

Johann Sebastian Bach in the Suzuki Violin School

by Kerstin Wartberg
(Translated by Mike Hoover)

Johann Sebastian Bach is the most frequently encountered composer in the Suzuki Violin School, appearing in most of the books, and consequently at each developmental level. Following is a brief summary of the included works with bibliography:

Johann Sebastian Bach

Book 1B

- ◆ Minuet 1: From the *Suite in G Minor for piano*, BWV 822
- ◆ Minuet 2: From the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*, BWV Anh. 116 (in G Major for harpsichord)
- ◆ Minuet 3: From the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*, BWV Anh. 114 (in G Major for piano)

Book 2A

- ◆ Musette: From the *English Suite No. 3 in G Minor*, BWV 808

Books 3A and 3B

- ◆ Minuet I and II: From the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*, BWV Anh. 114/115 (for piano)
- ◆ Gavotte in G Minor: From the *Suite in G Minor for piano*, BWV 822
- ◆ Gavotte I and II: From the *Orchestra Suite No. 3 in D Major*, BWV 1068
- ◆ Bourrée: From the *Suite for Violoncello No. 3*, BWV 1009

Books 4 through 8

- ◆ Vivace: From the *Concerto for Two Violins and String Orchestra in D Minor*, BWV 1043
- ◆ Gavotte I and II: From the *Suite for Violoncello No. 5 in C Major*, BWV 1011
- ◆ Gigue: From the *Suite for Violoncello No. 1 in G Major*, BWV 1007
- ◆ Courante: From the *Suite for Violoncello No. 1 in G Major*, BWV 1007
- ◆ Violin Concerto in A Minor, BWV 1041
- ◆ Andante: From the *Sonata in C Major for Violin Solo*, BWV 1005
- ◆ Allegro: From the *Sonata for Violin and Continuo*, BWV 1023

I am sure you will agree with me that the ultimate purpose of violin lessons cannot be the simple mastery of individual pieces. The impressions that we acquire through intense exposure to music and an instrument are much more important. These impressions will accompany your child for a lifetime, cultivate character traits and motivation, impart practical experience, and above all, open an inner path to artistic and spiritual values. We are not dealing with a short-term influence of the moment, but rather a long-term sensitization of the child. Music carves a path "into the depths of the human heart" (*Robert Schumann*) without words or explanations and can bypass the intellect to find the most direct route.

Suzuki was convinced that children who listened to music by Johann Sebastian Bach would absorb some of his character traits and feelings.

During my studies with Dr. Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan, he spoke many times about this subject. I quote from my notes: "When children grow up with the music of Bach, their souls will be directly influenced by Bach's spirit with its strong personality, deep religious earnestness, desire for order, and noble character. The life forces of children sense the traits of a composer and absorb them to bring them to life in themselves. I am certain that every heart capable of feeling music will assimilate its special radiance and its clear message."

Presenting a vivid encounter with the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, the article *A Journey Back in Time to the World of Johann Sebastian Bach* will provide parents and students with anecdotes, challenging tasks and information about Bach and his personal circumstances. Students and parents should read this text together. Depending on the students' ages, the article is likely to raise many questions requiring explanation. While some students will only be able to complete the assignments with parental help, others may find them very easy. Group lessons are also an ideal forum for answering these questions, completing the assignments, or discussing particular aspects of Bach's life in more depth.

Parents and teachers can further encourage their children and students to develop an interest in the world of music by providing appropriate books and recordings, with portraits of composers created especially for young audiences. It might also be inspiring to listen to recordings of original versions of works by Bach, especially those pieces appearing in the Suzuki Violin School. (Please see the list above.)

Original Compositions and Arrangements in the Baroque Period

Many pieces which are especially popular among players and audiences can often be found in a variety of arrangements. In the Baroque Period, it was considered an honor for a composer when colleagues would make arrangements of his works. After the motto "All is permitted that pleases!", no less a figure than **J. S. Bach** made arrangements of half of the 12 Vivaldi concertos op. 3 (one for four violins, two for three violins and three for one violin) for piano, organ, or even four harpsichords with string orchestra.

He transposed some of these pieces into different keys, changed bass lines and harmonies, fashioned figures to be more virtuosic, and even added or deleted measures.

See the direct comparison on the right. The lower system is by Vivaldi, the upper one shows its arrangement by Bach.

The image displays a musical score comparing two versions of a concerto movement. The top system is labeled 'Bach' and 'Largo'. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in a more complex, virtuosic style with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The bottom system is labeled 'Vivaldi' and 'Largo cantabile'. It features a bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in a simpler, more direct style. The two systems are arranged in a way that allows for a direct comparison of the two versions. The Vivaldi version is for 'Violino principale' and 'Violini I II e Viola'. The Bach version is for 'Violino' and 'Piano'.

Bach's pupil, Johann Friedrich Agricola, wrote in the year 1775 that Bach often played his pieces for violin or violoncello solo on the clavichord (a forerunner of the piano) adding chordal accompaniments to the melody. (See **Johann Nikolaus Forkel**: From the first biography in 1802 about Bach, Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel 2004). So it is certainly not a stylistic offence to include in book 3 the Bourrée from the Suite No. 3 for Violoncello Solo as an arrangement for violin and piano in this book. This is simply a continuation of Bach's own frequent practice and is reminiscent of his free spirit.

Arrangements in Instrumental Pedagogy

When students like a piece, they are much more willing to work intensively on difficult passages and tackle challenging technical issues like bow speed, string crossings, tempo and intonation. This is why arrangements can be such valuable additions to the lesson repertoire. Expecting students to polish etudes to the same high levels of mastery at this stage of development will usually exhaust their perseverance and enthusiasm rather quickly.

The Written Music as Foundation for Our Work

Although Suzuki frequently challenged teachers to act freely and creatively in their manner of teaching, he did want them to remain faithful to certain elements. One of these was adherence to the common repertoire used by Suzuki students throughout the world, which has enabled them to communicate in the common language of music for many years. This thought is further embodied in the homogeneity of the worldwide student and teacher training and has great merit. Nevertheless, movements for change have emerged and some Suzuki materials are coming on the market with alternative versions and different editions of some pieces.



Faksimile der Bourrée aus der Suite Nr. 3 für Violoncello solo, Abschrift von Anna Magdalena Bach

There is no Bach autograph (Urtext) of the suites for cello. Here, you see the earliest source, a copy from 1727 in the hand of Anna Magdalena Bach.

The Revised Edition of the Violin School Volume 3 will come on the market shortly. In it, you will find **alternative** versions of Gavotte I and II and the Bourrée by J. S. Bach.

Upon closer examination of the three different versions of the Bourrée

- ◆ Facsimile
- ◆ the transcription in the original Suzuki Violin School, 1978 Edition
- ◆ the transcription in the Revised Edition 2008

it is easy to see that none of the transcriptions may claim to be consistent with the facsimile edition, not to mention the fact that they have been transposed from the cello to the violin.

I am convinced that Johann Sebastian Bach, and Shinichi Suzuki as well, would have been extremely happy to hear children around the world play these pieces together, regardless of the arrangement. Both would have placed primary emphasis on the quality and musicality of the performances. In the interest of our children and students, we should not lose sight of these goals.

Kerstin Wartberg
Director of the German Suzuki Institute