

The Performance Analysis of the Viola Adaptation of the Prelude of Bach's Suite No. 2 for Unaccompanied Cello

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ABSTRACT

Johann Sebastian Bach was one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period, and his works have had a profound influence on the development of music in later generations. Bach's works are diverse, including six suites for unaccompanied cello adapted for the viola. These suites are highly demanding in terms of technique and expressiveness, posing a great challenge to performers. This article focuses on the prelude of the second suite in Bach's unaccompanied viola suites, deeply exploring its characteristics in terms of performance techniques, musical styles, and different performance versions. The aim is to provide performers and music researchers with a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding, and to promote the inheritance and development of Bach's viola works.

KEYWORDS

Johann Sebastian Bach; Baroque; unaccompanied cello; viola; suites; technique; expressiveness

Bach's Suites for Unaccompanied Cello, composed in the early 18th century, are gems in the viola literature. These suites are renowned for their rich musicality, unique structure and highly challenging techniques. Among Bach's six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello, the prelude of the second suite is of great research value. It showcases Bach's profound understanding of viola playing through its distinctive tonality, rich emotions and complex techniques.

Through the study of the viola-playing techniques of the prelude of Bach's second suite, this article aims to provide beneficial inspirations for performers, helping them better understand and interpret Bach's Suites for Unaccompanied Cello. Meanwhile, it is also hoped that through the research of this article, it can play a certain promoting role in the performance and teaching of Bach's musical works.

1 Bach's Six Unaccompanied Suites

The Baroque period was an extremely crucial period in the history of Western music, approximately ranging from the early 17th century to the early 18th century. The musical style of this period had distinctive features and had a profound impact on the development of music in later generations. One of the most remarkable characteristics of Baroque music is its intense and leaping rhythm, which is regular and fluid. This sense of rhythm makes the music full of vitality and impetus, while the melody shows refined, leaping and continuous traits.

Baroque music integrates the contrasts of forte and piano, solo and chorus, as well as different instruments and timbres, making the musical works rich and diverse and full of emotional

expressiveness.

In terms of creative forms, Baroque music gradually transitioned from being dominated by the human voice to being dominated by instrumental music. The use of instruments such as the violin, organ, and harpsichord gradually increased, laying the foundation for the development of instrumental music. Meanwhile, Baroque music pursued grand scales and splendid effects. The use of basso continuo became a hallmark feature of the music of this period. Basso continuo is a notation method for recording intervals, chords, and non-chordal tones in the lower part. It ran through the entire Baroque period and became an important technical means in music composition.

Baroque music is distinctly ornamental in melody, with a large number of embellishments added, making the melody more magnificent and complex. Meanwhile, the contrasts in the music are sharp, emphasizing the undulations of the piece and the changes in intensity. The tempo usually remains unchanged, endowing the music with strong emotional expressiveness.

The writing of the cello suites was extremely influential to changing the role of cello playing in Bach's time. Bach employed the suite form for this work, which was a common form in the Baroque period^[1]. Bach, as a representative figure of the Baroque period, composed 6 suites for unaccompanied cello. The suite originated as a set of dance pieces in France and was eventually finalized as Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue. Other dances such as the minuet and Bourrée could also be added. Bach developed it to its peak.

Bach absorbed the most substantial parts of Italian music culture - the Baroque style and its aesthetic ideas. When applying these aesthetic thoughts, he did not view them through rigid "frames", but developed these concepts of beauty with a sharp aesthetic vision and meaning, fully revealing the beauty that could be brought out in this style. Therefore, under any aesthetic concept, the artworks he created were full of vitality^[2].

Take Bach's Prelude of the Second Suite as an example, this particular movement unfolds within the rhythmic framework of the dance, but with the loose formal framework of the pattern prelude. The movement begins with a key-establishing gesture, proceeds to an elaborated harmonization of a bass line, and makes use of a strong dominant pedal^[3].

2 Baroque Performance Techniques

The term "Violoncello" was first used in Italy in 1665 in a printed edition of Giulio Cesare Arresti's *Sonate A 2. & a Tre Con la partedi Violoncello a beneplacito. Op. IV*. Before that date, and indeed for quite a long time after, such terms as *basso da braccio*, *violone*, *violone da braccio*, *violoncino*, and *bassetto viola* indicated the instrument of the bass part, if any was specified^[4].

The Baroque viola, as a time-honored musical instrument, carries rich cultural connotations and unique artistic charm. Compared with the violas we are familiar with nowadays, the Baroque viola has significant differences in structure, playing techniques, and timbre. This disparity stems from the uniqueness of the musical style during the Baroque period and the limitations of instrument-making techniques at that time. Firstly, the most prominent feature of the Baroque viola lies in its structural differences. Unlike modern violas, the Baroque viola has no chin rest or shoulder rest, which means the player needs to hold the instrument with the left hand for playing. This playing method makes shifting positions and vibrato relatively difficult. Therefore, when playing the Baroque viola, we should also follow the principle of avoiding frequent position shifts and vibrato. This not only helps maintain the purity of the timbre but also enables a more fluent performance.

Secondly, the strings used on the Baroque viola are also different from those on modern violas. The Baroque viola employs gut strings, which are more fragile compared to the metal strings used nowadays. Therefore, during performance, we need to avoid overly forceful and conflicting playing

techniques.

The Baroque bow hold is also an aspect that cannot be ignored in playing the Baroque viola. Compared with the modern bow hold, the Baroque bow hold pays more attention to the flexibility and independence of the fingers. The player needs to hold the bow stick gently with the thumb and index finger, and the other three fingers naturally curve to maintain the stability of the bow stick. This bow hold enables the player to better control the bow speed and volume during the performance, thereby achieving a more delicate musical expression.

During the Baroque period, the musical style emphasized the fluency and ornamental nature of the melody. Therefore, in the performance of the Baroque viola, the fluency of the music and the elasticity of the rhythm are particularly crucial. The performer needs to adjust the bow speed, bow pressure, and the application of left-hand fingering to express the beauty of the music. In this process, there are variations, short and lifted bow strokes, in order to create rapid note decays and frequent and subtle dynamic fluctuations within the basic volume range^[5]. The performer's familiarity with the instrument and mastery of playing techniques are of utmost importance.

The timbre of the Baroque viola is softer and warmer compared to that of the modern viola. This timbre characteristic enables it to occupy an important position in the chamber music and symphonies of the Baroque period. When performing, the performer should fully explore this timbre feature and incorporate it into the musical works, allowing the audience to feel the unique charm of the music of the Baroque era.

3 Version Analysis

The excellent Violoncello, the Bassa Viola, and the Viola di Spalla are small bass violins in comparison with the larger ones with five or also six strings, upon which one can play all manner of rapid things, variations, and ornaments with less effort than on the larger machines. Particularly, the Viola di Spalla, or Shoulder Viola produces a great effect when accompanying because it cuts through strongly and can express the notes clearly. [6]Version Analysis Among the numerous versions of musical scores, how to pick out the most suitable one is not only a reflection of a performer's skills and comprehension, but also the key to convey the emotions and style of the work. When choosing a version of the musical score, the primary considerations should be the authority and accuracy of the score, which are fundamental for guaranteeing the quality of the performance.

The works of the Baroque music master Bach have remained highly esteemed over the years. Regrettably, Bach's original manuscripts are no longer available. Currently, the musical scores that are closest to the original and accessible to us are the handwritten copies by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena. This handwritten copy is regarded as a precious resource for studying Bach's works. It faithfully retains the original style of the works and provides valuable clues for us to understand Bach's creative intentions. Therefore, choosing the musical scores published based on this handwritten copy undoubtedly brings us closer to Bach's artistic original intention and helps performers accurately convey the profound meaning of the works during their performances.

It is worth noting that this is not limited to the adapted versions for the viola. The viola, as a distinctively featured instrument, holds a significant position in Bach's works. To fully bring out the timbre characteristics of the viola, many adapted versions have emerged in the market. These versions, while maintaining the original essence of Bach's works, have made appropriate adjustments to the notes and playing techniques, enabling viola players to present the charm of the works more vividly and thoroughly.

When observing the textbooks commonly adopted by music academies at present, the Peters

version is evidently highly favored. The Peters version has won widespread acclaim for its rigorous editing, clear layout, and detailed annotations. On the American Redit forum, the Peters version is also a popular topic of discussion. Many performers and scholars exchange ideas and share experiences here, which gives the Peters version a lofty position in the hearts of performers.

Through in-depth study of the musical score, performers can understand the work more profoundly, improve their performing skills, and present more splendid performances to the audience. In this process, the Peters version is undoubtedly a trustworthy choice. The following pictures are respectively excerpts from the handwritten copy of Anna Magdalena and the version of Peters.



Figure 1 Handwritten copy by Anna Magdalena

Suite No. 2

BWV 1008

Prélude



Figure 2 Peters Version

4 Analysis of Performance Techniques

Significant interest on the part of scholars, performers, and listeners in music of the past has contributed in a very positive way to the expansion of the field of performance practice since the middle of the twentieth century. Today the study of performance practice encompasses a variety of different approaches, all of which are primarily concerned with the application of historically informed ways of performing music of the past.

4.1 Technical Difficulties of the Left Hand

4.1.1 Early Shifting

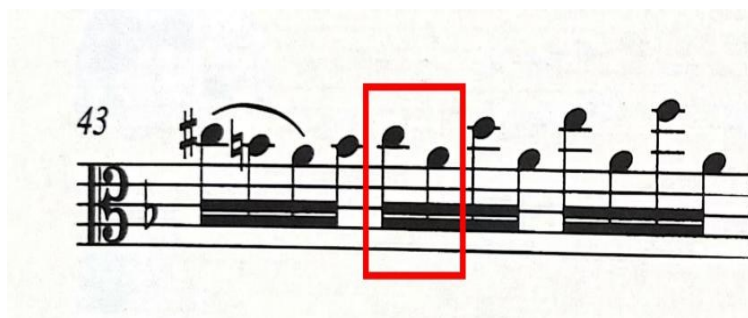


Figure 3 Bar No.43

In the 43rd bar, there are two distinctive notes. For a considerable number of performers, they often encounter rather thorny problems when precisely controlling the pitch. The fundamental reason for this difficulty lies in the fact that when the performer reaches the critical moment just about to touch these two notes, they hurriedly and hastily carry out the shifting operation. Such a coping style undoubtedly adds many uncertainties to the stability of the pitch, making the control of the pitch even more difficult and complex. However, in a sharp and strong contrast, when playing open strings, since the left hand does not need to undertake the arduous task of pressing the strings, the performer has an excellent opportunity to shift in advance. This wise move creates sufficient space for the left hand to adjust the hand shape, enabling it to adapt to the new position extremely quickly and precisely. In this way, the accuracy of the pitch can be greatly improved, reaching an almost perfect state. This meticulous and exquisite skill adjustment is undoubtedly a crucial and indispensable key link for those performers who have always been committed to pursuing the supreme and outstanding sound quality, directly related to the quality and artistic expressiveness of the performance.

4.1.2 Skillful Use of Stretched Fingers

The use of stretched fingers might be a problem that is easily disregarded when practicing this piece. For students, when facing notes that cannot be reached by the fingers on the same string, their first thought might be to change positions or change strings, as is the case in the 44th bar, for example. If they choose to change positions, the subsequent notes will again have to face the operation of changing positions, which undoubtedly adds more uncertainty to the pitch and also does not conform to the requirements of the playing method in the Baroque period. If they choose to change strings, it will lead to a non-uniform timbre. In view of this, in such a situation, the use of stretched fingers is undoubtedly the best option. Therefore, it is extremely important to make students clear about in what circumstances to use stretched fingers.

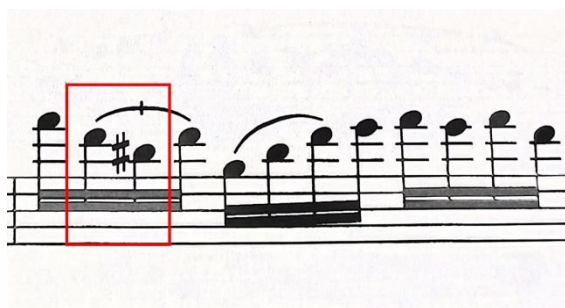


Figure 4 Bar No.44

Through the ingenious application of stretched fingers, the aforementioned problems can be effectively resolved, making the performance more smooth and precise, and also better presenting the due musical style and characteristics of the work. This requires teachers to provide students with clear and definite guidance during the teaching process, helping them understand and master the application timing and methods of this technique, thereby enhancing the level and quality of the performance.

4.1.3 Application of Retained Fingers

At the end of each chord performance, it is highly likely that the performer will have the action of re-pressing the strings with the left hand. Similarly, this operation method will significantly increase the uncertainty of pitch. However, the skillful use of retained fingers can effectively avoid such problems. The use of retained fingers can not only reduce the frequent movement of fingers on the strings and lower the chance of mistakes, but also make the connection between notes more smooth and natural, enhancing the coherence and stability of the performance. For the performer, proficiently mastering the technique of retained fingers can greatly improve the quality and expressiveness of the performance, making the presentation of the music more perfect and moving. In bars 59 - 63, the continuous chords are extremely challenging for the performer's left hand control, and the performer needs to consider the application of retained fingers while maintaining the hand shape.



Figure 5 Bar No.59-No.63

4.2 Technical Difficulties of the Right Hand

4.2.1 Distribution of the Bow

Regarding the control of the right hand, the author believes that the distribution of the bow is of crucial importance in this piece. From daily teaching, the author has found that students may encounter a shortage of the bow when performing this piece. Take the first sentence of this piece as an example. The common problem for students is that when there are many notes to be played within one bow, students tend to use too much of the bow. Therefore, the teaching focus of this section should be to teach students to consciously reduce the use of the bow. Furthermore, like in bar 21, the first note of each beat is played with one bow, and the remaining three notes are played with one bow. Many students, in order to ensure the uniformity of the bow, usually emphasize the

first note during the performance. Therefore, in addition to ensuring a reasonable distribution of the bow, the performer also needs to control the pressure of the right hand to ensure the uniformity of the timbre.



Figure 6 Bar No.1-No.4



Figure 7 Bar No.21

4.2.2 Smooth String Crossing

String crossing is also a key point in this piece. Different playing methods should be adopted for different types of string crossing. Performers should distinguish between reciprocal string crossing on adjacent two strings and string crossing across multiple strings. For string crossing on adjacent two strings, the performer should avoid excessive movement. Generally, only the forearm and wrist should be involved. For string crossing across multiple strings

4.2.3 Color Variation

When interpreting harmonic progressions dynamically, changing an intensity level at the moment of a chord change is less effective than leading towards that harmony change. [7]

The author believes that the difficulty in performing this piece lies in how to make color variations based on the direction of the melodic line and the analysis of harmony, rather than adding emotions randomly. Regarding this piece, I have summarized the following several musical processing methods: For the ascending trend of the melodic line, an appropriate crescendo can be made; for the descending trend of the melodic line, an appropriate diminuendo can be made. When the harmony changes from minor to major, a crescendo should be made. At the same time, when the harmony changes from consonant to dissonant, the dissonant intervals should be highlighted to emphasize the sense of tension.

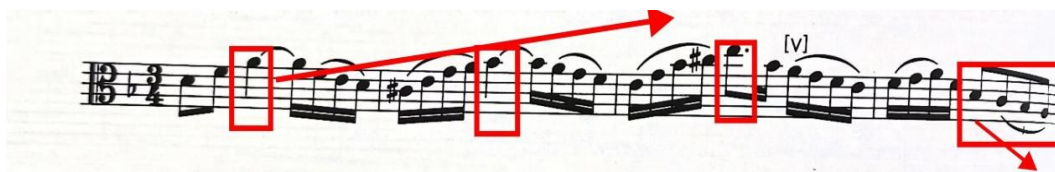


Figure 8 Bar No.1-No.4

Take bars 1 - 4 as an example. It can be clearly seen from the direction of the notes that the melody shows a trend of rising first and then falling. The performer needs to achieve the change in the sound effect based on the direction of the notes.



Figure 9 Bar No.12-No.13

For another example, in bars 12 - 13, in terms of the melodic direction, the melody shows a descending trend. Performers usually handle the F note in bar 13 very lightly. However, from the perspective of chord analysis, bar 13 changes from a minor triad to a major triad, so highlighting the F note would be more reasonable.

5 Conclusion

Through the detailed exploration of the performance, style, and versions of the prelude of the second suite of Bach's unaccompanied viola suites, we are able to catch a glimpse of the depth and subtlety of Bach's music. In terms of performance, the complex and diverse technical requirements demand that performers not only have a solid basic skill but also have a profound understanding of the connotation of music, so as to perfectly present the emotions and thoughts behind the notes. In terms of style, its elegant and solemn characteristics showcase the musical style of the era in which Bach lived, and at the same time reflect his unique pursuit and innovative spirit in the art of music. In the comparison of different versions, we have seen the diverse understandings and individual expressions of various performers for the same work, which further enriches the artistic connotation of the work. However, this research is only a preliminary exploration of this great work. Bach's music is like the vast universe, with countless mysteries waiting for us to uncover. In the future, it is expected that more scholars and performers can conduct in-depth research on Bach's unaccompanied viola suites and reveal their immortal artistic value from more dimensions, contributing more wisdom and strength to the development and inheritance of music.

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