

[SACD 1]

SUITE BWV 1007

01. I. Prélude	2:37
02. II. Allemande	4:46
03. III. Courante	2:41
04. IV. Sarabande	2:54
05. V. Menuet I/II	3:14
06. VI. Gigue	1:46

SUITE BWV 1008

07. I. Prélude	3:32
08. II. Allemande	3:28
09. III. Courante	2:07
10. IV. Sarabande	4:02
11. V. Menuet I/II	2:51
12. VI. Gigue	2:32

SUITE BWV 1009

13. I. Prélude	3:58
14. II. Allemande	4:04
15. III. Courante	3:17
16. IV. Sarabande	3:58
17. V. Bourrée I/II	3:47
18. VI. Gigue	3:13

TOTAL TIME: 58:57

[SACD 2]

SUITE BWV 1010

01. I. Prélude	3:55
02. II. Allemande	4:30
03. III. Courante	3:27
04. IV. Sarabande	4:13
17. V. Bourrée I/II	4:53
06. VI. Gigue	2:52

SUITE BWV 1011

07. I. Prélude	5:27
08. II. Allemande	5:19
09. III. Courante	2:14
10. IV. Sarabande	3:00
11. V. Gavotte I/II	4:28
12. VI. Gigue	2:15

SUITE BWV 1012

13. I. Prélude	4:52
14. II. Allemande	6:57
15. III. Courante	3:56
16. IV. Sarabande	4:08
11. V. Gavotte I/II	4:00
18. VI. Gigue	3:56

TOTAL TIME: 74:31

J.S.BACH

arr. Valter Dešpalj

The Cello Suites
Petri̇t eku

[Guitar]



SUPER AUDIO CD

eudora



The Cello Suites

PETRIT ÇEKU

The *Six Cello Suites* by Bach offer a multitude of ways through which to approach and experience their beauty, but perhaps their most captivating essence is the way they engage our mind in order to fully express their own creation. Bach used for this project a medium that was not typically well-suited for the task: an unaccompanied cello. By choosing the cello, Bach set for himself the goal of creating the experience of a complete musical work through an instrument that was seemingly incapable of the task. What is so magical about the suites is that, despite the physical limitations of the instrument, Bach is able to create a work that results in an experience of totality and completeness for the listener. Much of the polyphony, harmony, or even rhythm in these works is not physically there—that is to say, they are not notated, but they are absolutely in our mind and in our experience of the music. This is perhaps Bach's greatest achievement in these works, his ability to imply complex musical structure through minimal compositional means. By being actively included in the process of listening we are able to perceive the totality of what Bach communicates with seemingly too few notes. Despite evidence that these suites are meant to be studies written strategically to improve the art of performing, I think they also serve the deeper musical purpose of cultivating the art of listening.

The *Cello Suites* are a true celebration of harmony itself, which creates a meaningful space for the guitar to explore its harmonic nature. In the Baroque era, arranging a work for another instrument implied adapting one's entire approach of the music to the nature of the instrument for which the work was being arranged. This can be found in many examples from the period, including those by Bach himself. However, by undertaking such a task today, an arranger is exposed to criticism because of the contemporary concern for authenticity. Such criticism may occur because there are endless possible answers to the question «*How would Bach do it?*» Answering it requires someone with the qualities of a composer, a musician whose intuition is based upon a thorough knowledge of a wide range of disciplines, from harmony and counterpoint to the more theoretical fields of style and aesthetics.

Renowned cellist Valter Dešpalj is one of those rare musicians whose musical integrity and knowledge match with creative playfulness. As a cellist, his relationship with Bach's *Cello Suites* is intense and it has inevitably followed him throughout his life. I can vividly see him working on them as a student at Juilliard in the 60's and during his international career as a soloist, with as much dedication as he does today. Fortunately for us guitarists, Dešpalj has been a great admirer of our instrument since his childhood. In the 80's, he developed an interest in arranging Bach's *Cello Suites* for the guitar and eventually went on to arrange the *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* as well as the *Flute Partita in A minor*, all published by *Chanterelle Editions*.

The following interview provides a lens into the process of giving form to the *Cello Suites* on the guitar, exposing the deep collaboration between the guitarist Darko Petrinjak and Valter Dešpalj, through which the concept of the suites found a structure that was both coherent on the guitar and contained the full musical meaning of the original composition. The interaction and

discussion between them offer the reader an opportunity to consider all of the questions and concerns that I could possibly hope to address in my own words. In this way, the interview provides the most accurate and genuine perspective about what I hope to convey —that the construction of knowledge and the perception of beauty is an active process in which we must all individually engage. The conversation between Valter Dešpalj and Darko Petrinjak presented here is an excerpt of an interview published in the annual magazine *Gitara* by the *Croatian Guitar Teachers Association* in 2010 and it is included in this booklet with their kind permission.

Conversation between Valter Dešpalj and Darko Petrinjak

Darko Petrinjak: Do you remember what initially inspired (provoked) you to write guitar transcriptions of Bach's music?

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Valter Dešpalj: First I was provoked, inspiration came later. I was provoked when I listened to various movements of «my» Bach *Cello Suites* in versions for the guitar. In fact, I often heard something that was completely incompatible with my experience of the hidden harmonic and polyphonic currents. Often I heard absence of pedal tones being, in my opinion, wrongly substituted with moving ones. Often I missed inversions of the triads. Often I missed passing tones in the bass line. (They were clearly avoided in order to prevent the «peril» of dissonant clashes between bass and the descant lines. However, such safe approach inevitably results in simple and bland voice leading.)

As a cellist with a particular affinity for the guitar who knows something about this instrument, I set myself the task of offering a different approach. When we cellists study

Bach's *Suites*, we must make a serious effort to deal analytically and intuitively with the latent aspects that are not written. While doing that, we are not burdened by the «call of the guitar», which can sometimes pose an irresistible temptation to an arranger. That the guitar is not my instrument was amply compensated for by the assistance I received from you and Prof. [István] Römer.

I started working on these transcriptions about twenty years ago. The initial version was completed after a couple of years and I could hardly wait for it to be published. However, publication took some time. The first to be issued were my transcriptions of the *Flute Partita* and *Violin Sonatas and Partitas*, while the *Suites* came later. Now I am glad that everything turned out this way because I had the opportunity to revise my arrangements of the *Suites* thoroughly over a long period of time, which is especially important for achieving critical detachment.

D.P.: Your editions of Bach for guitar are performing ones and have no scholarly pretensions, as you did not include an accompanying analytical texts. Why?

V.D.: Transcribing can hardly be defined as a scholarly work. Are Busoni's transcriptions of Bach's works scholarly? Is Ravel's instrumentation of *Pictures at an Exhibition* a scholarly instrumentation of Mussorgsky's original piano composition? Transcriptions are not usually accompanied by analytical texts prepared by the transcribers. I am not sure that guitar transcriptions, even of Bach, should be an exception. Texts by transcribers who attempt to explain their approaches scientifically can be intriguing and interesting, although some are mere blathering attempts to conceal that the emperor has no clothes.

As Hindemith would say: «Ear is the ultimate judge». Everything comes down to the ear of an arranger, performer and listener, to the level of ear's perception.

D.P.: In transcriptions of Bach's music, it appears that the main issue should be the extent to which his idiom is captured. In addition to the erudition necessary for someone to do this kind of work —knowledge of baroque style (especially Bach's), counterpoint, harmony, baroque dances etc.— what role do you attribute to intuition?

V.D.: Capturing the idiom actually happens in the sphere of intuition. Fortunately, with every composer, and thus with Bach, there are mannerisms that are good to know. However, when it comes to complicated situations, which, believe me, occur frequently in the *Suites*, intuition is the deciding factor. Misses are inevitable but it is important to keep them to a minimum.

Bach's *Cello Suites* are more sensitive than the *Violin Sonatas and Partitas* due to their comparably ascetic texture. Many parts, even whole movements, seem to resist transcription, at least at first glance. It would be rhetorical to ask ourselves whether the *Suites* should be performed on the guitar in their entirety or should we consider only a selection of individual movements that require minimal intervention. Reality is that no one will prevent guitarists from performing them in their entirety. So, let us try to make most out of it.

A more or less literal reading from the original cello score would violate the nature of the guitar as a melodic and harmonic instrument with a specific type of resonance and its own demands. In this sense, it is instructive to compare the *Fifth Suite* with Bach's version



for lute, where it is quite clear that when the composer changes the medium, he also changes the texture radically.

Long ago, I received a letter from John Williams in which he wrote: «I have never thought of it [*Second Suite*] on guitar – we just don't have that wonderful thing, the bow!» This is a good point. It means that if we take something away, we must give something back, in this case lines and chords. Of course, the risk is great and considerable effort is required to find the most suitable variants for the new medium and style. This is a delicate task where if we succeed 70 percent it is great, while the remaining 30 percent should at least be «within the limits of decency». Of course, those who lack the courage to take risks find a safe excuse in, what I would call, «urtext fundamentalism».

D.P.: In your transcriptions, so far no one that I know of has questioned closeness to the Bach's musical discourse. There were, however, some remarks to the extent that your text perhaps contains too many notes that are not found in Bach's original, i.e., that the percentage of additional or altered material is too high in some compositions for a performer to feel that he is playing only Bach. I know that you did everything to avoid the «Bach-Busoni syndrome» and obviously have succeeded. Could the reluctance of some guitarists to accept your transcriptions be due to their attachment to older versions?

V.D.: First, I must point out that I highly respect Busoni's Bach. Unlike Stokowski, whose instrumentation of Bach's works places flashy American orchestras in the forefront, Busoni is much more serious and congenial. His virtuosic arrangements of Bach's organ works are an

authentic reflection of, as the French would say, *l'air du temps*, the aesthetics of his time. This was approximately when Mahler was also making interventions in Beethoven's symphonies, to the horror of Viennese purists—in order to adapt them to the acoustics of what were then newly built concert halls. Of course, I do not listen to Busoni's arrangements with the same ear as original Bach, just as I listen to Liszt's paraphrases differently than to the originals that inspired them.

Transcriptions of Bach for the guitar, especially in our time, naturally follow quite a different protocol. Clearly, maximum respect towards the original cannot be questioned. However, without a certain playfulness and freedom, sterility occurs. Certainly, I should not recommend such freedom and playfulness to everyone because the territory is dangerous and sensitive.

I suggest that those who think I have overloaded my arrangements with too many notes should listen to the *Sixth Suite* in the version for harpsichord by Gustav Leonhardt, and they will certainly conclude that in terms of audacity my interventions are quite moderate in comparison to the hyper-opulent and dense harpsichord line of this famous virtuoso and Bach expert.

In five or ten years' time I shall certainly change my thinking about some of my solutions but, of course, not castigate myself over this. For what is published is fixed, but it is essential that my thinking does not become fixed.

D.P.: Trying out on guitar what you envisioned, and bearing witness to the procedure (sometimes quite time consuming) for seeking optimal solutions, I was struck by your sensibility for the guitar idiom and respect for practical performing elements. To what extent did the principle of playability limit your choice of solutions?

V.D.: My basic feeling was that the guitar had enough possibilities, and finding solutions to the problematic situations was an inspiring challenge. All along I sought a certain balance in the density of texture. Here your assistance in making decisions was invaluable, as was that of Prof. Römer for the *Sonatas and Partitas*. Additionally, both of you tested the results on your students, which was yet another important reference. I think that in terms of playability, the technical resistance here is comparable to that which violinists experience when playing the *Sonatas and Partitas*, or cellists when playing the last three *Suites*. Which is to say, they are not easy. However, I should not consider this an *a priori* shortcoming, particularly because there is a critical mass of excellent guitarists who can easily overcome all the obstacles they will encounter. I definitely would not recommend some of my solutions to those who lack complete mastery of the instrument.

D.P.: Your persistent striving to consider each movement as a whole, with all its elements in proportion (note values, the density of the musical texture, rhythmic patterns in the bass, decisions on eventual changes of octaves, climaxes and their hierarchy) should be emphasized. It was interesting for me to see how on occasion you would erase some of alluring solutions if you felt that they would not fit into the movement as a whole. You particularly respect the integrity of the bass part, which you most often reconstructed. I imagine that your experience of playing in orchestra and chamber ensembles helped you shape the bass part?

V.D.: As a general working principle, in the first phase I sought a slightly stronger input of added notes, which I then reduced to the extent that seemed reasonable to me. Yes, there

were also alluring possibilities that I subsequently discarded because they seemed, so to speak, clever but not wise.

As for the bass, it is a sacrosanct category, the root of all the developments. Every musician of flesh and blood, regardless of what or where he is playing, must sense this. I should, however, like to call attention to a trend, whereby the sound of the bass is often forced and, thus, somehow trivialized. The importance of the bass is not conveyed by such demonstrativeness but by expressive playing. The volume of sound of the bass should have a natural correlation with that of higher register. The root and the trunk are of paramount importance but let us remember how much the crown fascinates us.

Due to the non-polyphonic nature of the cello, the bass frequently disappears and reappears in the original. It may be said that this effect of certain austerity in the bass line is part of the charm of the *Suites* when we perform them on the cello. However, the guitar, as I mentioned, has its own requirements, so that what sounds restrained on the cello may sound «amputated» on the guitar. Therefore, I tried to realize the bass in a logical continuity. In order to satisfy this principle, I had to apply an occasional «impure» intervention in the top voice in order to avoid the forbidden parallelisms and doubling of tones. Jokingly, I could say that I hope that Bach will forgive me, and so will perhaps some stern guitarist. However, sometimes I abandoned adding the bass altogether if I felt that the situation called for an effect of contrasting planes.



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