

**The Cello Suites:  
J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the  
Search for a Baroque Masterpiece**

*Eric Soblin*

*A Book Review by Jayne I. Hanlin*

Johnstone-Music is honoured to have the collaboration of Jayne Hanlin

# The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece

Eric Siblin

*The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece* by Eric Siblin measures only about six-by-nine inches. Yet, this author's first book is perfect for a musician's coffee table. The black suede-like dust jacket with a colorful shiny cello and gold lettering adds to the artistic appeal.

There is an underlying air of mystery in the text. The question is: Will the original manuscript—that would prove who composed it—ever be located?

Siblin shares impressive bibliographical research. Yet reading the text is more like hearing exciting stories about the lives of Bach and Casals than merely learning interesting or isolated facts.

The individual titles of the thirty-six chapters mirror names of the six suites' successive movements. Each chapter begins with a thought-provoking quotation, such as this one:

The more worn a string, the better it sounds. And do you know when it sounds best of all? Just before it's about to break. (158) Casals

As a long-time cellist myself, I am able to recognize familiar melodies in Bach's Suites. Which one is in the 2003 film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*? That's easy: *Prelude* from *Suite No. 1*. My fingers and bow arm move exactly to the soundtrack I hear. At the same time, it is painful to watch the non-synched version of the actor's simulated playing on the screen.

Almost a half century ago at a music store in Innsbruck, Austria, I purchased a copy of this same suite with a piano accompaniment. Even knowing then the music was for solo cello, I somehow never

questioned the history of the extra part in all these intervening years. In Siblin's book, I delightedly discovered Robert Schumann was the first composer to write such an accompaniment!

Mr. Siblin is an excellent writer. Sometimes he spices sentences with alliteration: "stop, start, and stray." (28) For readers unfamiliar with musical terms, even rudimentary ones, he gently inserts definitions:

Capellmeister—leader of the *Capelle*, the princely orchestra. (30)

And Siblin does not hesitate to answer a controversial musicological question: Is there only a single way to play Bach on the cello?

In truth, there are as many good versions as there are good cellists. Comparing recordings of the Suite No. 3 prelude recently, I found the sound of Steven Isserlis super-smooth; Anner Bylsma, dry and eccentric; Pierre Fournier, elegantly relaxed; Pieter Wispelwey, gorgeously magical; Misha Maisky, grandiose; Matt Haimovitz, lyrical and playful, stretching the phrases like elastic bands. . . . never do I want to hit the Stop button once any of these excellent cellists is bowing Bach. These musicians, and legions of others, make a compelling case for their own interpretations. (119)

Because of my long-time connection to the cello, I have listened to most of the great cellists in my lifetime. Inspired by Siblin's critiques, however, I shall be more specific in my future praise. No longer will a mere "wonderful" or "beautiful" or "amazing" from me suffice.

Continuing in his precise manner, Siblin describes a recording by Casals:

Every listen brings fresh discoveries.

Casals sounds authentic, and not because of the hiss and squeaks and crackle of the vintage mono recording. Even though his mindset was Romantic, his use of vibrato exaggerated, his

knowledge of baroque history limited, and the recording technology of his time primitive, Casals played the suites the only correct way—by breathing life into them. (120)

I wonder what words Siblin would write after listening to the crackly 78-RPM Casals recording I got for my eighth birthday!

At a Montreal cafe, the book's author happened to meet Walter Joachim, who became a devotee of Casals after hearing the master perform in 1927. Later, Joachim became principal cellist of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. This Canadian suggested that Siblin learn how to play the cello. And that is exactly what he did.

I admire any person who tries to learn a new skill. But it takes special courage to start to play a string instrument as an adult. Conscientious even as a beginner, he was soon able to play simple tunes in *Bach for the 'Cello: Ten Pieces in the First Position*, a music book I used as a young student myself. He never mastered the cello, and since he was a competent guitarist, he now chooses to play the prelude (yes, the same one in the Russell Crowe movie mentioned earlier) to the first cello suite on his fretted instrument instead.

Even as loyal as I am to my instrument, I have no problem sharing this piece with woodwinds, brass, or percussion. Besides, there is the possibility that the suites may not have been written for the cello in the first place! Anna Magdalena was the second wife of Bach. Because of her manuscript, we know which notes Bach wrote.

What we don't know is what instrument he necessarily wanted the music played *on*. (250)

Why not? It all hinges on the sixth suite's music for a five-stringed instrument, perhaps the violoncello piccolo played "*da spalla*, that is, on the shoulder" rather than "*da gamba*—held between the legs." (251) A traditional cello like mine has only four strings and an endpin to rest on the floor for balance.

Besides many Bach transcriptions, there have been updated versions of Bach. Think *Fantasia* and the Swingle Singers octet. Who knows what the future will bring Bach-wise? Country? Maybe even rap?

As Sibling notes: “The tired but true conclusion is that every age reimagines Bach on its own terms.” (217)

I have no statistics about other authors’ first-hand approaches toward musical subjects, but I think Sibling’s way is highly unusual—if not unique. Yet impressive as his willingness to study the cello himself, his active musical participation also amazingly included Bach’s vocal music.

Though not expert in reading notes, he decided to attend the Bach Weekend in Montreal in 2008. He was a baritone in the choir singing one of Bach’s cantatas—in German no less. Fortunately, at the first rehearsal, he wound up sandwiched between two experts, Yves and Louis!

Bach’s suites are not programmatic music, and I have never tried to summarize them or make my own storylines. But from now on, I shall try to envision my own creative ones as the author does quite well. Here is his description of that same first movement in the first suite:

The first prelude has always brought to mind a boy cellist out walking with his father by the old port of Barcelona in 1890, on the brink of discovering sheet music in a musty second-hand music shop. While Bach may not have written a teenage Catalan cellist in the first cello suite, he did write youth and innocence and the feeling that everything is possible. (221)

In 1965, at the last moment, Casals was unable to come to the American String Teachers Convention in Dallas and conduct some of his own and other compositions for a cello choir in which I played. What cellistic disappointment for everyone in the large ensemble!

I never was able to sit in the audience to hear one of his performances either. Yet, he still inspires awe, so I was thrilled to read the text's sparkling tidbits about him, some familiar, others unknown, including his political stands, his family, and his 1958 performance at the United Nations. (You can listen to it on YouTube—but only accompanied with assorted snapshots.)

With great pleasure I read *The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*. Whether or not you are a cellist, I recommend Siblin's *modern* masterpiece.

Reviewed by Jayne I. Hanlin, initiate of Alpha Omicron and current member of the St. Louis Alumnae chapter. Mrs. Hanlin, the sister of famed pianist Malcolm Frager, is the co-author of *Learning Latin Through Mythology* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

(Review is about 1275 words)

Below is information about the book that you might wish to include.

*The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*

Author is Eric Siblin

Published by Atlantic Monthly Press in 2009

319 pages

\$24.00

ISBN-13: 978-0-8021-1929-22009