

ALISA WEILERSTEIN

BACH CELLO SUITES 1, 3 & 5

JAN 26 / COBB GREAT HALL

This performance will run approximately 80 minutes, with no intermission.

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Bach (1685-1750)

Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Minuet

Minuet II

Gigue

Suite No.3 in C Major, BWV 1009

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Bourrée

Bourrée

Gigue

Suite No.5 in C minor, BWV 1011

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavotte

Gavotte

Gigue

ALISA WEILERSTEIN

Alisa Weilerstein is one of the foremost cellists of our time. Known for her consummate artistry, emotional investment, and rare interpretive depth, she was recognized with a MacArthur “genius grant” Fellowship in 2011. Today her career is truly global in scope, taking her to the most prestigious international venues for solo recitals, chamber concerts and concerto collaborations with all the preeminent conductors and orchestras worldwide. “Weilerstein is a throwback to an earlier age of classical performers: not content merely to serve as a vessel for the composer’s wishes, she inhabits a piece fully and turns it to her own ends,” marvels the *New York Times*. “Weilerstein’s cello is her id. She doesn’t give the impression that making music involves will at all. She and the cello seem simply to be one and the same,” agrees the *Los Angeles Times*. As the UK’s *Telegraph* put it, “Weilerstein is truly a phenomenon.”

With her multi-season new project, *FRAGMENTS*, Weilerstein aims to rethink the concert experience and broaden the tent for classical music. A multisensory production for solo cello, the six-chapter series sees her weave together the 36 movements of Bach’s solo cello suites with 27 new commissions. After premiering the first two chapters in Toronto in early 2023, with subsequent performances at New York’s Carnegie Hall and beyond, she looks forward to touring all six chapters in seasons to come. Weilerstein recently premiered Joan

Tower's new cello concerto, *A New Day*, at the Colorado Music Festival. The work was co-commissioned with the Detroit Symphony; the Cleveland Orchestra, where Weilerstein performed it last fall; and the National Symphony, where she reprised it in May. An ardent proponent of contemporary music, she has also premiered and championed important new works by composers including Pascal Dusapin, Osvaldo Golijov and Matthias Pintscher. Already an authority on Bach's music for unaccompanied cello, in spring 2020 Weilerstein released a best-selling recording of his solo suites on the Pentatone label, streamed them in her innovative *#36DaysOfBach* project, and deconstructed his beloved G-major prelude in a Vox.com video, viewed more than two million times. Her discography also includes chart-topping albums and the winner of *BBC Music's* Recording of the Year award, while other career milestones include a performance at the White House for President and Mrs. Obama.

Diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at nine years old, Weilerstein is a staunch advocate for the T1D community. She lives with her husband, Venezuelan conductor Rafael Payare, and their two young children.

PROGRAM NOTES

"I have been living with these suites since further back than memory can reach, and I have grown with them throughout my life with the cello. Great music is a reflection of life as it is lived, and this ... is a reflection of myself ... steeped in and still discovering Bach's unparalleled accomplishments."

—**Alisa Weilerstein**, adapted from notes for her recording of Bach's complete Cello Suites, which won the BBC's Recording of the Year

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) wrote his six cello suites, BWV1007-1012, between 1717 and 1723, while he was employed at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. It was one of the few times in his career when he had no responsibility for religious services. Bach was an excellent violinist, in addition to having superior keyboard and supreme compositional skills. Many modern scholars think that he may have written the suites primarily for himself to play on the *viola da spalla*, a small cello that was played "on the arm." The base of the instrument was placed against the chest, with the fingerboard held along the left arm. This position allowed violinists to play the larger, lower-pitched cello with comparative ease. The instrument remained popular in Germany long after most other countries had adopted the upright cello. The

suites show Bach exploring dance forms as well as instrumental and compositional techniques, challenging himself to create single-line music in these ancient forms that were normally fully harmonized.

Bach's suites were composed at a time when solo music for the bass viol, a fretted instrument, had been played for over 50 years. However, Bach's suites are the first written specifically for the cello, an unfretted instrument in the violin family. String players who wanted to play any type of cello had to learn new techniques. At the same time, many other technological changes were occurring, including the use of stronger-sounding strings, new techniques for making and using bows, and changes in the design and construction of the basic instrument. All surviving cellos from Bach's day show that the fingerboards were altered to allow the "on the arm" instrument to be played upright, and bows went from an underhand position to placing the hand atop the bow. During this time of transition, Bach's suites were unprecedented. They would stand alone as works for solo cello for roughly 100 years.

The suites follow the traditional form of the French overture, which was based on standardized dance movements. French culture had a huge impact on courts throughout Europe, and Anhalt-Cöthen was no exception. The basic movements, although no longer danced, were integral to a suite: allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. Bach was well acquainted with

this style but expanded it by adding a prelude and including minuets, bourrées or gavottes in the various suites. Although he occasionally appeared to indicate a chordal structure, especially at cadences, the “chords” were actually double, triple or quadruple “stops,” in which two, three or four pitches are sounded almost simultaneously. In general, any harmony is by implication. Only a few bars have passages with two parts. Vibrato is treated as an ornament, and it, along with trills and other ornaments, were clearly marked in the manuscripts. The pitch was about one-half step lower than today’s concert pitch.

No manuscript of the suites in Bach’s hand has survived. His friend Johann Peter Kellner (1705-1772) made the first copy of Bach’s manuscript in 1726. Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena (1701-1760), made a copy between 1727 and 1731. Her copy is generally considered the most reliable, despite some evidence she made it hurriedly, especially in the placement of slurs. Two other anonymous but roughly contemporary copies exist. The earliest printed edition was published in 1826. Modern editions combine the best elements of all of these.

Suite Number 1, BWV 1007, is in G major. The Prelude features continuous 16th-note passages and arpeggios, sounding improvisational but actually very carefully planned. The Allemande has a faster tempo, with 16th notes related to the themes of the prelude. The Courante is even faster, with alternating 8th and 16th notes. The

Sarabande implies counterpoint, although of course it is only one line, played more slowly than the preceding movements. The low notes sound as if they were played continuously, despite the intervening measures without those pitches. The non-French insertion is the pair of minuets, which feature a major/minor/major contrast. The Gigue is relaxed, humorous, and features surprising rhythmic and implied harmonic structures. This suite was the inspiration for the Toronto Music Garden, a three-acre garden which resulted from a collaboration between Yo-Yo Ma and the Toronto Botanical Gardens. Search "Toronto Music Garden" on a browser for more information about this unusual representation of the Suite.

Suite Number 3, BWV 1009, is in C major. The Prelude is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time with many scale passages and broken chords. It ends with a quadruple stop: four notes played as close to simultaneously as possible. The Allemande is slow, with many open strings, double stops, and wide leaps. The Courante begins in $\frac{3}{4}$, switches to $\frac{6}{8}$, and is light and Italianate. The Sarabande has syncopated rhythms with multiple stops and a stately affect. The Bourrée is in two parts; the first features strong rhythms and is in C major, followed by a slower section in the parallel key of c minor, then a repeat of the first part. The Gigue is cheerful, with large leaps and some drone-like passages, with a unique and "picturesque" theme, to quote one reviewer.

Suite Number 5, BWV 1011, was intended for a five-string instrument that was re-tuned from the standard pitches. This tuning technique, *scordatura*, is rarely used for the suite today. Suite 5 is the most technically and musically advanced of all the suites and its prelude is the longest of all individual movements. The Prelude begins slowly, almost hesitantly, with multiple stops and dotted rhythms harking back to the French overture. The second theme features a series of rapid passages with imitation of earlier phrases. The Allemande continues the dotted rhythms but in a somber mood. The Courante is a major contrast, with an almost-frantic exhibition of technical skill, abandoning most of the dance-like characteristics of its namesake. The Sarabande is brief and sad, with large leaps and implied dissonance. The first Gavotte features angular motion and a nervous minor-key energy, while the second moves in triplets, with a memorable theme. The Gigue is less energetic than many of Bach's giges, with several held high notes that tumble in 3/8 time to the lower registers. Its second theme continues the descending line and quietly ends on a single low pitch.

—Mary Black Junttonen, MSU Music Librarian Emeritus