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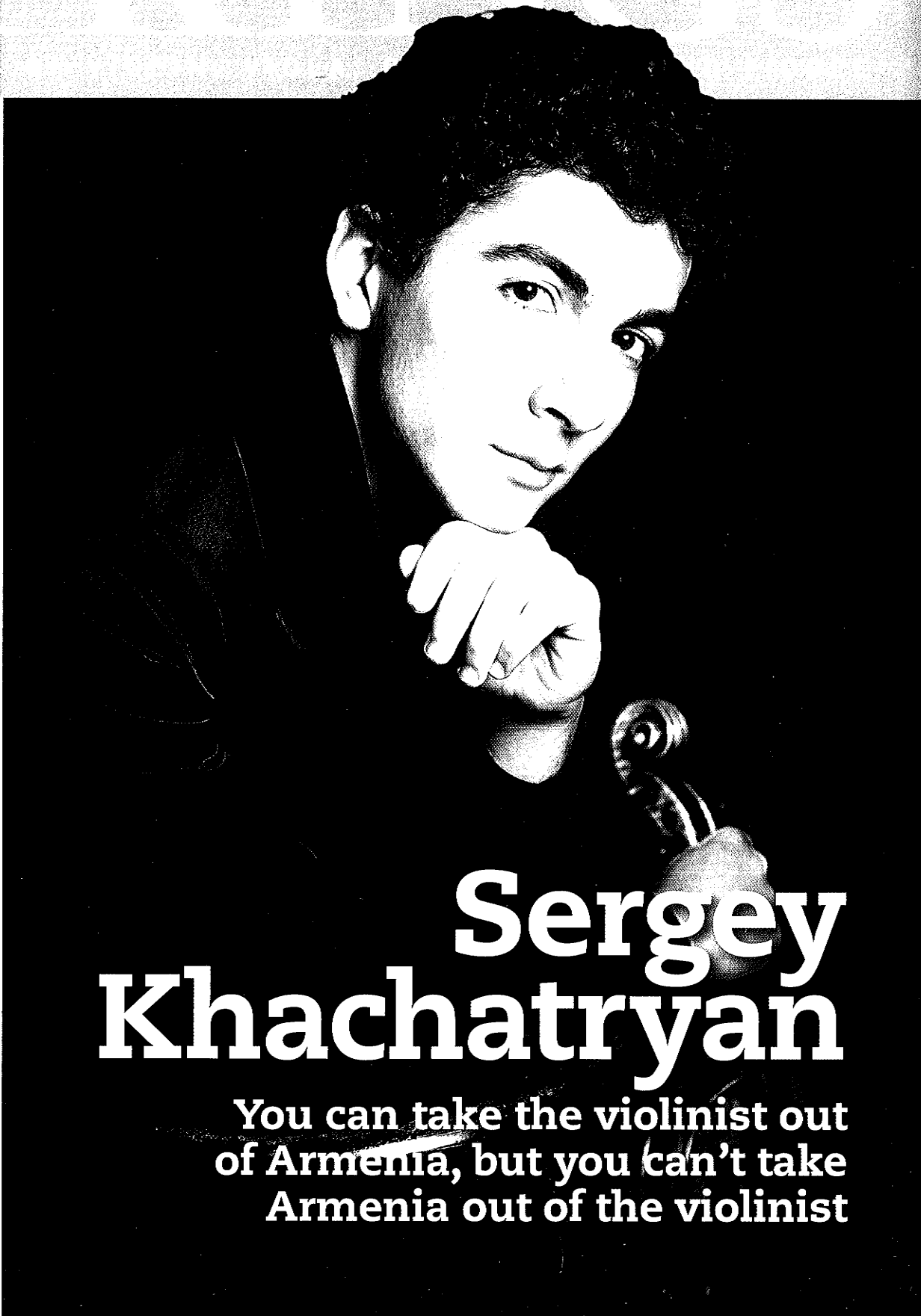
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You can take the violinist out
of Armenia, but you can't take
Armenia out of the violinist

Examining Pitch Conflicts in the Bach Cello Suites



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20 reasons to reconsider your assumptions about this iconic body of work

By David Starkweather

ARCHIVE For what top players have to say about the power of Bach's Cello Suites, read 'Suite Soul Music' at AllThingsStrings.com.

I STRIVE TO PLAY WHAT THE COMPOSER WROTE, or at least what I think he wrote. Playing the correct notes is a good starting point for developing an appropriate interpretation. Sometimes there are a few discrepancies between sources for several notes in a piece, but Johann Sebastian Bach's Six Suites for Violoncello Solo, BWV 1007–1012, have at least 20 questionable notes and rhythms. Wouldn't you be happier knowing that you are playing the notes or rhythms that Bach wrote?

Bach wrote the suites in 1726, but the autograph manuscript is lost. Two contemporaneous copies exist, thus these two were no doubt copied from the original. I will refer to them with letter names: Source A is the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript, written between

1727 and 1731 by Bach's second wife, who was a trained musician; and Source B is the Johann Peter Kellner manuscript, part of a large volume of Bach's works copied by Kellner and dated 1726.

There are also several other important sources, but none that appear to have been copied from the original. These other copies appeared between 35 and 98 years after the suites were composed. Source C is the "Westphal" manuscript, part of a 14-volume set copied by two anonymous copyists, dating from the second half of the 18th century. These were discovered in 1830 in the estate of Johann Christoph Westphal, a

Hamburg organist, printer, and music dealer. Source D is the "Traeg" manuscript, made by an anonymous copyist, dating from the end of the 18th century, originating from northern or central Germany, and offered for sale in 1799 by the Viennese art and music dealer Johann Traeg. Source E is the first edition, published by Janet et Cotellet in Paris around 1824. According to the preface of the edition, Source E is based on an unidentified manuscript (apparently now lost) found in Germany by the cellist Pierre Norblin (1781–1854). Source H is the J.S. Bach autograph manuscript of Suite No. 3 in G minor for lute, BWV 995, written between 1727 and 1731.

IDENTIFYING THE TOP 20 ERRORS

Armed with this background information, it is possible to examine the Top 20 pitch and rhythm conflicts in the sources. Obvious errors can be identified when comparing the various sources. The copyists made mistakes, yet most of the disputed spots originate from incorrect editions. The two contemporaneous copies (Sources A and B) often agree. Many of the problematic notes result from the first edition, Source E, published 98 years after the suites were written.

SUITE NO. 1

This is the case in the Prelude of Suite 1 (**Ex. 1**—see music examples on pp. 32 and 33). On the third beat of m. 26, the second 16th note is B \sharp in all sources except Source E, which has a printed B \flat . On the fourth 16th note of the same beat, all sources agree with B \flat . Source A is shown in **Ex. 2**.

In Suite 1 Menuet II, the movement in G minor, the five sources leave some doubt as to what Bach may have written. As seen in **Ex. 3**, the last eighth note of m. 3 is an E \sharp (an E with no accidental marked) in Sources A, C, and E. E \flat is marked in Sources B and D. Bach followed a common convention of the time, using a key signature for the minor key having one less flat than modern practice. As a result, the flat sixth scale degree had to be marked when needed. Bach tended to use melodic minor in his solo string writing, with the ascending line having a raised sixth scale degree, and the descending line having a lowered sixth scale degree.

In the similar spot at m. 7 (**Ex. 4**), E \sharp is marked in Sources A, C, and E, the same sources that have no accidental in m. 3,

while E \flat is marked only in Source B. Source D has an obvious error, marking the pitch C.

SUITE NO. 2

Some of the most annoying recurring errors are those that originate solely from source E. This is the case in the Suite 2 Courante, m. 27. The second-to-last note of the measure is a G in all sources except E (see arrow in **Ex. 5**). Another point of disagreement between the sources is found in the Suite 2 Sarabande, m. 23, shown in **Ex. 6**. All other sources agree with the Kellner rhythm on beat two and the Anna Magdalena Bach trill on beat three, giving confirmation for this reading.

In the Gigue of Suite 2, the last note of m. 28 (**Ex. 7**), sources B, C, D, and E all agree, moving stepwise D–E–F. Anna Magdalena Bach appears to have mistakenly repeated the final B \sharp of the previous two bars.

SUITE NO. 3

The next note controversy, shown in **Ex. 8**, is in the Sarabande of Suite 3, m. 7. Sources disagree as to whether the note on the last 16th of the second beat is a B \flat or C. As indicated in the example, Sources B, C, and E have the pitch C and sources A and D have B \flat . The convention at that time was to mark all repeating accidentals within a measure, although sometimes they were not marked again within the same beat. This is seen on the second beat of m. 7 in both Sources A (**Ex. 9**) and D.

In Suite 3 Bourrée II (**Ex. 10**), the last note of m. 4 is only marked A \flat in source B. All other sources (A, C, D, and E) have no accidental until the following measure, where A \flat is marked on the second note. As in Suite 1, this is another example of the use of a key signature with one less flat than in modern notation. In this Bourrée, the sixth scale degree of C minor is A \sharp unless marked flat. This is perhaps another example of Kellner's own minor contributions, similar to what can be seen in his copy of the Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo.

In the Suite 3 Gigue, m. 19, rhythm and notes are identical in Sources B, C, D, and E, as seen in **Ex. 11**. Sources B, D, and E also have the same slur. Notating six notes in this measure was likely a mistake on the part of Anna Magdalena Bach. Judging by the lack of accuracy in her copy of the Son-

atas and Partitas for Violin Solo, an occasional mistake is certain.

SUITE NO. 4

Many of the oddest pitch mistakes in the six suites stem from the first edition. A persistent mistake of this type is in the Suite 4 Prelude, the third beat of m. 80, as seen in **Ex. 12**. This beat has a B \flat in all sources except Source E, which has a B \sharp .

In the Allemande of Suite 4 at m. 23 (**Ex. 13**), A \flat is used on the third beat; assumed from the key signature, but also marked in Sources A, C, and D. Source E indicates A \sharp , and continues to use A \sharp in measure 24, beat two. In all sources other than Source E, A \sharp is not used until beat three—another example of a mistake originating from the first edition.

The only remaining spot to examine in Suite 4 is in the Sarabande, m. 28, beat two. Source A has an A \flat , but the other four sources all have the G indicated in **Ex. 14**.

SUITE NO. 5

Suite 5 is problematic due to the scordatura notation used by J.S. Bach. Sources A, C, D, and E copied the scordatura notation. Kellner, however, transcribed the scordatura notation to actual pitch, which resulted in some mistakes, such as the enlarged notehead in **Ex. 15**, last note of m. 191. Source H is in J.S. Bach's hand, transcribed from the cello suite, thus a particularly valid source.

Near the end of the Suite 5 Prelude, at m. 193, Anna Magdalena Bach wrote a double notehead G and A on the third 16th note. The pitch A \sharp notated in Source B (**Ex. 15**) also appears in Sources E and H, thus supported by the transcription in J.S. Bach's hand (**Ex. 16**). Sources C and D have the pitch G, repeating the bass note of two measures and four measures earlier.

In the last line of the Prelude, the chord at m. 219 (**Ex. 17**) is a case where all five cello sources agree. The lute suite version, Source H, has several significant differences at this point, including the lack of a Picardy third in the final chord.

An often overlooked double-stop in the Courante of Suite 5, m. 16 (**Ex. 18**), can clearly be considered valid. The pitch G appears in all except Source A, and this harmony is confirmed by Source H.

SUITE NO. 6

The only significant note error in the

Prelude of Suite 6 is the second-to-last note in m. 95 (**Ex. 19**). This is middle C# in all sources except the Kellner copy.

The first measure in the Suite 6 Allemande (**Ex. 20**) shows rhythm and trill notation that do not agree. Kellner was inclined to add trills, so the trill on beat three is questionable (as well as technically awkward). If one counts divisions of the beat on beat four, Source A has one 64th note less than a quarter note. Source B has one 32th note more than a quarter note. The modern notation in Ex. 20 uses the fourth-beat rhythm and trill found in Sources C, D, and E.

In the second measure of the Allemande (**Ex. 21**), the sources do not agree on several points. Immediately following the dotted eighth note, Kellner notated the pitch B, forming a double-stop with A (above middle C) above. Source A has no double-stop, while in Sources C and D the pitch B is notated directly below the tied eighth note of the second beat, as shown in Ex. 21. The chord on the third beat is also found in all sources except A.

The next note controversy in Suite 6 is in Gavotte I, m. 7 (**Ex. 22**). The lower D on beat two appears in all sources except A. This is on the edge of the page and is not very legible in Kellner's copy, but the note is confirmed in Sources C, D, and E. Anna Magdalena Bach already shows signs of having been inconsistent at this moment, as her E# on the downbeat is an obvious error.

In Gavotte II, at m. 16 beat 2 (**Ex. 23**), Source A remains on the pitch D (above middle C) of the preceding and following beats. All sources except Anna Magdalena Bach agree with the pitch B on beat two.

The Gigue of Suite 6 has some dissonant chords and double-stops, several of which are shown in **Ex. 24**, mm. 9, 11, and 12. There are no grounds for changing these, as all sources agree. Likewise, the last note of m. 11 is G# in all sources, followed by another G# in m. 12, and then G# in the second beat.


The final note controversy in this Gigue is just after the double bar (**Ex. 25**). The rhythm in m. 29 contains an extra eighth note in source A. The grace notes shown in this example appear in Source D. Source C has a single F# grace note, and Source E has no grace notes at all. This is the rare case of a choice among sources with little agreement.

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Example 1:
Suite No. 1 in G major,
Prelude mm. 25-27



♭ (B); no accidental (A,B,C,D) | ♭ (A,B,C,D)

Example 2:
Suite No. 1 in G major,
Prelude m. 25-27;
Anna Magdalena Bach copy



Example 3:
Suite No. 1 in G major,
Menuet II, mm. 1-6



no accidental (A,C,E); ♭ (B,D)

Example 4:
Suite No. 1 in G major,
Menuet II, mm. 7-12



E♭ (A,C,E); E♭ (B); C (D)

Example 5:
Suite No. 2 in D minor,
Courante, mm. 25-28;
Anna Magdalena Bach copy

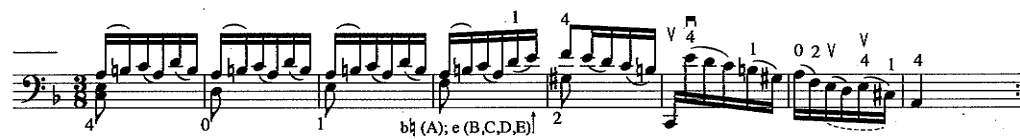


Example 6:
Suite No. 2 in D minor,
Sarabande, mm. 19-23



A,C,D,E (♯) 1 0
rhythm (A,C,D,E)

Example 7:
Suite No. 2 in D minor,
Gigue, mm. 25-32



♭ (A); e (B,C,D,E)

Example 8:
Suite No. 3 in C major,
Sarabande, mm. 5-8



♯ (B,C,E); ♭ (A,D)

Example 9:
Suite No. 3 in C major,
Sarabande, mm. 5-8;
Anna Magdalena Bach copy



Example 10:
Suite No. 3 in C major,
Bourrée II, mm. 1-5



♭ (B); ♯ implied (A,C,D,E)

Example 11:
Suite No. 3 in C major,
Gigue, mm. 17-24



rhythm & notes (B,C,D,E)

Example 12:
Suite No. 4 in E♭ major,
Prelude, mm. 78-81



♯ (A,B,C,D); ♭ (E)

Example 13:
Suite No. 4 in E♭ major,
Allemande, mm. 22-24



♯ (A,C,D); ♯ (E)
no accidental (B)

Example 14:
Suite No. 4 in E \flat major,
Sarabande, mm. 26–29

Example 15:
Suite No. 5 in C minor,
Prelude, mm. 189–194;
Kellner copy

Example 16:
J.S. Bach Suite No. 3
in G minor for Lute,
BWV 995, mm. 189–194

Example 17:
Suite No. 5 in C minor,
Prelude, mm. 217–223

Example 18:
Suite No. 5 in C minor,
Courante, mm. 14–17

Example 19:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Prelude, mm. 95–96

Example 20:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Allemande, m. 1

Example 21:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Allemande, m. 2

Example 22:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Gavotte I, mm. 6–11

Example 23:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Gavotte II, mm. 12–17

Example 24:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Gigue, mm. 8–12

Example 25:
Suite No. 6 in D major,
Gigue, mm. 28–31