

DLA Doctoral Thesis Abstracts

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**The Impact of Pablo Casals on the
Performance Tradition of Bach's Cello
Suites**

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I. Background of the Research

Johann Sebastian Bach's Cello Suites (BWV 1007–1012) have become indisputable cornerstones of the cello repertoire, with Pablo Casals' role in their performance history being famously epoch-making. Although popular legend claims that Casals discovered these works, the literature has so far paid little attention to a deeper understanding of this process. My research started from the realization that the true significance of Casals' innovations can only be understood when compared to earlier 19th-century performance practices.

One of the most important sources for my dissertation is Zoltán Szabó's thesis, which provides the most comprehensive exploration of the publication history of the suites to date and was indispensable for understanding 19th-century performance traditions. The main sources for Casals research were the artist's own recollections — recorded by J. M. Corredor — notes by his former student and later assistant Rudolf von Tobel, and the comprehensive analyses of David Blum. These works are invaluable for examining the cellist's technical and

musical thinking. For gathering data on the Hungarian reception and concert performances, the research of Piroska Molnár and the database of the HUN-REN Institute for Musicology provided irreplaceable help, giving an accurate picture of the contemporary concert scene and documentation of Casals' appearances.

II. Sources

The source base of my dissertation is the organic unity of sheet music editions, audio documents, and written records. My primary sources were manuscript copies, with special attention to the Anna Magdalena Bach (AMB) copy, which Casals considered the most authentic starting point. I compared this with the most important published editions of the cello suites from 1824 to 1929 (e.g., Norblin, Dotzauer, Grützmacher, Klengel, Alexanian), which are also primary sources for my work. Documents from the archive of the Pau Casals Institute in Barcelona are also of particular importance, as they provided answers to many key questions through the identification of the edition discovered by the artist.

In examining Casals' interpretation, I considered his recordings from 1936 to 1939 as the most important reference, as they capture the audible realization of the written musical solutions (timing, dynamics, articulation). To understand the theoretical background of the interpretation, I used notes from Casals' immediate circle (J. M. Corredor, David Blum, Rudolf von Tobel), which record Casals' verbal teachings and aesthetic views. To reconstruct the Hungarian reception, I processed reviews and concert programs from contemporary press (e.g., *Pesti Napló*, *Zenei Szemle*), which provide an authentic picture of how the artist's playing influenced Hungarian musical thinking.

III. Method

The methodological basis of my dissertation is historical source analysis and comparative interpretation study. In my research, I directly linked the analysis of sheet music editions (e.g., Dotzauer, Grützmacher, Alexanian) with the study of performance practice. In the analysis of interpretation, I compared Casals' 1936–1939 recordings with the edition published by Rudolf von Tobel, as well

as the instructions recorded by David Blum and J. M. Corredor. This approach made it possible to trace audible musical phenomena (dynamics, agogics, timbre, articulation) back to specific technical solutions (fingerings, bowing). I used the same comparative method to reconstruct 19th-century performance traditions, contrasting the instructions of contemporary editions (Grützmacher, Becker) with Casals' solutions, thus making interpretative differences visible.

IV. Results

The choice of topic for my dissertation was primarily inspired by a deep respect and love for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, as well as the professional admiration I feel for Pablo Casals' artistic and human character. As a cellist, Casals is for me not just a historical figure, but one of the most outstanding representatives of instrumental thinking; his entire persona and musical humility are exemplary. The driving force behind my research was the curiosity to understand what made him the person whose name is associated with the legend of

the discovery of the suites, and what truly defines his innovative role compared to earlier traditions.

My investigations provided a more nuanced picture of the 19th-century perception of the works. My results show that before Casals, the suites—though not forgotten—were regarded more as excellent pedagogical material and stylistic exercises for technical development, rather than as concert repertoire pieces. Casals' merit was to elevate Bach's compositions to the highest rank of musical works, surpassing this earlier view. Based on my research in the Pau Casals Institute archive, I clarified that although Casals found the romantic Grütsmacher edition (*Konzert Fassung*) and kept it for the rest of his life, the true origin and musical compass of his interpretation was the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript copy. This also supports the idea that the artist sought authenticity by exploring deeper layers of the sources.

The main result of the dissertation is the exploration of Casals' musical vision. I have shown that the essence of his innovation lay not only in technical solutions—which also served to create polyphony—but in recognizing the structural and dramaturgical unity of the

works. Casals was the one who saw the suites not as a series of separate movements, but as an organic whole. The key to his interpretation was a deep understanding of Bach's intricate polyphony and the conscious use of articulation. For him, timing and articulation were not technical issues, but among the most important means of musical expression, making the piece speech-like and rhetorical. My research highlighted the artistic attitude that characterized Casals throughout his life: the constant search for ever better solutions and the desire to convey the richness of Bach's music as faithfully as possible.

V. Activities Related to the Subject of the Thesis

While writing my dissertation, I gave several concerts where I played some of Bach's suites. At my final concert, I will perform the D minor (BWV 1008) cello suite.