



Musical Interludes | The Cello Suites  
Program Notes, by Brian Lauritzen

Thank goodness for second-hand thrift stores. If not for these fine establishments and the occasional treasures buried within, we may have never encountered a set of six unaccompanied cello pieces today considered to be the pinnacle of the repertoire. But one day in the late 1890s, cellist Pablo Casals wandered into a thrift store in Barcelona and walked out with the sheet music for the Six Suites for Cello Solo, BWV 1007-1012.

At the time, the suites were almost completely unknown around the world and those who did know them (mostly cellists) considered them to be études, or practice pieces—music not meant for public consumption. But Bach’s music grabbed the then-14-year-old Casals and didn’t let go. The cellist found a lyricism and soulfulness in the music that others before him hadn’t. More importantly, Casals was able to transmit that feeling to audiences who became transfixed.

The what ifs surrounding the Bach cello suites are massive. What if Casals hadn’t run across that sheet music in the thrift store? What if he hadn’t been captivated by the music? What if he hadn’t been able to form an interpretation that connected with audiences? What if the Bach cello suites remained in obscurity today? What *other* undiscovered or dismissed music are we missing out on?

That last question is the most haunting one. We almost missed out on the entirety of Bach’s music. After his death, he quickly fell into obscurity. His music was preserved but rarely performed. Audiences had largely moved on from this composer who spent most of his life writing music for the weekly church services.

Thank goodness for Felix Mendelssohn. If not for this child prodigy composer (who was declared The Next Big Thing at age 16), we may not have ever encountered any music by the composer considered to be one of the greatest in history. But one day in 1805, Felix’s father Abraham purchased a set of sheet music by J.S. Bach at an auction. Abraham encouraged Felix to study the scores and Felix fell in love with the music.

Later, Felix Mendelssohn’s grandmother, Bella Salomon, gave Felix a gift which would not only change his life, but it changed classical music history. Her gift? A copyist’s manuscript of J.S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. That was the piece which captivated Felix Mendelssohn in the

same way the cello suites consumed Pablo Casals. Mendelssohn vowed to mount a performance of this complex work--no small feat. It took five years, but eventually he was able to realize that dream. For the first time in a century, the transcendence of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* was put before an audience. The response was euphoric and that single performance led to a revival of Bach's music throughout Germany and beyond.

Bach, Mendelssohn, and Casals are therefore inextricably linked. We cannot tell the story of classical music without any of them.

The Suite No. 3 in C major is the second most often performed of the six cello suites. There are 197 recordings of it currently in print. All of the suites begin with a prelude which is generally free-flowing and improvisatory. Then comes a series of dances: allemande, courante, sarabande, two bourrés, and a gigue.

The allemande is an old German dance where couples would form a line, link arms, and walk the length of the room taking three steps and then balancing on one foot. Often paired with the allemande, the courante picks up the tempo a bit, which makes sense given the word courante literally means, "running." The dance steps were a combination of running and jumping. The sarabande is generally referred to as a Spanish dance, but in fact may have been of Guatemalan or Mexican origin and likely made its way to Spain via the colonizers. It is a slow, stately dance where couples danced in a double line. This is followed by a pair of bourrées--a lively dance originating in Auvergne which combines quick skipping steps with a longer gliding step. Finally, the gigue: a very fast dance originating in Ireland (jig). In French theatre productions, it was customary to end a performance of a play with a gigue. Following drama with music and dancing.

Writing about Mendelssohn's d-minor piano trio, Robert Schumann proclaimed, "This is the master-trio of our time...it is an exceedingly fine composition that, years hence, will still delight our grandchildren and great-grandchildren." He's not wrong! It's full of inspiration, luxurious melodies, intricate ensemble passages, one of the most beautiful slow movements ever written, and a crackling brilliant finale.

*Song of the Birds* is actually a Catalan Christmas carol, which tells the story of the joy of nature upon learning of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. Pablo Casals' wordless arrangement of it allows us to enjoy its haunting beauty year-round. After his exile in 1939 due to the Spanish Civil War, Casals would open each one of his concerts by playing this piece. It is still seen as a symbol of Catalonia today.