

J.S. Bach's Lute Suite BWV 1006a: A Study in Transcription

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J.S. Bach often transcribed his own musical works, using them in multiple settings, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Lute suites. This paper explores Bach's method of transcription in these suites, focusing on Suite no. 4. BWV 1006a provides one of the best opportunities to study Bach's method of re-using his own material. It is also a prime example of Bach's tendency to compose works using a general sketch, independent of instrumental considerations, and adapt them later to various idioms. It will be seen that Bach's transcriptions successfully transform the source material into a piece that is idiomatically appropriate. This information informs modern performance practice and enhances understanding of the transcription process.

Key Terms: Music; Classical, Baroque; Bach, Transcriptions; Lute Suites; Johann Sebastian Bach

In J.S. Bach's huge repertory, a sizeable number of transcriptions exist. Bach frequently re-worked his own material and cast it in different settings, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Lute Suites, particularly BWV 1006a.²³ Bach's earlier version of this piece, *Partita III for Solo Violin, BWV 1006*, served as his source material for the lute version. Bach also used the Prelude of this suite as an orchestral *Sinfonia* in the cantata "*Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir*,"²⁴ BWV 29, and as an introduction to the second part of another cantata, "*Herr Gott Beherrscher aller dinge*,"²⁵ BWV 120a.²⁶ The piece is now performed most frequently on the guitar, transcribed from the lute version.

This study will examine the Lute Suites in general, highlighting the other instances of transcription, particularly BWV 995 and BWV 1000. BWV 1006a will then be

explored, using specific analytical examples comparing the different versions. Due to its multiple versions, this piece provides one of the best opportunities to study Bach's method of transcribing his own material. It is also a prime example of Bach's tendency to compose works using a general sketch, independent of instrumental considerations, and adapt them later to various idioms. It will be seen that Bach's transcriptions successfully transform the source material into a piece that is idiomatically appropriate. This information informs modern performance practice and enhances understanding of the transcription process.

Overview of the Lute Suites

Bach's compositions numbered BWV 995 through 1000 and 1006a are designated as the "Lute" works. Composed over several decades (1717-1740), BWV 995, 996, 997, and 1006a are stylized dance suites.²⁷ BWV 998 is a Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro; BWV 999 is a Prelude; and BWV 1000 is a

²³ Bach's compositions are identified by numbers preceded by the initials "BWV" that stand for *Bach Werke Verzeichnis*, meaning "index of Bach's Works." These numbers were first assigned in Wolfgang Schmieder's thematic catalog of Bach's works, published in 1958.

²⁴ Translation: "We thank you God, we thank you"

²⁵ Translation: "Lord God, Ruler of all things"

²⁶ Frank Koonce, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Solo Lute Works* (San Diego: Neil A Kjos Music Company, 1989), viii.

²⁷ The Baroque dance suite was a collection of dance music, typically consisting of an Allemande, Courante, Saraband, and Gigue. A Prelude and other types of dances were often added or substituted. A "stylized" dance piece is composed as art music and is not intended to accompany actual dancing.

Fugue.²⁸ Many scholars have questioned, however, if these pieces were specifically intended for solo lute. Of all the lute works, only BWV 995 is specifically designated in Bach's original scores as being for the lute. Clive Titmuss, in his article on the Lute suites, says that "the pieces were never composed as a group, though this is the form in which they have repeatedly been published and recorded. They are not technically possible on the lute without fundamental changes to the text. Two of the suites, in E major (1006a) and G minor (995), are two-clef arrangements of earlier pieces for strings with only passing resemblance to the lute style. External and internal evidence presents too many contradictions to ignore."²⁹ It is the opinion of Titmuss and other scholars that Bach actually composed these pieces as keyboard works written in a lute style, realizing them on an instrument called the *lute-harpsichord*



Figure 1. Lute-Harpsichord (baroquemusic.com)

²⁸ A *fugue* is defined as "a composition in which three or four voice parts take up a short theme according to a set of fairly strict rules. The fugue is a form of *imitative counterpoint*, that is, a musical fabric in which different melodies or different parts of the same melody sound simultaneously and, at the same time, the different voice parts imitate one another, repeating the material of the first voice part in either the same or a slightly different form" (Harper Collins Dictionary of Music, 2nd edition).

²⁹ Clive Titmuss, *Bach's Lute Suites: The Myth is Busted* (www.classicalguitarcanada.ca, April 2012)

The lute-harpsichord was a Baroque keyboard instrument designed to imitate the sound of the lute, using gut strings and some even using bowl-shaped bodies (as in Fig. 1). Unfortunately none of these instruments has survived to the present day (Fig. 1 is a reconstruction based on written accounts). An inventory of Bach's estate revealed that he owned two lute-harpsichords at the time of his death in 1750.³⁰ Since Bach was not a lutenist, and the Lute suites have many keyboard-like qualities, it is reasonable to conclude that these works were conceived for the lute-harpsichord. However, unless some new evidence comes to light, we may never know with certainty about the conception of these works. For now, the lute designation makes the most sense, but as we will see, Bach himself used this material in multiple ways, adding to the ambiguity.

In 1973, Thomas Kolhase did a dissertation study on the Lute Suites and offers this opinion on their conception³¹:

BWV 995- for lute
 BWV 996- for lute-harpsichord
 BWV 997- "indirectly" for lute
 BWV 998- for lute or harpsichord
 BWV 999- for lute
 BWV 1000- for lute-harpsichord
 BWV 1006a- unspecified (intended instrument not clear)

In Kolhase's determination, only BWV 995 and BWV 999 are specifically designated for lute. And even these are in some doubt; 999's orchestration is very keyboard-like (arpeggios³² with a moving bass line), and Clive Titmuss says that "BWV 995 is a stab at arranging an earlier work for the lute, but it is not lute music." Phillip Hii's article on Bach's method of transcription quotes

³⁰ Koonce, *Ibid.* ix

³¹ Thomas Kolhase, "Johann Sebastian Bach's Compositions for Lute Instruments." Dissertation, Tubingen, 1972.

³² An *arpeggio* is a chord that is played melodically (one note at a time) rather than harmonically (together).

C.P.E. Bach's assertion that "Bach's compositions were largely conceived independently of instrumental considerations and adapted much later."³³ This certainly appears to be the case with the Lute Suites, and is most likely the reason for the confusion over their conception. One aspect that is not in dispute is that several of these pieces are transcriptions of earlier works. Since these are Bach's own transcriptions, they provide further insight into Bach's compositional process.

Bach's Method of Transcription

Three of Bach's Lute works are transcriptions or adaptations from his unaccompanied string music. BWV 995 is a transcription of Cello Suite V, BWV 1011; BWV 1000 is a transcription of the Fugue from Violin Sonata I, BWV 1001; and BWV 1006a is a transcription of the Violin Partita BWV 1006.³⁴ Bach's unaccompanied string music was fertile ground for transcription due to Bach's method of composition.

These works are masterpieces of *implied polyphony*.³⁵ Bach uses the melodic line not only to state melody but to outline harmony and counterpoint,³⁶ all within a single line. Stanley Yates says it well: "The appellation 'unaccompanied', when applied to Bach's solo string music, is a misnomer. Rather, these works are *self-accompanied*, the accompaniment being embedded in a single 'melodic' line along with the 'solo' part proper."³⁷ Thus Bach is ingeniously embedding melody, accompaniment, and counterpoint into a single "unaccompanied" line.

Bach realizes this implied polyphony through 1) arpeggiation, 2) melodic leaps, and 3) multi-stop chords. Below is an example of the implied polyphony in the Cello Suite I Prelude, taken from the Stanley Yates article:

Ex. 1 Prelude, Cello Suite I (BWV 1007), mm. 37-39

³³ Phillip Hii, "Bach's Method of Transcription." *Soundboard: The Journal Of the Guitar Foundation of America* 17/1 (1990) 26-35

³⁴ Wolfgang Schmieder's BWV catalog of Bach's works was arranged thematically, not chronologically; therefore the BWV 1011 Cello Suite was actually composed *before* the BWV 995 Lute Suite, BWV 1001 was composed before BWV 1000, and so on.

³⁵ Polyphony is "music with more than one voice or melodic part sounding at the same time" (Harper Collins Dictionary).

³⁶ Counterpoint is "the technique of combing two or more independent melodies to make up a harmonious texture or one in which the chords produced by the melodies sounding together are pleasant to the ear" (Harper Collins Dictionary). The definition of counterpoint is essentially the same as polyphony.

³⁷ Stanley Yates, "Bach's Unaccompanied String Music: A New (Old) Approach to Stylistic and Idiomatic Arrangement for the Guitar." *Classical Guitar Magazine, Londres* 17, no. 3-6 (1998).

Here we can see that the single cello line, with its arpeggiations and melodic leaps, is actually implying three separate voices. In the lower staff Yates re-voices the single cello line, showing the different voices through altering stem direction and differing rest and note values (the actual number of notes is the same). This implied polyphony in the single cello line makes these pieces particularly well suited for transcription, as the harmonic and melodic implications can then be realized, and Bach does this himself in his transcriptions.

Bach's transcriptions of his solo string music involve several melodic and harmonic differences from the original. Melodic differences include 1) Embellishment- single notes and arpeggios; 2) ornamentation; and 3) realization of implied counterpoint. Ex. 2 is an example from BWV 1006a that shows the use of arpeggios to compensate for the lack of tonal sustain on the lute (top line is violin original, bottom line is lute transcription):

Ex.2 Prelude, Lute Suite No.4, mm. 138-139

Ex. 3 is another example melodic elaboration through arpeggiation from Lute Suite no. 2:

Ex. 3 Double, Lute Suite no. 2, mm. 47-48³⁸

For an example of realization of implied counterpoint, we look to an example from Bach's clavier transcription (BWV 964) of his A minor Violin Sonata (BWV 1003). Of this excerpt, Phillip Hii says that "this short passage probably best epitomizes Bach's technique of reducing of reducing counterpoint to single lines. A key factor in the effectiveness of an unaccompanied melody depends on the extent to which the harmonic progression is defined by the melody." Also, it is important that the melody incorporates elements of the bass line to achieve the implication of counterpoint. We see that in this example.

Ex. 4, Fugue, mm. 111-113

Harmonic differences in Bach's transcriptions include: 1) Greater elaboration and clarification of musical structure; 2) redefining the bass line; 3) providing greater harmonic support; and 4) adding contrapuntal⁴⁰ material. BWV 995, being a transcription of Cello Suite V, offers several appropriate examples.

³⁹ Phillip Hii, *Ibid.* 31

⁴⁰ Contrapuntal means "pertaining to or in the form of counterpoint" (Harper Collins Dictionary)

³⁸ Phillip Hii, *Ibid.* 29

The image shows two parts of a musical score. Part a) consists of two staves: the top staff is labeled 'Cello' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Lute'. It contains measures 1 through 8. The Lute staff has various fingering numbers (7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7) and some notes are marked with 'one' and 'sharp'. Part b) also consists of two staves: 'Cello' and 'Lute'. It contains measures 11 through 15. The Lute staff has fingering numbers (3, 3) and some notes are marked with 'one' and 'sharp'.

Ex. 5 Lute Suite BWV 995: a) Gigue mm. 1- 8; b) Gavotte II en Rondo mm. 11-15.¹

In a) we see that Bach adds contrapuntal material through the use of an imitative line in the lute version; in b) a bass line is added which fills out the harmony that was only hinted at in the original.

Ex. 6 (see next page), from the Allemande of BWV 995, provides examples of harmonic and idiomatic differences. In m.1 and 2 we see changes in rhythmic figuration

more suited to the trilling character of the lute; those same changes are seen in m.7 and 8. At the end of m.2, bass notes are added, and a full chord is inserted at m.4. Measures 5 and 6 provide additional chord tones to beat 1, and beat 1 of m.7 and 8 changes the chord to make it more idiomatic to the lute. The rest of the excerpt sees added or re-orchestrated bass notes that fill out the texture.

The image shows a musical score for measures 1 through 11. It consists of two staves: the top staff is labeled 'Cello' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Lute'. The Lute staff has various rhythmic markings, including trills (tr) and some notes are marked with 'one' and 'sharp'. There are also some boxed areas in the Lute staff, possibly indicating specific transcriptions or changes.

Ex. 6 Allemande, BWV 995 mm.1-18; a) cello original; b) lute version.

BWV 1006a

Now that we have explored the ways in which Bach manipulates his material in his transcriptions, we will examine BWV 1006a. It is a transcription of BWV 1006, Partita no. 3 for solo violin. Bach's autograph score does not indicate an instrumental designation, but it is written on two staves in the manner of clavier music, which would support the notion that this piece was written for lute-harpsichord.⁴¹ Clive Titmuss, when discussing Bach's contact with lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss in 1739, says that "it is possible that Bach had Weiss in mind" when making these arrangements, and "Bach may have written various pieces for the lute in thin-textured style at relatively low pitch, and, being surrounded by capable exponents of the instrument, expected them to make the lute transcription."⁴² Reinforcing this idea, Hans Vogt said that the lute works were "occasional pieces, written for specific players at specific events, and they were often revised by their recipients."⁴³ This would explain the two-stave clavier arrangement of the autograph score and the lack of instrumental designation. However, Titmuss himself says that this train of thought underestimates Bach's professional capacity; he was certainly capable of composing in the lute style but it is not

unreasonable to think that he might have left the final details of arrangement to specialists such as Weiss. It is most likely that Bach conceived this piece on the lute-harpsichord and left off the instrumental designation to allow for transcription into different idioms.

BWV 1006a is a stylized dance suite in E Major. It contains six parts: Prelude, Loure, Gavotte en Rondeau, Minuet 1 & 2, Bourree, and Gigue. Of all of these, the Prelude is the most popular and well-known. Bach must have liked it as well, as he re-cast it in four different versions. The Prelude will be examined more closely a bit later in its various versions.

The title "Loure" refers to a French Baroque dance in triple or sextuple time; in this case, 6/4. Bach's transcription uses the lute's harmonic capacity to fill in chord punctuations, further clarifying the harmony, but all other aspects are identical to the original. The Gavotte en Rondeau obviously uses rondo form (ABACA etc.) and is the second most well-known part of the suite after the Prelude. Here, Bach adds bass lines to achieve further contrapuntal motion, and fills in vertical harmonies that were only implied in the original. Minuet 1 and 2 are short dances meant to be played in ABA form (Minuet 1, Minuet 2, followed by a repeat of Minuet 1). Bach includes a few extra bass notes and a little added harmony, but the contrapuntal motion is essentially unchanged. In the Bourree, Bach adds an extensive bass line to realize the implied counterpoint:

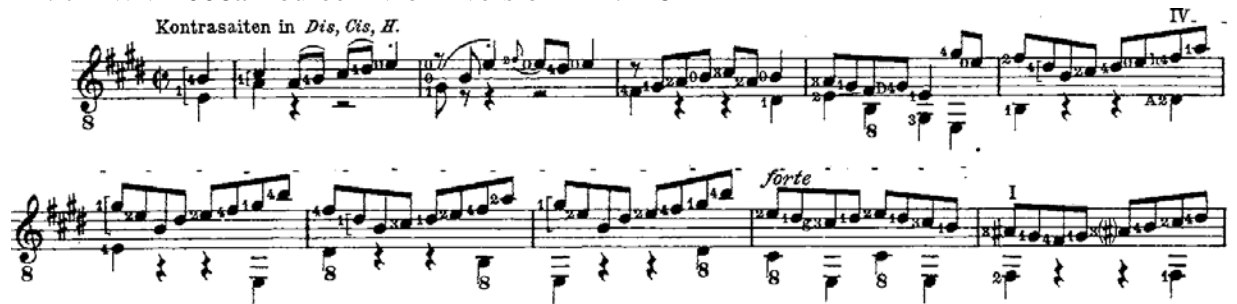
⁴¹ Koonce, *Ibid.* 137

⁴² Titmuss, *Ibid.* 8

⁴³ Hans Vogt, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Chamber Music*. Portland: Amadeus Press (1981), 55



Ex. 7 BWV 1006a Bouree – violin version mm. 1-8



b) lute version. mm. 1-10⁴⁴

The same thing occurs in the Gigue, but even more so. The violin original is entirely a single line texture, and Bach adds a supportive bass line in the lute transcription:



Ex.8 Gigue, a) violin version, mm. 1-6



b) Lute version, mm. 1-8

⁴⁴ imslp.org. Single staff transcription from the Bach autograph.

In returning to the Prelude, we see a prime example of Bach's re-using his own material in different settings. It is written in a through-composed style, with running

sixteenth notes throughout, and the violin version is entirely a single line texture, with all of the implied polyphony that Bach does so well:

Ex. 9 Prelude BWV 1006, violin version, mm. 1-12⁴⁵

Bach's autograph score for BWV 1006a looks like this, written clavier-style:

Ex. 10 Prelude BWV 1006a, mm. 1-12, from autograph

⁴⁵ Scores taken from imslp.org

Here is the same transcription, put on one staff for the Lute:

The image shows a musical score for a lute transcription of J.S. Bach's Prelude, mm. 1-12. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 3/4. The piece is in G major. The score includes fingerings (1-4), ornaments (trills), and dynamic markings: 'piano' and 'forte'. Roman numerals VII, IX, and JX are placed above the staff to indicate fret positions. The word 'Laute.' is written at the beginning of the staff.

Ex. 11 Prelude, mm. 1-12, Lute

Notice in the Lute transcription that Bach adds bass support to the original violin line. The changes here are relatively small in comparison with the Bourree and Gigue.

The Prelude was also used as the foundation of the Sinfonia in the BWV 29 cantata:

Sinfonia BWV 29

J.S. Bach

Tr. II, III
Timp.
Vl. & Ob. II
Vla.
Org. & Cont.

5

In this example, the organ is playing the Prelude and the trumpet, timpani, oboe violin, and viola add chordal exclamations and reinforce lines. The Prelude's use in the Sinfonia of the BWV 120a cantata is very similar to that of BWV 29.

The BWV 1006a Prelude is certainly not the only example of Bach re-working his own material (BWV 1000 has a violin, lute, and organ version), but it is one of the best examples. After considering all of the evidence above, it is apparent that Bach frequently wrote general sketches of works that were to be adapted later into other incarnations. BWV 1006a's ambiguous autograph score is evidence of this, as is the adaptation of the Prelude into four separate versions of the same music. Bach's method of transcription proves that a piece of music, once composed, can have many lives in other forms. Perhaps this says that composition is a process of evolution as well as creation.

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