

Bach on the Ten - String Gritar Nicolò Spera

Cello Suites 4, 5, 6 | BWV 1010, 1011, 1012

Bach on the Ten-String Gritar

NO LESS an authority than Bach himself has shown that his cello suites are well suited to be played on instruments in the guitar family: when commissioned to write a work for the lute, the guitar's Baroque predecessor, Bach transformed his Fifth Cello Suite BWV 1011 into the Lute Suite BWV 995. Since then, others have followed Bach's practice, producing beautiful renditions of all six cello suites for the Baroque lute, as well as the six-string guitar. But to my knowledge, no one has yet adapted and recorded the suites for a guitar with ten strings.

Transcriptions, reworkings, and transpositions were part of Baroque musical life, and Bach was no stranger to these practices: in addition to the Suite BWV 1011/995, Bach made numerous arrangements of other peoples' compositions as well as his own. Bach's music in particular follows a theoretical, metaphysical plan, above and beyond the capabilities of any specific instrument. For this reason, musicians from Bach's time to the present have found it natural, even irresistible, to adapt Bach's works to their instruments of choice.

The cello suites have proved especially amenable to transcription for almost every instrument imaginable, from trombone to koto. Whereas the range of the six-string guitar is very limiting, on a ten-string guitar the additional bass strings give the lower register eloquence and transparency. To play the Fifth Cello Suite on the ten-string guitar is

simply a matter of following Bach's own version for lute itself not really a transcription, but a complete reworking, full of fascinating and unpredictable transformations of line and counterpoint that can hardly be emulated. Given no clue as to how Bach might have treated the remaining suites if he had chosen to rework them, I have produced straightforward transcriptions, designed to make the music resonate on the guitar, while maintaining the essential fluidity of the dances and their underlying rhythms. To achieve this end, I have merely added a few bass notes and filled out a few chords: no more than one of Bach's lutenist. friends might have done in reading through the original scores—improvising, as it were, by playing whatever lay under the fingers and sounded pleasing on the instrument. The art of the cello suites, after all, is foremost an art of suggestion, and I have taken pains not to add so much that allusion would be lost to dreary literalism.

Learning these suites on the ten-string guitar has been an inspiring and often revelatory process of experimentation and discovery. Bach's writing in these works is remarkably varied and inventive: each suite shines with his kaleidoscopic imagination, magnificent sense of architecture, ever-surprising dramaturgy, and moving humanity. This is probably why musicians of all generations are inexorably drawn back to his centuries-old music, which speaks to us with powerful clarity and vibrant energy.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to my best friend, best man and mentor, Jonathan Leathwood, whose patient listening and caring guidance through my discovery of these works have been an incommensurable source of inspiration and enlightenment.

To Jonathan, I am dedicating this recording.

-Nicolò Spera







A Bellist's Perspective

Bach's cello suites have been on the best-seller list ever since Pablo Casals first recorded them in his classic edition of 1936. At the time, these were new works for both Casals and his listeners. There was no tradition. Now there are so many recordings that making a new one is among the most difficult of challenges. In preparing and performing the suites, the artist encounters new possibilities at every turn. Nicolò Spera performs these suites with full conviction in his own discoveries. He clearly portrays what he sees as new and, in so doing, he creates an intimate relationship between the music and the listener.

In interpreting these works, Spera makes uncompromising choices and is scrupulous in his detail. There are elegant rubati, tempi that surprise without seeming out of place, florid passages performed with ease and agility, dynamic ranges from one extreme to the other, articulations with incredible lightness, and vocal lines that speak to his understanding of a beautiful singing voice. There are magical moments: the drama and variation of color in each of the Preludes; the intimacy of the Sarabandes, where he draws the listener into the hushed silence; the glory and the playfulness, the joy and the majesty, the gentleness and the force that animate his performance of each suite.

The cello, of all the string instruments, is known for being closest to the human voice in range and color. Given the instrument's legato capabilities, the cellist can achieve resonance and line by artistically manipulating the bow. On the guitar, a plucked instrument, how can the performer achieve this sonority and shape, so important to the beauty of the horizontal and the depth of the vertical that Bach intends? Spera's recording gives evidence that the answer lies in the additional lower strings. The instrument's expansion into the lower register allows Spera to choose lower keys for the suites, giving the guitar a profound chest voice that comes close to the sound world of the cello. Depth and thickness is added to the voice of the guitar, realizing ideas that, on the cello, Bach could only leave to the listener's imagination. For each suite, Spera uses a different tuning (probably, one of the most enticing challenges of these transcriptions) in search of the deepest, richest sound possible. His tunings create an expansively lyrical instrument whose range approximates that of the Baroque thirteen-course lute. As a result, Spera sustains and clarifies the counterpoint, harmony, and bass line that Bach sketched.

For cellists, the horizontal direction of the music in the

Prelude of the Fourth Suite is especially difficult, because of the unforgiving leaps. The ten-string guitar gives this Prelude a new and fascinating perspective. And this is perhaps the most meaningful achievement of Spera's new recording of the suites: it succeeds in persuading the listener that ten plucked strings are all that is needed. Spera offers a refreshing, captivating perspective on these boundless works, and a breathtaking discovery of an unprecedented sound world.

Judith Glyde, Professor Emerita University of Colorado Boulder Former Cellist, Manhattan String Quartet



Italian guitarist Nicolò Spera brings to his teaching and performing a unique synthesis of European and American traditions.

Nicolò is one of the few guitarists in the world to perform on both six-string and ten-string guitars, as well as on theorbo. His wideranging repertoire includes the extraordinary music of the Franco-Andalusian composer Maurice Ohana. He has given lecture-recitals on the music of Ohana at different institutions and festivals, including the Mediterranean Guitar Festival. Arizona State University, Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana, Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan, San Francisco Conservatory, and the University of Surrey for the launch of the International Guitar Research Centre. His CD of Ohana's complete works for solo guitar (Soundset Recordings), presenting the world première recording of *Estelas*, was awarded the 5-stars "Disco del mese" review by *Seicorde*, the major Italian classical guitar magazine, and it was described as "un disco di altissimo valore."

Nicolò is equally at home in outreach concerts for the young, masterclasses for all ages, solo recitals and concerti with orchestra. As a soloist, he has performed with conductors Andrés Cárdenes, Alejandro Gómez Guillén, Devin Hughes, Cynthia Katsarelis, and René Knetsch. About his performance of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, Robin McNeil wrote: "I have heard this piece performed several times, and the performance that Nicolò Spera gave was the best I have ever heard. First of all Spera is a virtuoso guitar player, and second, he is a superb musician." (*OpusColorado*)

He has won top prizes at several Italian and international competitions and is regularly invited to play in music festivals such as the Strings Music Festival in Steamboat Springs, the Tangents Guitar Series in San Francisco, the Mediterranean Guitar Festival in Italy, and the Sauble Beach Festival in Canada. A versatile chamber musician, in 2012 Nicolò co-founded the ensemble Duo Chagall with violinist Jenny Diaz. Previously, he worked on an unusual chamber music project with clarinetist Andrew Dykema, and together they performed the complete guitar and clarinet repertoire by the late Romantic Viennese composer Ferdinand Rebay.

His most influential teachers are Oscar Ghiglia, Jonathan Leathwood, and Lorenzo Micheli. Nicolò holds degrees from the Claudio Monteverdi Conservatory in Bolzano and the prestigious Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, an Artist Diploma in Guitar Performance at the University of Denver and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Colorado Boulder.

In 2011, Nicolò was appointed to the faculty at the University of Colorado Boulder, where he is professor of Classical Guitar. He is also on the faculty of the study abroad program *Renaissance in the XXI Century* in Florence, Italy.

In 2013, he founded the University of Colorado International Guitar Festival and Competition, an unprecedented event that attracts prestigious guests, guitar performers, and students from all over the world.



Johann Sebaztian Bach (1685-1750)

1-6 Suite n. 4 in G major BWV 1010

Prélude | Allemande | Courante | Sarabande | Bourrées I & II | Gigue

7-12 Suite n. 5 in F minor BWV 1011

Prélude | Allemande | Courante | Sarabande | Gavottes I & II | Gigue

13-18 Suite n. 6 in C major BWV 1012

Prélude | Allemande | Courante | Sarabande | Gavottes I & II | Gigue

Nicolò Spera, 10-string guitar

The Suites are transcribed and transposed for the ten-string guitar by Nicolò Spera.

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Producer: Jonathan Leathwood

Recording, editing and mastering: Michael Schulze

Art and design: Sara Dubois www.sweetbaycreative.com

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Instrument used on this recording: Ten-string guitar by Roberto de Miranda, Milan, Italy (2009)

