

The Cello Music of J. S. Bach and Johannes Brahms

An Honors Lecture Recital

presented and performed by

Arthur Hill

Mihai Tetel

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mihai Tetel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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2018
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Abstract

The senior performance recital is a chance for an instrumentalist to show their talents and skills acquired during their undergraduate performance studies. The repertoire composed by Johannes Brahms and J. S. Bach was chosen for my recital in order to display my expanding talent of musical expression. Equally important are the contrasting musical ideas, moods, time periods, and personalities of the two works as well as the fact that they are both considered to be a part of the standard repertoire for cello. A lecture presentation preceded the performance of each piece. These presentations were added to augment the musical experiences of the performer and the intended audience. By combining music history with character stories about these famous music personalities, it was my intention to bring new life and meaning to these important musical works.

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- My love and thanks to my wife Beth for her support through all of this good stress.
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Introduction

A senior recital is generally viewed as a sum of one's accomplishments as an undergraduate performance student. In order to include a large range of playing techniques and to show the variety of literature a student has studied during the past few years, highly contrasting music is usually selected. For these reasons and due to considerations of my playing techniques at the time, Mihai Tetel- my cello teacher and project advisor- and I selected J. S. Bach's Cello Suite in C major and Johannes Brahms' E minor sonata for cello and piano as the repertoire for my senior recital.

In addition to the performance of the Bach and Brahms compositions, two short lectures over the composers and their respective works were presented on my recital. A primary reason I chose to do a lecture recital was my personal interest in these composers: the circumstances of their lives, the connections between historic people, and the emotions they experienced. For me, putting a face to the composer gives them and their music new life and makes them seem much more real. The stories (included in the below sections) about Pablo Casals' discovery of Bach's Cello Suites and Brahms' snide response to a cellist's request during a performance are not merely meant to be entertaining. They can make you feel briefly as if you might run into them on the street and they make Bach and Brahms seem more like people than untouchable icons found only in textbooks.

In addition to my personal interests, I attempted to meet certain expectations in the classical music world to have a broader knowledge of music history. In classical music today, historical knowledge is an essential tool for improving performance skills. Also, I thought it might be an opportune time to refresh my public speaking skills, since job searching and

interviewing would be sneaking up on me soon. The following are the written versions of the lectures, which were composed prior to the lecture recital on November 21, 2003.

J. S. Bach and his Cello Suite in C major

113 years ago, a young boy walked with his father through the streets of Barcelona in search of new music to be played in local cafes. The little child, or El Nen as he was known, began playing the cello two years before, but he'd already built an astonishingly impressive reputation from his playing in the café Tost and café Pajarera. That day on the streets in Spain two great things happened to the young cellist: his father bought him his first full-sized cello, and in a small music shop by the harbor he discovered some old, crumbled copies of Bach's 6 suites for solo cello.

How this 13 year old cellist understood the significance of Bach's music is still beyond me, but somehow little Pablo Casals knew the music was not just intended to be didactic- they were not static, emotionless etudes. Instead, they should be cherished among the greatest of Bach's works.

It would be twelve years after his personal discovery in Barcelona before Casals felt prepared to perform the cello suites, and he was the first to play an entire suite on a single public concert. It's easy for us to take for granted the acceptance of Bach's works, but before Casals' performances at the beginning of the 20th century, it was generally thought that they were only meant to be exercises for cellists during Bach's time. Casals changed the way people looked at the cello suites. His amazing performances of the works convinced thousands of people that the suites had artistic and emotional qualities.

In 1890, the same year of Casals' first encounter with the cello suites, a dealer of historical manuscripts offered to sell Johannes Brahms an autographed score of Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin. Brahms was a board member of an organization interested in music history, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, and he had a personal interest in collecting manuscripts of past composers including Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Bach. These manuscripts of Bach's violin works were outstanding finds because at the time no other authentic source for these works could be claimed. They were also- and still are- known for their outstanding neatness and beauty, which (to be polite) are not usual qualities for an autographed Bach manuscript. To make a long story short, Brahms may have doubted their authenticity and he opted not to buy them. But they eventually found their way into the hands of a friend and colleague of Brahms, the violinist Joachim, who was inspired to put on the first public performances of the sonatas and Partitas. He also began to edit the first edition of these works from an authentic source.

It is nothing but coincidental that these works should be rediscovered the same year in different parts of Europe, but it is fitting that they were since they were both written by Bach in Cothen, Germany near the year 1720. The six years Bach spent at the court of Prince Leopold at Anhalt-Cothen were unique for Bach, musically speaking. The previous ten years of his life, Bach worked at Weimar and created many of his great organ works. After Cothen, he spent the remaining 23 or so years of his life in Leipzig, and he composed most of his cantatas, The Well Tempered Klavier Book II, and The Art of the Fugue. In Cothen, Bach's compositions were mostly works for solo instruments and works for two or three players, or what is now known as chamber music. Cothen was different from Weimar and Leipzig because the religion was of the

reformed church, not of the Lutheran faith. Bach had no responsibilities with the church music since it only consisted of simple chorales. Instead, Bach's duties were to write music for the Prince- who was apparently a decent amateur musician- and his small band of musicians. In addition to the works for strings I've already mentioned, Bach wrote several sonatas for flute, violin, and viola da gamba with klavier and some trio sonatas.

One of the problems that music historians have encountered when trying to trace the history of Bach's Cothen years is that none of his chamber music written there was published in his lifetime. It was hand-copied, and intended to be played in the court, not for public concerts. Although there are no existing copies of the solo cello suites in Bach's handwriting, there are several other existing copies, most notably the one from the hand of Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, whom Bach married in Cothen after the death of his first wife.

I'm assuming that many of you do not know the solo cello suites by heart, so I'd like to give a short description of them, particularly the third in C major which I'm about to perform. They contain a broad range of moods from high-spirited Courantes and introspective Sarabandes, to the dark, unsettling prelude from the 2nd suite and the cheerful Gavottes of the 6th suite.

The third suite in C major stands out in the middle of the set as a pronouncement of purpose and joy. The opening prelude is boldly stated, and it is almost as if Bach is making us generous offering. Listen for the pedal tone (or repeated open G string) in the second half of this movement. Bach was particularly fond of this device in his preludes. The 2nd movement- the Allemande- is filled with shorter notes, 16ths and 32nds, which makes a tempo that is slower than normal for a Bach Allemande seem appropriate. The Courante seems fitting with a lively tempo because of its rapid descending and ascending lines. An interesting six-measure section

appears twice in this movement, creating some unusual harmonies for Baroque music. The Sarabande is proud and outgoing unlike most of the similar dance movements in the cello suites, which are generally more introspective. In each of the six suites, Bach places a lighter dance movement between the Sarabande and the final movement. In the third and fourth suites, Bach chose to put a Bourree between the Sarabande and the final movement, the Gigue. Even if you don't know the solo cello suites, you may recognize this movement when you hear it. With the final movement, Bach presents us with a dazzling, spirited Gigue to conclude this suite in C major in which the rhythms and harmonies are always on the move.

I hope you enjoy Bach's suite number three in C major for solo cello!

Johannes Brahms and the E minor Sonata for Cello and Piano

If you'll indulge me, I'd like to do a short experiment before I play Brahms E minor sonata for cello and piano. I'd like everyone to close your eyes. Now in your mind, try to picture Johannes Brahms.

How many people saw an older man, with a long, silvery beard?

I think that it is next to impossible to escape the image of an older Brahms: his ridged brow, silver hair and fuller figure. I won't try to avoid that image, but I would like you to imagine a younger Johannes. In pictures from the early 1860s- around the time that he composed the E minor sonata- he still has the same penetrating gaze and bold face, but his hair is dark and his beard looks more like mine.ⁱ

Brahms's musical output is extremely hard to break down. There were very few periods in which he wrote only one type of composition, and he usually had several works in progress at the same time. Some of his pieces were finished in a matter of weeks or months, but many of them took years to complete. Take his first symphony, for example. The first evidence of sketches for this work appear in a letter from Brahms to Clara Schumann in 1862. But the work wasn't completed for another fourteen years.

During the same year of the initial sketches for his first symphony Brahms attended the Lower Rhine summer music festival. While staying with a fellow composer, he began work on the F minor string quintet and his first duo sonata, the E minor sonata for cello and piano. At this time Brahms was still a relatively unknown composer. But early on in 1862, a series of articles in the Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik journal, written by Adolf Schubring gave him very strong praise and introduced many people to the German composer. Several years later, Brahms's name

became widely known due to the success of his German requiem, especially from the Viennese premiere in March of 1871.

During the same year of the German Requiem premiere in Vienna, the E minor sonata was also premiered in Leipzig, the city where Bach lived and worked over one hundred years before. Brahms and a cellist named Josef Gansbacher played the work for friends several years before the public premiere, and as the story goes Brahms played so loud that the cello couldn't be heard at all! When Gansbacher complained during the performance, Brahms' response was "Lucky for you, too!"

The sonata begins with a lengthy eight-measure phrase in the lower range of the cello. From the first note, the mood is dark and heavy, seemingly the expression of some eternal sadness. The next phrase breaks away from this dark mood with a melody in the cello that is translucent or shimmering; suddenly hopeful. But the cello bursts with passion before subsiding to its dark lower register once again. This is where it's easy to forget the image of the young Brahms. There is no feeling for the joy of youth here, but there is a sadness that reflects the common image of the wise, somber old man.

It is hard and would probably be fallible to draw any specific comparisons between specific events in Brahms's life and the deep sorrow felt in the opening movement, but the list of tragedies he experienced certainly had an indirect influence on its mood. Schumann's death in 1856 and Brahms's failures to attain any lasting relationships with women- especially Schumann's wife, Clara- may have left a lasting impression on Brahms that influenced the creation of the E minor sonata. Several years later, the death of Brahms's mother would precede the completion of the sonata's last movement by a matter of months.

Brahms had a keen perception of the music of the past. He studied the forms of Haydn and Mozart and integrated his own melodic ideas, romantic harmonies, and innovative use of rhythm. His knowledge of the music of the past is evident in each movement of this sonata. The immediately accessible and dance-like second movement is in the classical form of minuet and trio. An essential quality of this form is the contrast between the two sections of music, and Brahms solves this problem in his own unique way. The minuet begins with a *dolce* melody sung by the cello while the piano provides a graceful accompaniment. While Haydn likely would have placed a repeat sign after this phrase, Brahms switches the roles of the instruments and repeats the theme in the piano. The Trio that accompanies this minuet is a completely different sound world. The melodies are very chromatic and the piano accompaniment is full of octaves that double most of the cello's melody.

The final movement, composed three years after the first two, is a fugal finale. The contrapuntal techniques of Bach are very evident, but there may also be a direct connection to the Art of the Fugue, Contrapunctus 17. Brahms's fugal subject borrows the notes from the first five beats of that movement from Bach's greatest fugal work. In Brahms's final movement, the fugal sections are contrasted with two relaxed, melodic passages marked *tranquillo* and *dolce*. Brahms staggers the voices of the cello and piano throughout the bar (a common device of his) and the variety of rhythms help provide contrast to the different motives, which continuously appear at unexpected moments to surprise the listener.

¹ I obviously did not have any facial hair at the time!

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