version of the viola suites — and not a moment too soon! This morning I could not find a trace of the viola original. I fear that our little Carl Philipp may have used the pages for more of his paper glider experiments.

JSB: Who does our son think he is — another Leonardo da Vinci?

AMB: Ach, Johann, it’s a great loss! I so much enjoyed hearing you play the suites on your viola. They gave you such pleasure.

JSB: Please don’t worry, Anna. I know the suites from memory, and you shall continue to hear me play them for many years.

AMB: And perhaps one day you will transcribe your viola sonatas and partitas to the violin so that they may have a wider hearing?

JSB: Perhaps, Anna, perhaps . . .

On a more serious note, Michael Kimber has observed:

When copying from alto clef to bass clef, a moment of inattention could result in a pitch being notated a step too high. For example, the top staff line, G in alto clef, would be A in bass clef.

I have found eighteen such errors in Anna Magdalena Bach's copy of the Suites. While these cannot be taken as proof that Johann Sebastian Bach's original manuscript was written in alto clef -- and therefore intended for viola -- their frequent appearance suggests this possibility.

Interestingly, I have found only one instance of pitches being notated too low: in beat 3 of m. 8 of the Allemande of Suite No. 6, four notes written in alto clef are incorrectly notated as C# B A G. In bass clef these would be read as the correct pitches D C# B A (although an octave too low).

The source I consulted is a facsimile of Anna Magdalena Bach's autograph manuscript, printed in Edmund Kurtz's edition of the Suites (International Music Company, New York, 1984). The original of this manuscript is in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

Suite No. 1

Sarabande, m. 3, last note and m. 4, first note appear to have been written a step too high, then corrected; m. 4, fourth note looks more like A than G.

Suite No. 2

Courante, m. 27, last note was written as G, but most consider F the correct pitch.

Suite No. 3

Prelude, m. 27, last note was written as F, not E.

Gigue, m. 105, at least three of the notes in the descending scale were written a step too high, then corrected, and to be sure the correction was correctly understood, note names (in German, where h = b) -- c h a g f -- were penned in above the notes.

Suite No. 4

Prelude, m. 40, last note was written as A, not G.

Allemande, m. 30, last note was written as G, not F.

Sarabande, m. 28, next to last note was written as A, not G.

Suite No. 5

Prelude, m. 182, quarter note was written as A, not G.

Allemande, m. 9, beat 3, next to last note was written as G, not F, and last note was written as F, then corrected to E.

Courante, m. 5, next to last note was written as E, not D.

Courante, m.12, beat 2, second note was written as G, not F.

Gigue, m. 21, last note was written as G, not F.

m. 47, last three notes were written a step too high, with no attempt to correct.

Suite No. 6

Courante, m. 66, last note was written as B, not A.

The Sarabande, Gavottes, and Gigue of this suite, which was composed for a 5-stringed instrument, are written mostly in alto clef and, apart from missing accidentals, are notably free of pitch notation errors.

Postscript:

In 2003 I received an email from violist Mark Holloway, who wrote:

About a year ago, I was talking with the Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma about Bach, telling him that I very much enjoyed his book "The Fencing Master," where he explores some of the suites in free-thinking, exciting, and unusual ways. I was working on the first suite at the time, and I told him this. He wished me luck, and at the end of our conversation, as I walked away, he called out to me, "You know, Bach himself played these suites on the viola!"