

Authenticities in Performance: Anner Bylsma, Pablo Casals and Steven Isserlis's Recordings of
the Sarabande from Bach's Suite No. 2 in D Minor for Unaccompanied Cello BWV 1008

Isis Tse

“If we look at the works of J.S. Bach... on each page we discover things which we thought were born only yesterday, from delightful arabesques to an overflowing of religious feeling greater than anything we have since discovered.” – Claude Debussy

Introduction

The relationship between composer and performer has long been a convoluted one. Performers are often taught, first and foremost, to respect the composer’s wishes – they strive to give “authentic” performances. The concept of authenticity is especially problematic in early music (Medieval to Baroque). The rise of historically informed performance, in which period instruments and techniques are used, has sparked increased debate about the meaning of authenticity.

The range of performance practices varies widely among performers of early music. The search for an “authentic” interpretation of Bach’s *Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* has been a source of contention among cellists; the suites contain almost no musical indications such as dynamics, tempo or bowings. The range of interpretations stretches from Baroque period style performance to highly Romantic. Though most discussion about authenticity centers around historical authenticity, a second type of authenticity exists – a *personal* sense of authenticity.

In this paper, three recordings of the Sarabande from the second suite will be discussed in terms of their approaches to authenticity. The first recording is that of Pablo Casals, who first popularized the Suites. The second is the 1979 recording of Anner Bylsma, who is a noted advocate and practitioner of historically informed performance. The third is that of Steven Isserlis.

The meaning of authenticity

The word “authentic” has three relevant definitions to our discussion: 1) original, firsthand, 2) of authority, authoritative, 3) belonging to himself, own, proper.¹ These meanings give rise to three distinct types of authenticity, as described in Peter Kivy’s book *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance*.² The first two meanings of authenticity are concerned with historical authenticity. The first sense of authenticity is concerned with being “original” or firsthand; the performance recreates the way the work sounded during the composer’s lifetime. The second meaning of authenticity, stemming from “authoritative”, is faithful adherence to the composer’s intentions of the work. The third type of authenticity concerns originality on the part of the performer – a personal authenticity.

The first sense of authenticity is *sonic authenticity (the historical authenticity of physical sound)*. In other words, the performers hope to replicate, to the best of their knowledge, how the music would have sounded during the composer’s lifetime. This sense of authenticity does not concern how the music perceived by listeners of the period, but rather, how it sounded objectively. For example, to our modern ears, Baroque period woodwind instruments sound almost consistently out of tune, but their questionable intonation may have been perceived entirely differently by Baroque audiences. In this sense of authenticity, the Baroque period instruments are still *sonically authentic*, regardless of how our perception of their intonation may have changed.

The second sense of authenticity that we have identified is *authenticity as faithfully adhering to the composer’s intentions*. The word “intention” in this context has been questioned in the Wimsatt and Beardsley article “The Intentional Fallacy” and subsequently in Taruskin’s

¹ Kivy, Peter. *Authenticities : philosophical reflections on musical performance*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.

² Kivy also describes a fourth type of authenticity – authenticity as *practice*, not in the sense of the composer’s intentions but as contemporary practice. Kivy deals with mainly non-aural aspects of performance practice, which are not relevant to our discussion here.

essay “On Letting the Music Speak for Itself”. In understanding this sense of authenticity, however, we will assume that composers do, in fact, have intentions, and that these intentions can be made known to us. These intentions can be: 1) expressed by the composer in the score, or 2) inferred by the performer based on knowledge of the performance practice of the composer’s period. At first glance, this seems to amount to the same type of authenticity as *sonic authenticity*. However, in this sense of authenticity, composer's intentions are to be understood against the background of what was possible, conceivable or known at the time. Based on knowledge about performance practice and the notated score, performers can make reasonable conclusions about the composer’s intentions as they apply them today. The objective sounds may vary from those produced during the composer’s lifetime, while still showing fidelity to their intentions.

Our last sense of authenticity is *personal authenticity*. All performances of a work are “versions” of that work. When a performance has a personal character and originality, it is a distinguishable version of that work and thus exhibits personal authenticity.

Bach’s Cello Suites and the sarabande

Although the exact date of composition of the Cello Suites is unknown, scholars believe that the suites were written around 1720, in the period when Bach was focused on instrumental music. The suites were not widely known before the 20th century and were generally believed to be technical exercises.³ In 1939, Pablo Casals began the first-ever studio recording of the Suites, bringing them into mainstream cello repertoire. Each of the six suites contains six movements: a prelude, followed by five dance movements – an allemande, courante, sarabande, either a pair of minuets, a bourrée, or a gavotte, and finally, a gigue. The Suites are often called a study in

³ Eric Soblin. *The Cello Suites*. (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2009), 4.

“implied harmony” due to the nature of the solo instrument. Though Bach uses double and triple stops frequently, the texture is sparse.

The original manuscript of the Suites was lost, leaving two main versions: those of Anna Magdalena Bach and Johann Peter Keller. The bowings are the main point of contention between the different manuscripts. Scholars contend that Kellner’s edition is inconsistent in terms of articulation and difficult to interpret.⁴ Anna Magdalena Bach’s version is often held as authoritative due to her proximity to the composer, but her version is also seen to be ambiguous and inconsistent with regard to the placement of slurs. Scholars have noted that a comparison of her copy of Bach’s violin sonatas and partitas with Bach’s copy reveals the carelessness of her articulation marks: slurs are sometimes inaccurate, difficult to read, or skipped entirely.⁵ On the other hand, the “missing” slurs may be indicative of a loose Italian style of bowing. The inconsistencies in bowings between the different sources seem impossible to resolve; scholars continue their attempt to comprehend Bach’s intentions as closely as possible. Ultimately, though Bach’s original manuscript has been lost, we must assume that the versions that exist, taken together, reveal enough about Bach’s intentions that we can perform the Suites. While the bowings vary greatly between the two versions, the notes and their durations are generally the same.

Sarabandes were originally lively dances that were popular in Spain, but with their spread to France in the 17th century, they evolved to become slow court dances.⁶ The signature characteristic of the sarabande is an accentuation on the second beat in triple meter; the accentuation can be harmonic, agogic, melodic, or dynamic. This accentuation is heard in

⁴ Paul R. Laird. *The Baroque cello revival: An oral history*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 72.

⁵ Laird, 76.

⁶ Allen Winold. *Bach's cello suites: analyses and explorations*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 56.

opposition to the first beat of the measure. The downbeat, then, must also be accented for the sarabande to retain a sense of triple meter.

Sarabande from the Second Suite

Sarabande.

The musical score is presented in four systems of staves. The first system contains measures 1-4 (P1) and measures 5-8 (P2). The second system contains measures 9-12 (P3) and measures 13-16 (P4). The third system contains measures 17-20 (P5) and measures 21-24 (P6). The fourth system contains measures 25-28 (P7). The score includes various musical notations such as trills (tr), grace notes (w), and slurs.

Figure 1: Sarabande from Suite 2 of the Bach Cello Suites.⁷

Bach's second cello suite is written in D minor. The key allows for extensive use of the open strings (namely A, D, and G). Playing the open strings creates a more "open" sound than stopped notes – the harmonics are more audible and double and triple stops can be used to greater effect to create a thicker texture. The cello, as a melodic instrument, limits how much harmony can be achieved: generally, only two strings can be played simultaneously. Thus, a

⁷ Johann Sebastian Bach. "Sarabande," in *Suite No.2 for Unaccompanied Cello BWV 1008*, ed. Alfred Dörffel (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1879), 67.

complete chord can never be truly played at once, relying on the residual sounding of one or more notes. Bach relies on implied harmony in creating his trademark polyphony.

A main feature of the Sarabande is stepwise movement in the range of a third. The movement is generally restricted – the largest leap is that of sixth until we reach the third phrase. The phrases have been labelled below (P1, P2, etc.) The Sarabande is divided into two sections by the repeat after the third phrase. The form can be seen as two symmetrical sections of three phrases, with the last phrase (phrase 7) functioning as a codetta. With the exception of the first phrase, the fourth (which ends the first section), and last phrase, each phrase begins with an upbeat of three notes. Each of these upbeats contains three eighth notes except for the sixth phrase (which ends the second section), which contains a sixteenth followed by two eighth notes.

The Baroque cello and bow, and Baroque performance practice

The nature of the baroque instrument directly affects how it is played, and thus is invaluable in understanding the performance practice of the time (especially in relation to the modern cello). The baroque cello differs from its modern counterpart in its shape, type of strings, and tuning. On the baroque cello (see figure 2), the neck is attached to the body of the instrument almost at a right angle. This positioning of the neck allows for little room for clearance of the strings over the mid-section of the instrument. As a result, the bridge on the instrument is quite low in comparison to the modern cello. The type of string used during the Baroque era of 1600 to 1750 was the gut string, which was made of sheep or goat intestines. In comparison to the commonly-used metal strings of the modern cello, the gut strings had a softer tone with quieter high frequency harmonics. The sound of the gut strings blended well with the resonance of other Baroque instruments. The baroque cellos are commonly tuned at a lower frequency (415 Hz for the A string) than the modern cellos (440 Hz), making the sound a semitone lower. These

properties of the Baroque cello resulted in lower string tension, thus creating a generally warmer, gentler and less penetrating sound.

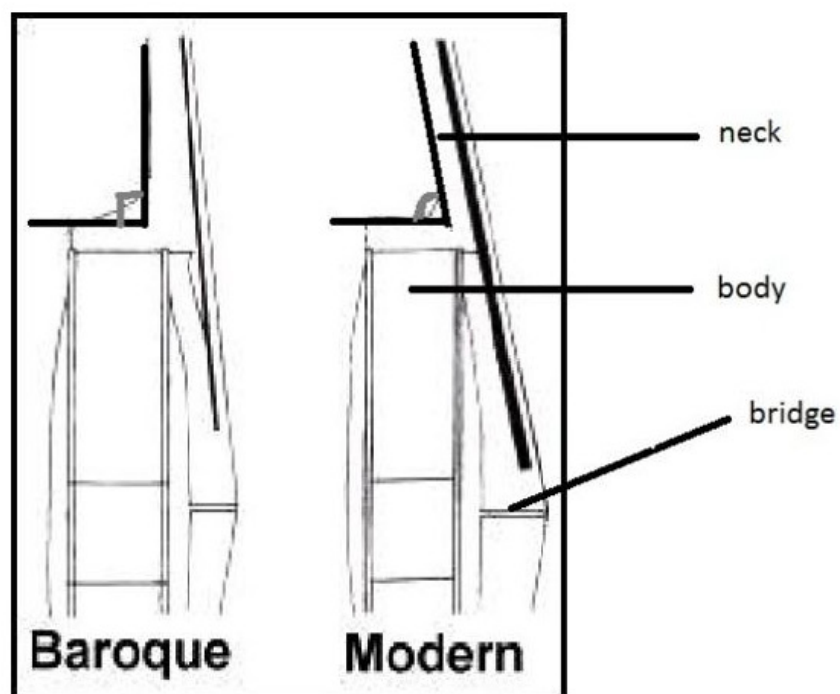


Figure 2: Baroque cello and modern cello ⁸

A typical bow from the late 17th or early 18th century would be made from snakewood (a much stiffer, denser wood than pernambuco, which is used for modern bows), have $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of a modern bow, half the amount of hair and a fixed frog. This made for a crisper, lighter articulation, increased agility and a greater variety of detached bow strokes. The bow is held further down the stick rather than at the frog (see figure 3). This hold, combined with the decreased tension in the hair, leads to an overall lighter pressure when compared to its modern counterpart (see figure 4). Long, sustained bow strokes are hard to achieve with a baroque bow: due to its curved shape, the pressure is low at the upper end of the bow. The modern bow is capable of producing powerful, sustained notes through the entire length of the bow.

⁸ "The Baroque Cello." *Internet Cello Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 December 2014.



Figure 3: Baroque bow ⁹

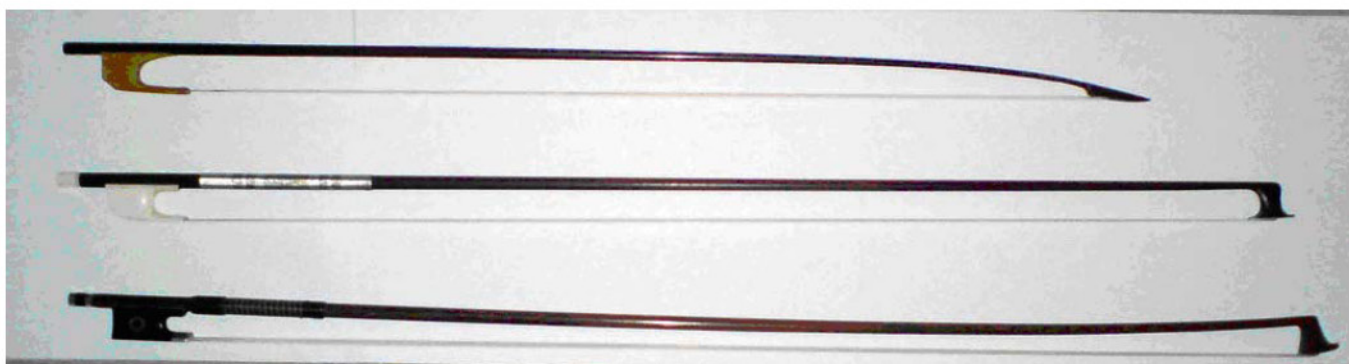


Figure 4: Baroque bow (top) and modern bow (bottom) ¹⁰

After 1750, the Baroque cello gradually evolved into the current wooden cello. To achieve a better partnership with the modern piano, the modern wood cello was designed to produce a harder-edged, more penetrating sound. To generate this type of sound, the cello required a larger string tension, created by a higher bridge in conjunction with the tilting of the neck backwards at a larger angle from the body of the instrument. The increased angle of the neck allowed for higher string tension without restricting the movement of the left hand.

Vibrato was used for occasional ornamentation in the Baroque period. By the Romantic period of the 19th century, it was appropriate to employ vibrato almost throughout a piece; vibrato began at the beginning of a note and was used continuously. However, in the Baroque

⁹ Josephine van Lier, "Baroque Bow," Photograph, 2014. *Josephinevanlier.com*, <http://www.josephinevanlier.com/images%20sept%202009/Bow-Baroque-Josephine-van-Lier2.jpg>

¹⁰ Oliver Webber, "Bow." Photograph. 2014. *TheMonteverdiViolins.org*, <http://www.themonteverdiviolins.org/baroque-violin.html>

era, with the use of gut strings, vibrato began later in the note to allow time for the gut strings to sound. The vibrato itself was also less wide and fast than that used in the Romantic era.

Anner Bylsma's recording of the Sarabande

Anner Bylsma's 1979 recording of the Bach Cello Suites was instrumental in defining the historical performance movement. Anner Bylsma plays on a Matteo Goffriller cello made in 1693 and uses a Baroque bow. Bylsma, by using the period instrument (tuned to 415Hz) and bow, and adopting a historically informed performance style, is clearly interested in *sonic authenticity*. *Authenticity as intention* was defined above as: 1) adhering to the intentions written in the score, and 2) adhering to the performance practice of the period. In the case of the Sarabande, there are almost no interpretive markings given by Bach (as noted earlier, the bowings are a major source of contention), but Bach undoubtedly labeled the movement as a sarabande. Bylsma's interpretation is guided by *authenticity as intention*: fundamentally, by the notion of the Sarabande as dance, as well as the way in which the baroque cello is played. In this case, then, *authenticity as intention* and *authenticity as sound* are the same: Bylsma playing is faithful to Baroque performance practice (and Bach's intention that the movement be a Sarabande), and his choice of instrument is historically accurate.

Bylsma writes that a sarabande is "passionate and serious" – but that it is a dance, "not a song".¹¹ He plays in a moderate, steady triple meter, keeping with the dance character of the movement (M.M. ± 54 , quarter note); one can imagine people moving in step to this tempo. The articulation is fairly detached, as would be expected from the nature of the instrument and the bow. The second beats of the measure are accentuated mainly through stronger articulation, and occasionally, lengthening of the note. His performance is marked by silences between beats,

¹¹ Anner Bylsma. *Bach, the fencing master: reading aloud from the first three cello suites*. (Amsterdam: Bylsma's Fencing Mail, 1998), 85.

especially between chords (double and triple stops) and separated notes, allowing for the time needed for the gut strings to resonate.

Bylsma's was not the first recording of the suites on Baroque cello – Nikolaus Harnoncourt released one in 1965 – but Bylsma's was the first that dramatically reinterpreted the suites. Most previous recordings of the suites were greatly influenced by nineteenth-century Romanticism. Bylsma is well-known for his “historically informed performances”. Beyond his Baroque style, however, his style is difficult to find: he is careful not to “overplay” the music or revel in dramatic emotions. No phrase seems to have more importance than another – the codetta is a matter of fact phrase rather than the culmination of the movement. The implied harmonies and dissonances are passed through. His articulation is dry, and vibrato is scarce. The tempo is rigid; he uses only slight rubato, usually accelerating towards a cadential point, and allowing time for silence after chords. Taken in the context of his recording being the first to present a “historically informed performance” of the Sarabande, his version almost seems to be striving to be the antithesis of the slow, romantic Sarabande that was expected.

Pablo Casals's recording of the Sarabande

Casals brought the Suites out of obscurity with his 1939 recording. Previously thought to be merely technical exercises, Casals's deeply emotional interpretation was shocking. In recounting the reception to his initial performance of the Suites, Casals says, “the purists said that this was not Bach... Now the Bach at that time was played like an exercise, without any real musical meaning. They were afraid to put something in it... they have accepted the bad theory that the music of Bach is objective.”¹²

Casals's version of the second Sarabande is slow and legato (M.M. ± 42 , quarter note) Casals plays on a modern cello with a modern bow. John Planer, in his article “Sentimentality in

¹² David Blum. *Casals and the art of interpretation*. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977), 141.

the Performance of Absolute Music: Pablo Casals's Performance of the Saraband from Johann Sebastian Bach's Suite No. 2 in D Minor for Unaccompanied Cello, S. 1008" has examined this recording in detail. Planer asserts that Casals's tempo distorts the triple meter to the extent that it is heard as duple meter, destroying the distinctive characteristic of a sarabande.¹³ Planer also criticizes Casals's excessive use of rubato. The Sarabande, Planer asserts, consists of three types of rhythmic conflict: 1) conflict between 3/4 and 6/8 groupings, 2) struggle for dominance between the first and second beats of each measure, and 3) opposition of the notated triple meter against a meter of 2/8. Casals's durational accentuation of long notes disrupts the balance between the rhythmic conflicts. Integral to these rhythmic conflicts is a predominant sense of triple meter. Planer concludes that "to gain emotional intensity Casals sacrifices Bach's subtle rhythmic equilibrium."¹⁴ Casals comments that, "they always say 'play what is written' – but there is *nothing written!*"¹⁵ The score, however, does have something written – the notes, with durations and pitches, and the title of "Sarabande". Since the only stylistic indicator of Bach's intentions on the score is that the movement is a sarabande, and the defining characteristic of the sarabande is its triple meter, Casals's "sentimentality" is in direct opposition to Bach's written intentions.

Of Casals's other highly Romantic means of interpretation, Planer writes only that his "dynamic accentuation, vibrato, bowing and intonation are effective and appropriate".¹⁶ In understanding Baroque performance practice, many of these aspects of style are questionable in terms of their authenticity. Casals's wide, continuous vibrato and audibly conspicuous shifts

¹³ John H. Planer. "Sentimentality in the performance of absolute music: Pablo Casals's performance of Saraband from Johann Sebastian Bach's suite no. 2 in D minor for unaccompanied cello, S.1008." *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (January 1, 1989), 246.

¹⁴ Planer, 246.

¹⁵ Blum, 142.

¹⁶ Planer, 246.

(glissandos) are certainly historically inaccurate in Baroque performance practice; and his powerful, sustained bow strokes would have been impossible with period instruments. Casals's recording is clearly not authentic according to our first two senses of the term: as intention and as sound.

However, Casals undoubtedly displays great *personal authenticity* in his recording. His version of the Sarabande is intensely emotional. His style of playing is unmistakable: he expertly shapes the phrases and stretches dissonances through rubato and leads the melody through dramatic contours in dynamics. Casals writes, "Bach must be free. When the purists hear me say you must play Bach like you play Chopin they are horrified. But I laugh at them. Nobody has arrived to the expression of Bach."¹⁷

According to our original definition of *authenticity as intention*, intention is tied to historical accuracy: a Romantic interpretation of a Baroque work cannot be authentic in this sense. Casals regards his interpretation as an expression of Bach's intentions. In the debate about the nature of the composer's intentions, an argument often made is that the composer might have preferred our modern instruments and means of performance. Perhaps Bach would have liked his music to be played like Chopin's; but these questions can never be answered. The information we possess can only be based in historical fact; Bach could not have preferred a sound that did not exist during his time. Despite Casals's sincerity, his performance cannot be considered authentic to Bach's intentions.

In comparing the recordings of Bylsma and Casals, a question arises: are historically authentic performance and personal interpretation incompatible? Bylsma's personal interpretive style seems lost behind adherence to Baroque performance practice, whereas Casals indulges in personal emotion but distorts central characteristics of the music. Surely a balance between these

¹⁷ Blum, 153.

two types of authenticity can exist. For example, in studying historical performance practice, we know that fast, continuous vibrato is inappropriate for Baroque music, but moderately paced vibrato can be employed as ornamentation. Rhythmic flexibility can be used, as long as rubato is not used to the extent that it distorts an overall pulse. Within the context of Baroque performance practice, a personal expressive style is possible to achieve.

Steven Isserlis's recording of the Sarabande

Steven Isserlis released his recording of the Bach cello suites in 2007. Isserlis plays on a Stradivarius, but rather than using modern steel strings, he always uses gut strings. He takes a relatively slow tempo for the Sarabande (M.M. ± 48 , quarter note). This is certainly not as slow as Casals's recording (M.M. ± 42). I agree with Planer that a tempo of at least M.M. 44 is required to avoid subdivision of the meter into duple meter.¹⁸ Isserlis uses slight rhythmic flexibility to shape phrases, but the pulse is steady enough such that the fundamental characteristic of a sarabande, its triple meter, is still clear. The use of gut strings helps in creating an intimate, gentle sound; and his chords are rolled slowly, giving time for each individual string to resonate. His articulation is smooth, but clearly Baroque: the notes are not long and sustained, but instead fade away organically as they would with a Baroque bow. His vibrato is employed as ornamentation, as would be appropriate in Baroque performance practice, on key notes with harmonic function.

In defining our three senses of authenticity, it was noted that, on the surface, *authenticity as sound* seemed to converge on the same type of performance as *authenticity as intention*. However, since the intentions of the composer are to be understood within the context of their time, performers can conclusions about how to apply these intentions in modern practice. The objective sounds may vary from those produced during the composer's lifetime while remaining

¹⁸ Planer, 245.

authentic to their intentions. Since the modern cello did not exist in Bach's time, naturally, the sounds it produces cannot be identical to those produced then. However, Isserlis's playing of the modern cello in a Baroque style comes close to making the modern cello sound like a period instrument. The modern cello sounds richer and projects more strongly, but especially with the use of gut strings, the modern instrument is capable of sounding close to its Baroque counterpart. Clearly, Isserlis is knowledgeable of the Baroque cello and the sounds it produces, and uses this knowledge in applying Baroque performance practice on a modern cello. We will never know whether Bach would have liked his music played in a Romantic style like that of Chopin; that style of playing is so far removed from Bach's time that to draw any conclusions about Bach's hypothetical thoughts is absurd. However, we can reasonably conclude that playing a modern cello, in the way Isserlis does, might closely coincide with Bach's wishes for the Sarabande.

He describes the second Suite as "Sorrowful Mystery: the Agony in the Garden".¹⁹ In his recording, I hear a clear personal narrative based in the underlying harmony of the movement. The agony is the struggle to reach the D in measure 27 (figure 5). The D in that register is never in the context of tonic harmony until measure 23. It works to resolve the preceding chord, but the resolution is unsatisfying as the bass is in first inversion. The D is fleeting – it drops down an octave and the melodic line resolves in this lower octave. The D in question returns in measure 26, heard against a G#, to create a tritone before resolving to tonic harmony in measure 27. Isserlis seems to outline this agony in his performance. Each utterance of the D is tentative, until it gains strength in the final repeat of the second half. With the tritone against the G# in measure 26, it grows until it seems unwilling to resolve. Isserlis adds a small trill on the arrival of

¹⁹ Johann Sebastian Bach, *Cello Suites*, Steven Isserlis, 2007 by Hyperion Records, CDA30001/2, 2 compact discs. Liner notes.

measure 27, as if to hold onto its sorrow for a moment longer before it resolves – and in the final measure, lets it die away completely as it sinks two octaves.

Figure 4: Measures 26-28 of the Sarabande²⁰



Undoubtedly, interpretive freedom within Baroque performance practice is achievable. Isserlis's personal voice in the music is clear, but he respects the dance character of the Sarabande and keeps within period performance practice, demonstrating *authenticity as intention*. Presumably, he was not striving for a *sonically authentic* performance; if that were the case, a period instrument would have been essential. However, his choice of a modern instrument over a period instrument seems almost inconsequential, given the sound he achieves on the modern instrument. I venture that his sense of *personal authenticity* not only coexists with *intentional authenticity* but is deeply connected with it. Bach's masterful use of harmony for the solo instrument can be latent in performance. In Isserlis's recording, the narrative I hear in his recording brings the underlying harmonic tensions of the Sarabande to life.

In looking to achieve a historically authentic performance, the answer does not lie in studying performance practice as a set of rules, but rather, understanding the nature of the period instrument and the spirit of the composition. Surely it was not that a Baroque performer said to another, "we must avoid long, sustained, dramatic lines," for instance; the style of playing was determined, in large part, by the instrument. It is impossible to know whether Bach would have

²⁰ Bach (1879), 67.

wanted his music played like Chopin, or whether he might have wanted the Suites played on saxophone. If our quest is for reasonable historical authenticity, we must base our interpretations in our knowledge of the Baroque period. Our interpretations need not be lost behind adherence to Baroque performance practice, however – the personal voice of the performer can surely be heard while keeping with period playing style.

Conclusions

I identified three types of authenticity: authenticity as *sound* and as *intention*, as well as *personal* authenticity. The first two senses of authenticity – as *sound* and as *intention* – concern historical authenticity. I examined the varying approaches to authenticity in Bylsma, Casals, and Isserlis's recordings of the Sarabande from the second Suite of Bach's Cello Suites. Bylsma was primarily concerned with *intentional and sonic authenticity* while Casals's recording showed *personal authenticity*. The issue that arose from these two recordings was whether historical authenticity is incompatible with personal authenticity.

I view the third recording, Isserlis's, as a convergence of historical authenticity (namely authenticity as *intention*) and personal authenticity. Baroque performance practice can be understood as a set of guidelines that is based inherently in the nature of the instrument of the time. As such, adherence to period performance practice does not strip away the interpretive freedom of performers. Instead, knowledge of Baroque performance practice can allow performers to apply their personal interpretations within a range that respects the composer's intentions.

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