

Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music
Doctoral School (7.6 Music)

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J. S. BACH: SIX SUITES FOR VIOLONCELLO SOLO
(BWV 1007-1012)
PERFORMANCE, ARTICULATION
PROBLEMS OF THE SOURCES AND THE CRITICAL
EDITIONS

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation

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I. Introduction to the Research

As a cello player I first faced the great variety of interpretations of the Bach Cello Suites (BWV 1007-1012) when preparing for their performance. The wide variety of performance manners can be easily observed as much in the live performances as in the recordings and in the editions, of which almost a hundred exist today. Having gotten to know the manuscript sources of these essential pieces of the cello repertory, I have come to the conclusion that one of the reasons for the great interpretational variety must lie in the differences of the sources, and in the fact that in a number of cases they are very difficult to read and to explain. Following an examination of most of the existing editions, and thoroughly ly listening to many recordings, I found that it would be interesting and worth while to study the interpretational questions raised by the sources in relation to the critical editions of the pieces. For in these latter, presumably expert editors, entrusted by well-known publishing houses, attempt to reconstruct „authentic“ versions of the pieces.

As the basis of my research I have chosen five modern critical editions which take into account all of the now-known manuscript sources of the Cello Suites (there are four sources, labelled generally in the international literature and in my thesis as A, B, C and D). And I have set as a goal for my studies to compare, with the sources and with each other, the chosen editions (the standard setting volume of the Neue Bach Ausgabe plus four critical editions from the year 2000).

Out of the great number of possible aspects I have chosen the articulation to discuss in detail. I came to this decision mainly for three reasons: first, articulation can be well observed in both the sources and in the editions; second, articulation is in a very close, inseparable relationship with performance; third, this aspect seemed at first glance the most complicated of all, with substantial differences between the editions and the sources.

My dissertation therefore studies and evaluates the editorial decisions concerning the articulation of five critical editions of the Bach Cello Suites with special consideration given to the manuscript sources. The publication data of the chosen editions can be seen in the table below.

Publisher	Year	Editor(s)	Facsimile supplement
Bärenreiter NBA VI/2 kötet	1991	Hans Eppstein	manuscripts A, B, C, D
Bärenreiter „Bärenreiter Urtext“	2000	Bettina Schwemer, Douglas Woodfull-Harris	manuscripts A, B, C, D and the first printed edition
Breitkopf & Härtel	2000	Kirsten Beisswenger	manuscript A
Henle	2000	Egon Voss, Reiner Ginzl	—
Wiener Urtext	2000	Ulrich Leisinger	—

II. Research Methods

Before starting my research I made a thorough examination of the modern international musicological literature concerning my subject. I found a large number of dissertations, articles and essays about Bach's Cello Suites, but, as far as I could trace, none of them discuss my chosen subject: the problems raised by the sources in relation to the critical editions. I started my thesis by summarizing the most important critical studies related to my topic, especially those about the performance problems and methods of the Cello Suites (Chapter I.).

To place the chosen editions in a wider context and to demonstrate their significance, I considered it important to write a short survey of [past](#) editions, focusing primarily on the critical editions and on those where at least a critical intention can be identified (Chapter II., Part 1). [Currently](#), the formal characteristics, the [objective](#), and the types of critical editions in general [raise](#) controversies in the musicological discourse. Concerning this topic I described the opinion of two experts [in](#) the field: Georg Feder and James Grier (both authors of monographs about editing music; Chapter II., Part 2). They both make a point about the problematic meaning of the term *urtext*, which actually appears in some way in all my chosen editions (as I have stated, it is usually meant to express the scholarly nature of the edition). Despite the controversial terminology, I could also identify all of the editions as critical editions, even according to the strict criteria formulated by James Grier. The aim of the editors and the publishers, i.e., is to create a musical text that is closest to the intentions of the composer, and to make critically informed decisions after – among other things – examining the sources and the historical context of the pieces. [All](#) of the editions [contain](#) an extensive preface which discusses the basic editorial principles and the background for the decisions of the editors, the single decisions are accounted for in the critical report. The signs, which are not directly drawn from the sources but come from the editors, are unambiguously indicated in the musical text (by different kinds of parentheses and broken lines).

Most of the problems concerning the sources of the Cello Suites arise [because](#) the composer's [autograph copy](#) does not survive. We know the pieces today from four 18th century copies. Two were made during Bach's lifetime: one by his second wife Anna Magdalena, and another (earlier) one by one of his personal acquaintances, the organist-composer Johann Peter Kellner (manuscripts A and B). The other two manuscripts were copied after Bach's death, but still in the 18th century (copies C and D). To demonstrate the main notational characteristics of the four copies I analyzed a page from each of them (Chapter III., Part 3). [After the analysis, my most important conclusions were the following:](#)

- The manuscript of Anna Magdalena Bach (A) is very reliable and careful [concerning the notes and the rhythm](#), but her articulation marks seem to be in many cases careless, sometimes almost impossible to understand.
- J. P. Kellner's copy (B) is very crowded, some parts of the pieces are even missing from it, and its articulation marks are the sparsest of all. The manuscript as a whole makes the impression that it was probably made for the copyist's own use. It's hard to

explain the fact that this earliest copy contains some good, plausible solutions (in both the articulation, and the notes and the rhythm) which are independent from all the others.

- C and D copies are strikingly similar to one another. Their notation is clean and well planned. Their articulation marks are not only [more easily](#) understandable compared to the earlier sources, but the number of the marks is considerably [larger](#) as well (both the legato and the staccato marks).

After discussing the more or less certain facts about the origin of the sources, I turned to describing the hypotheses of the editors about dating the manuscripts and about the relationship of the copies to one another (Chapter III, [Parts 1, 2, 4, 5](#)). Based on these assumptions, the editors formulate the basic principles by which they are able to make decisions about different aspects and details of their musical text.

After examining and evaluating the research and the ideas of the editors, their points of departure for the preparation of the musical text, including the articulation, can be summarized (of course here only in a simplified way) as follows:

- Hans Eppstein (NBA) creates two musical texts (Text I and II); the first is based mainly on source A and to a lesser extent on B, while the second on both C and D.
- Kirsten Beisswenger (Breitkopf) bases her edition entirely on the copy of Anna Magdalena Bach. As an aid to solving the problematic articulation marks, she uses information gathered from a detailed examination of copies of other works made by Bach's [second](#) wife.
- The edition of Egon Voss (Henle) is also based on manuscript A, but for the interpretation of the articulation marks he considers the information of the other three sources as well.
- Ulrich Leisinger (Wiener Urtext) prepares his edition using sources C and D.
- Bettina Schwemer and Douglas Woodfull-Harris (Bärenreiter Urtext) decided to publish all the sources in facsimile, and their musical text does not contain any slur marks.

As critical editions, the declared goal of all of the chosen editions is to recreate – as closely as possible – the original text in accordance with the intentions of the composer. As a background for this, I have examined the obtainable information about 18th century and also especially Bach's articulation in both the 18th century (J. J. Quantz, L. Mozart, J. Mattheson, M. Corrette, G. Muffat, J. G. Walther, C. P. E. Bach) and in the modern literature (N. Harnoncourt, J. Severus, M. Cyr, G. Dadelsen, J. Butt, J. R. Fuchs; Chapter IV). Among the general characteristics of articulation – as formulated in Bach's time – I have found important descriptions about the parallels [between](#) speech and music, about the rule of the down-bow, about the exact meaning of a slur and also about the interpretation of musical places without written-out articulation marks. I have noticed that, concerning Bach's articulation, the three most important points made by musicologists today are: Bach elaborates many details in a most

thorough way; his articulation is often special, but generally it is tightly connected to the conventions of his time and environment; and there are many exceptions and variations to be found among his articulation marks, but, as a rule, his articulation can be regarded as mostly consistent. In the light of all this information I could state that all my chosen editions set out to interpret the sources of the Bach Cello Suites by taking into consideration the 18th century articulation conventions and also the general consistency of Bach's articulation.

Knowing the general background and the declared basic concept of each of the editors, I could [proceed](#) to the detailed examination of their editorial decisions. The different motives of their individual decisions – in some cases, at least – could be reconstructed from their critical commentaries. After studying and comparing all the articulation marks of all the manuscripts and all the sources, I decided to demonstrate the typical problems [with](#) a large number of examples classified according to the declared motives of the editors. Naturally, a large number of the problems [arising](#) in the sources are connected with the characteristics of the hand-written musical text. Such details [include](#) the mistakes made in space distribution on the paper (the collision of the musical signs), the corrections, the changes of staff, the beaming of the notes, the direction of the note-stems, and the shorthand notation of the articulation (Chapter V, Part 1). Aside [from](#) these, the decisions of the editors were shaped by [such](#) factors as the technique of cello playing and musical aspects, [for example](#) as analogy and polyphony (Chapter V, Part 2).

[One](#) of my aims was to show, in the analysis, that most editorial decisions are shaped by many factors at the same time, and [to demonstrate](#) how much the musical text of the critical editions depends on the subjective interpretation of the editors.

III. The Results of the Research

In my dissertation I could discuss only the most important examples of my detailed and thorough examination of the sources and of the five chosen editions. I hope that one of the results of these examples is [to](#) shed light on the articulation problems and possibilities of a number of individual movements and excerpts in the Cello Suites. Apart from this my goal was to draw more general conclusions about the articulation characteristics of the sources and also to evaluate the five editions with regard to [both](#) their basic principles and their decisions. As a result of my examinations I could make the following general statements [about the editions](#):

- Of the editions which are based on the manuscript of Anna Magdalena Bach (Beisswenger and Voss), I found Beisswenger's the more respectable, considering [both](#) its general methods and its individual decisions. Beisswenger's basic principles are firmly established and strictly adhered to: her goal is to base the edition on the copy of Anna Magdalena Bach (AMB), taking into account the facts known about her hand writing [manners](#). Her decisions are well documented in the critical report, and her musical text often offers more than one articulation possibility. The point of departure

declared by Voss seems [to me](#) to [be](#) to a certain extent vague (he prepares the edition by following mainly the copy of AMB, but sometimes he considers the information included in the other sources as well), and the reasons given [for](#) his basic principles are at some points questionable. The general tendency of Voss is to transfer AMB's articulation marks into the modern edition literally, exactly as seen in the source. I found this mostly negative, because sometimes these solutions seem musically or technically almost absurd. At the same time, it has a positive side as well: this way Voss does not give up the variety of articulations found in the sources, he does not make his musical text too uniform. Generally we do not [learn](#) Voss's train of thought because he applies his notes very sparingly, sometimes almost insufficiently.

- Leisinger departs on his own new findings and hypotheses about the four manuscript sources, which Beisswenger questions at certain points. I do not deny that Leisinger's thoughts can be debated, but I have no doubt that an edition based on sources C and D is surely justified and significant. According to Leisinger, the information included in the later sources most probably comes from Bach himself. But even if this [were](#) not true, I think Leisinger concludes correctly that the articulation and other marks in C and D come from well-educated musicians, and thus are very important sources of 18th century performance practice. Leisinger's individual decisions are always reasonable, and are based on a broad knowledge of the subject. His critical notes are short but very precise. I find it especially useful that he places the most important variants of the two older sources in small print on the bottom of the pages of the main musical text.

- Because of the great similarity of sources C and D, I think it is reasonable and useful to base a critical edition on both of them at the same time (e.g. Leisinger). On the contrary, I find that sources A and B are different to such an extent that, even if they originate very close to each other in time and space, the mixing of their musical signs results in an artificial musical text. This is the main reason for judging Eppstein's first text as problematic. It is also true that, with the aid of the detailed critical notes, it is possible to separate the articulation marks that come from A from those that come from B. But I am not sure how close to Bach's intentions a musical text that is put together from two, sometimes sharply differing, sources [can get](#). Another disadvantage of Eppstein's edition is a tendency to prefer too many uniform solutions based on musical analogy. Despite the questions raised by the musical texts, I think Eppstein's edition is (more than fifteen years after its creation) still fundamentally significant because of the detailed description of his own research, and the exhaustive amount of explanatory notes.

- Kellner's copy of the Cello Suites seems to have been made for his own use; it is not complete and it contains many inaccuracies. But curiously, it also contains some independent and plausible solutions, which – as I have noted – do not appear with enough weight in any of the chosen critical editions. The only place where some of them do appear is Eppstein's Text I, but, as I mentioned above, [they are](#) mixed with the signs of source A. Because of its deficiencies, I do not think that Kellner's copy (B) could serve alone as a basis for any critical edition of the Cello Suites. But I would find interesting and important an edition that would [present](#) this manuscript to modern users.

▪ Compared to the other chosen critical editions, the Bärenreiter Urtext (by Bettina Schwemer and Douglas Woodfull-Harris) gives a radically different answer to the questions raised by the extant sources of the Cello Suites. The slurs, which cause the biggest problem, do not appear in the edition at all. Instead the user-performer can create a [personal](#) version by studying the attached facsimiles. Because of the complicated nature of the extant sources I find the solution of these editors very well justified. [For a limited circle of \(musically trained and well informed\) users](#) this edition is [very useful and indispensable](#).

▪ The edition of Bärenreiter Urtext raises questions about the other critical editions as well. If an easily obtainable edition like this exists, which describes all the important information about the sources and makes it also possible to study the sources themselves, why is there still [a](#) need for such editions as the ones prepared by Beisswenger or Voss? In my thesis I noted that, to make use of the latter editions as a performer, a large amount of intellectual input is needed. The articulation in them is not ready to use, it needs to be stylishly supplemented. On the other hand, the articulation marks of the sources cannot be [located](#) in them either, because the hand-written, sometimes inaccurate, slurs of the manuscripts cannot and must not be reproduced in a modern edition, not even in the critical notes. The intended meaning of the articulation marks in source A (and B) is [in](#) some places so obscure that no matter how much an editor is striving for the least amount of editorial intervention, a lot will depend on subjective decisions. In fact, so much, that I think, [that](#), for an exacting user, the examination of the manuscript facsimiles will be inevitable. But this then means that the user/performer is already following the method suggested by the Bärenreiter Urtext edition. The other critical editions can only be interesting, in as much as in them one can discover the opinion of an experienced musicologist or Bach-scholar. For the less exacting users, for example amateur cellists or young students, a well prepared instructive edition can serve much better than a hard-to-use critical edition. Thus, the solution of the Bärenreiter Urtext in the case of the Bach Cello Suites has maybe not entirely surpassed the traditional critical editions, but has at least diminished their significance.