

Transcription de :
Bernard SALLES

(original pour violoncelle seul)
pour contrebasse seule

SUITE I BWV 1007
(19 mn 30 s)

Jean-Sébastien BACH
(1685 - 1750)

PRÉLUDE

(2 mn 30 s)

♩ = 60 à 80 (2 mn 30 s)

* - les coups d'archets en noir ont été repris des manuscrits originaux

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- les coups d'archets grisés sont proposés par Bernard SALLÉS

FOREWORD

Originally, these now world-famous Suites were composed for cello. There is no known autograph of the pieces in BACH's own hand, but two manuscript copies - one from the 1730s, by Anna Magdalena, BACH's second wife, the other by Johann Peter KELLNER, a Thüringen organist and a pupil of BACH's are considered authoritative. Anna Magdalena's hand is so similar to her husband's that some musicologists actually think she wrote the title-page only, in which case that manuscript would be the original version of the Suites as for the second manuscript, dated 1726, it is less widely known and differs much from the former.

Everybody now agrees that these Suites for unaccompanied cello originated during BACH's stay at Cöthen (1717-1723), where his main employment was directed toward writing and performing chamber music. During this period, he composed the Brandenburg Concertos, the first volume of the Well-tempered Klavier, the first four French Suites, and the Suites & Partitas for unaccompanied violin. As the latter are dated 1720 and bear the title "libro primo" (first book), many people think that the "libro secondo" would have been - logically - the Cello Suites.

Did BACH compose the Suites for someone in particular? He was himself an outstanding organ-player and a very accomplished violinist as well, but his cello technique must have been less developed. Therefore, he couldn't have written the Suites for his own use or his children's. He must have had someone in mind, a musician among his immediate circle of acquaintances, most probably the Cöthen Court cellist. The name of Ferdinand Christian ABEL is often mentioned (BACH was also ABEL's third daughter's godfather). Yet another name is also a possibility : that of Christian Bernhard LINCKE, another cellist at the Cöthen Court.

The cello Suites keep the traditionnal structure of the German suite, i.e. a succession of bipartite dances, each piece moving harmonically from the tonic to the dominant in its first half, and back to the tonic in the second half. Each Suite starts off with a free form Prelude which enables the player to show his virtuosity.

It is followed by an Allemande, a slow dance in 4, then a Courant, which, as its name suggests, is a fast movement in 3, and a Sarabande, another dance in 3, but slow. In Suites I and II, the Sarabande is followed by two Menuets (Menuet 1 & 2 / repeat Menuet 1). The other Suites have Bourrées instead of Menuets (same 1/2/1 structure). Both Menuets and Bourrées are in a moderate 3 . Menuets might be more 'refined' and Bourrées a bit more 'rough'. Each Suite ends on a ternary Gigue.

Bach's purpose in composing these Suites is still unclear: were they meant as concert pieces? or as étude-like didactic pieces? When the 'back to BACH' movement started in the 1820, thanks to F. MENDELSSOHN, the Cello Suites were among the first pieces to be published, but with a strict educational purpose in mind, just like the Partitas for unaccompanied violin or the two volumes of the Well-tempered Klavier. Not until Pablo CASALS 'rediscovered' the Suites around 1920, performed them in public and recorded them, did they achieve the status of 'music pieces' worthy of every cellist's repertoire. The same applies to the double bass: BACH's output does include a great many works of a didactic character. Indeed, one can say that BACH is the greatest pedagogue of all music history. And so the Suites have been adopted by every instrument with a range similar to that of the cello: viola and double bass for string instruments, bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, trombone and tuba for wind instruments, and even marimba-xylophone in the percussion family!

I have studied various transcriptions of the Suites without finding the proper transcription or range appropriate to the double bass. It's either too low or too high (except for Suite I). In the first case, the original key is respected but played down an octave! In the second case, the transcription certainly allows for the original key and range but, from Suite II onward, the double bass must play in an extremely high register which does not suit the large resonance chamber of the instrument. There are also some eccentric transcriptions with key, note and rhythm changes that do not bring any technical benefit that would make for a coherent musical performance.