

A COMPARISON OF SELECTED EDITIONS OF BACH'S SUITE NO. 5 IN C
MINOR, BWV 1011

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Johann Sebastian Bach's cello suites have a significant place as staples in the instrument's repertory, and have been transcribed for a great many other instruments. For years, the suites were not recognized as being the compositional masterpieces that they are considered to be today, but were relegated to a niche as a series of technical studies. Pablo Casals famously recorded the set from 1936-38 and brought the suites out of their relative obscurity.

After Casals, performers and scholars have paid greater attention to historical authenticity. Great difficulty is encountered in the fact that no autograph copy exists. The only exception to this is the *Fifth Suite*, for which a lute version in Bach's handwriting is extant. The earliest manuscript versions of the suites are those of J.S. Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach, and organist Johann Peter Kellner. These versions are likely close approximations of the original autograph. Still, many discrepancies and errors can be observed between the two.

The first printed edition came in 1824, published by Janet et Cotellet of Paris. This edition takes its source from a common ancestor of Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscript that no longer exists.¹ The Schirmer edition of 1939, edited by Frits Gaillard, comes immediately after Casals's recordings and represents an early attempt at fidelity to the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript.

This paper will examine the *Fifth Suite* to compare the Anna Magdalena Bach and Kellner manuscripts, the 1824 Paris edition, and the 1939 Schirmer edition. The lute

¹ Bettina Schwemer and Douglas Woodfull-Harris, *J.S. Bach: 6 Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso: Text Volume* (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag Karl Vötterle GmbH & Co. KG, 2000), 5.

transcription in Bach's handwriting will be discussed, but because of limiting circumstances, it will be used primarily to resolve conflicts between other versions.

A comparison of the two earliest manuscripts, Anna Magdalena Bach's and Kellner's, reveals a number of differences. The major, overarching discrepancies are (1) that Kellner's manuscript contains significantly more trills, and (2) disagreement concerning slurring.

The fact that Kellner marks more trills is a difference that may be analyzed in several ways. Did Anna Magdalena Bach neglect to mark trills when she copied her manuscript?

Such a reason is possible on several counts. Perhaps she left the question of whether to trill or not to the judgment of the performer. Kellner's manuscript seems not to be designed for performance—witness the numerous “B-sharps” he wrote, intending the note B-natural but copied from the C-sharps of the original *scordatura* version. Was his manuscript intended for eventual adaptation to the organ, his instrument? If so, perhaps designating trills was a more important task for him.

There are various reasons supporting the theory that Kellner's manuscript was not for performance on a stringed instrument. Kellner removed the *scordatura* notation, transposing down a major second the notes which are to be played on the A string. This process led to a number of errors. Kellner also omitted the *Sarabande* and copied only the first line of the *Gigue*. The latter omission may be because of a missing page or because Kellner never completed the project. The former omission is harder to explain without examining Kellner's motivation for copying the *Suites*. Did Kellner feel that the *Sarabande* did not fit the organ? Or was he generally dissatisfied with the movement?

Returning to the question of trills, it is also possible that Kellner added ornaments where they seemed to be called for, a practice that would not have been uncommon. Kellner's trills, in this case, would be valuable to study, since his would be a fairly contemporary vision of good taste in trills. His trills, like Anna Magdalena Bach's, are not directly from the composer, but are the next best thing.

The other major difference between Anna Magdalena Bach's and Kellner's manuscripts is the discrepancy between slurs. At first glance, both manuscripts appear to have random slur markings. Interestingly, many of the slurs are in the same spots in the music, if not over the same notes. There are numerous exceptions to that generality, where one or the other adds or omits a slur.

However, there seems to be little consensus between the two concerning specifically which notes are to be slurred. Compounding this problem is the practice of marking first occurrences and assuming that the performer will continue in the same manner until a change is marked. Furthermore, neither Anna Magdalena Bach nor Kellner is reliably precise in the notation of slurs.

Kellner uses strange "squiggly" slurs, a confusing marking seemingly indicating a longer phrase that is to be broken into multiple bows. His penmanship often does not allow the observer to determine the exact point that the bow is to be changed. This may even be by design.

A likely reason for the squiggly slurs is the tendency of ink to create blots on the page, which makes reading more difficult for the performer and generally obscures the manuscript. Each mark the copyist made increased the possibility of blotting. To avoid this, copyists made as few marks as possible and left out information that was determined

to be less necessary. Articulation is one feature often determined to be ignorable.

Kellner's squiggly slurs may be a compromise, giving as much information as possible while requiring the copyist to make only one mark.

One other possible explanation for Kellner's squiggly slurs is once again the purpose of his manuscript. If Kellner intended the piece to be adapted to organ, string bowings would not have been important to him. Phrasing, though, may have been valuable even when played on another instrument. A squiggly slur may have indicated that the notes were part of the same phrase, but that in the interest of accuracy, Bach's manuscript may have indicated additional breaks in bowing.

The tendency of ink to blot also led copyists to neglect to mark slurs that would have been added by the performer. One custom was for the performer to add slurs where notes were close together and use separate bows where there were large leaps.²

The 1824 French edition notates slurs in many of the same places as the two manuscripts, but is similarly inconsistent concerning which specific notes are slurred. The one improvement over the manuscripts is the precision with which the slurs are marked. These slurs, of course, represent merely the editor's interpretation of the manuscript he was copying. This manuscript, claimed by the editors to be in Bach's own handwriting, no longer exists. Such a claim may or may not be true. Whatever manuscript was used for copying, the editor's conformity to it is doubtful at best. One need not look further than the first measure for an example. The first note, a C octave, is missing a tie to the first sixteenth note. The notes are tied in every other version that this paper studies,

² Bettina Schwemer and Douglas Woodfull-Harris, *J.S. Bach: 6 Suites a Violoncello Solo senza Basso: Text Volume* (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag Karl Vötterle GmbH & Co. KG, 2000), 25.

and is surely an oversight. This error, incidentally, is repeated several times throughout the movement.

The title page the 1824 Paris edition calls the pieces *Sonates ou Etudes*, reflecting the fact that by this time the *Suites* were generally not used as performing pieces. Perhaps for this reason, the edition is filled with additions and riddled with errors. Even more trills than can be found in Kellner's manuscript are now present, and a large number of grace notes are added. Trills and graces may have been added by a performer in Bach's day, so these are perhaps not entirely out of place. However, some of the additions fundamentally alter the piece, and should be executed with caution.

There are even a number of notes which match neither Anna Magdalena Bach's nor Kellner's manuscripts. The late date of the edition—about a century after the pieces' composition—leads one to assume that these are mere errors. One such example, in measure 12 of the Allemande, is the introduction of an entirely new chord, consisting of the notes D, B-flat, and F, where Anna Magdalena Bach and Kellner had notated A-flat and F.

When Casals popularized the pieces in the 1930s, he interpreted them in a romantic style, without attempting to retain the original performance practices. Later musicians deemed it worthwhile to reexamine the style in which they would have been played during Bach's time. Period performance practice was not important when Gaillard's 1939 edition was published.

By the 1930s, however, the old custom of imitating initial slurring patterns was gone. Performers now required much more information about bowings. As a result of

both of these factors, Gaillard marked many more slurs and extended some existing slurs. Understandably, this led to more opinionated and thus controversial decisions.

A further type of added information leading to controversial decisions is the notation of dynamics. All period manuscript copies of the *Fifth Suite* are lacking even a single dynamic marking. There are several reasons for this: (1) generally, dynamics were left to the performer, and (2) as previously mentioned, any extra markings increased the possibility that the ink would blot. Gaillard added a plethora of dynamic information, all of which is his own opinion. His dynamics are by no means historically informed, or even necessarily intelligent, and should be treated as suggestions by the performer.

One complicating factor in an analysis of the various manuscripts and editions of the *Fifth Suite* is the existence of a transcription for lute in the composer's own handwriting. The manuscript is split between two staves, includes many more chords, and features expanded voicings of many of the chords that appear in the cello version. For these reasons, a side by side comparison with other manuscripts is more troublesome. However, the notes from J.S. Bach's own hand are surely worth examining when a discrepancy is found between other versions.

An example of a situation in which the lute manuscript can assist is the first chord in measure 5 of the Allemande. Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscript contains only an E-flat, whereas Kellner's manuscript adds a G and a C below the E-flat. J.S. Bach's lute score contains the chord notated by Kellner, and that chord made its way into both the 1824 French edition and the 1939 Gaillard edition.

Following are two examples that demonstrate the tendencies of the different sources and a logical method of solving problems. The first is a question of notes; the second is an examination of articulation.

Example 1: *Allemande*, m. 8.

Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscript calls for a quadruple-stop on the pitches E^2 - C^3 - E^3 - G^3 . Kellner's chord is a triple-stop, and omits the pitch E^3 . The 1824 edition agrees with Kellner's pitches except that the natural sign is missing from the lowest E. This is most likely an error, since neither of the manuscripts omits the natural sign. Gaillard, strangely enough, takes Kellner's version of the chord. Since Gaillard expressly studied Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscript and not, presumably, Kellner's, this is somewhat inexplicable. J.S. Bach's lute transcription is no help in this case; he writes the pitches E^2 - G^2 - C^3 - G^3 . Bach's chord is changed for the probable purpose of suitability for the instrument.

In this example, the final decision is left to the performer, since the two most reliable sources disagree, and J.S. Bach's manuscript does not help to resolve the discrepancy. The Paris edition may or may not be reliable in its omission of the upper E, and the erroneous E-natural in the lower octave does not help its credibility. Gaillard's edition is the least dependable in resolving the problem, since he did not follow the manuscript that he was supposedly analyzing critically. More likely, Gaillard left the chord from the printed edition from which he was working.

Example 2: *Gavotte I* articulation

The first *gavotte* includes little information as to the articulation. Kellner's and Anna Magdalena Bach's manuscripts contain slurs over the eighth notes, and the 1824

edition mirrors that articulation. Gaillard adds dots beneath the slurs, calling for separate strokes to be executed without changing the direction of the bow. Such an interpretation may or may not be valid and characteristic of period practices. This articulation would certainly alter the literal indication in the manuscripts, but this does not necessarily render the style improper.

The initial two quarter notes are sometimes performed in a *staccato* fashion, and this is not indicated in any of the editions or manuscripts. A separation between notes may be stylistically sound and even good period performance practice. From this and the previous discussion we glean that some missing information can be intelligently added, but that it ultimately remains the performer's decision whether to accept or reject an editor's markings.

Conclusion

The general result of this examination may be summarized by emphasizing that the main problem with interpreting Bach's *Suite No. 5* for solo cello, and more generally, Bach's solo cello suites, is the lack of information in the existing manuscripts. The earliest, most reliable sources have the least information to work with. Any editions published thereafter must necessarily add information and, ideally, strive to avoid subtracting information. It is left to the performer's discretion to decide which interpretational markings to follow. If editors were uniformly meticulous, the performer's job would be much easier. Unfortunately, even a well-meaning editor such as Gaillard is fallible and should not be trusted with all details.

In many cases, there is no singular historically informed manner to execute passages; there are countless historically *uninformed* methods of performance. It is the

discriminating performer's duty to choose one of the scholarly performance practices. If a performer places his full trust in an editor, he demotes himself from interpreter to copycat. Therefore, it behooves any student of the *Suites* to examine the multiple sources and study the relevant textual resources in an effort to understand and apply period practices where desired. Such a mission cannot be concluded in a single day, a single paper, or even in a lifetime.

Bibliography

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