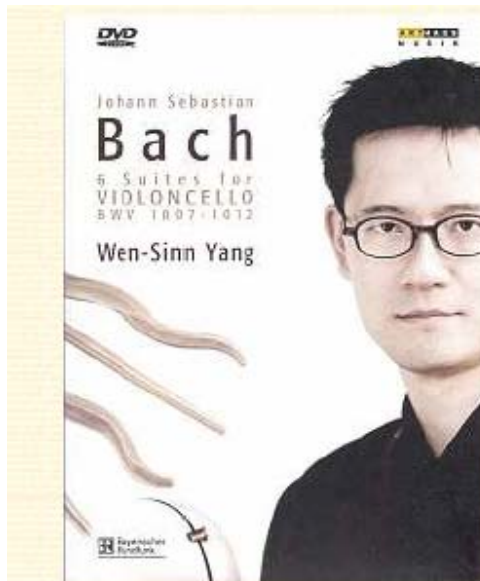


Wen-Sinn YANG

**Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)***Six Suites for Violoncello*, BWV 1007-1012.

DVD 1: Suite No.1 in G Major; Suite No.2 in D Minor; Suite No.3 in C Major

DVD 2: Suite No.4 in E Flat Major; Suite No.5 in C Minor; Suite No.6 in D Major.

CD1: Music only from DVD 1; CD2: Music only from DVD 2

● Wen-Sinn Yang. (cello)

rec. Servatiuskirche Auf Dem Streichen - (no date given)

Sound Supervisor: Wilhelm Meister

Executive Producer: Korbinian Meyer

Director of TV and Video: Ruth Käch.

Region Code 0; NTSC

● DVD ARTHAUS MUSIK 101 419 [2
DVDs: 76:49 + 96:54]

v.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/Sept06/Bach_cello_Yang_101419.htm (1 of 5)04/10/2006 2.14.10

Musical discovery is an endless odyssey, and even in previous ports of call left fallow, one may discover new delights.

The recorded music catalogue contains more than fifty versions of J.S. Bach's six Suites for Solo Cello. This does not include those who have made multiple recording such as Paul Tortelier and Mischa Maisky, or numerous recordings of individual suites. In this writer's collection are more than twelve different versions not to mention arrangements for guitar and lute. The Lute Suite BWV 995 is an arrangement by J.S. Bach of the Suite No. 5.

A more recent addition to this rather crowded catalogue is Wen-Sinn Yang. Of Taiwanese descent he was born in Bern, Switzerland. He studied cello in Zurich with Claude Starck, and in Berlin with Wolfgang Boettcher. Master classes with Janos Starker and David Geringas were later additions to his musical education. At age 24, Sinn Yang was engaged as first principal solo cellist with the Symphony Orchestra of Bavarian Radio.

The review package comprises two DVDs, one for each of three Suites plus a most informative booklet incorporating an interview with Sinn Yang by Richard Eckstein. As a bonus there are two audio CDs of the same music programme which, in my experience, is a rarity in this type of presentation.

The venue for this recording is the pilgrimage church of St. Servatius set high on a ridge above the Achenal valley. It stands next to an old bridle path near some ruined stables - the remains of a property that in the 12th century belonged to the Counts of Kraiburg-Ortenburg. The church has survived intact and may have served as a private chapel. In both acoustic and visual terms this is a perfect recording venue for the programme. Scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary, the Passion of Christ and the Last Judgement adorn the choir. In the nave we see scenes from the lives of the Saints and of salvation.

Having viewed the programme one may readily conclude that Sinn Yang interprets these works in specifically Christian terms; the accompanying notes quickly dispel that notion. He nonetheless imbues them with a deep spirituality that he felt appropriate to take advantage of the inspiration offered by the location. Exactly where the border between these two interpretive considerations lies is a matter of individual listener judgement.

To listen to the entire cycle requires a significant time commitment: in this instance approx. 175 minutes including performer's dialogue at the commencement of each suite. Despite a long-time love affair with these works, this review is the first occasion on which I have listened to all Suites consecutively in one sitting. I then found myself repeating this marathon event in the evening and until early hours of the morning!

At the commencement of each Suite, the performer provides intriguing insight into the music both from compositional and interpretive perspectives.

In his book, 'A Self-Portrait', the great French cellist Paul Tortelier explains why, in the notes accompanying his recording of these Suites he refrained from providing personal imaginative impressions of each Suite - such impressions are for the performer rather than the listener. He goes on to explain and give examples of such interpretive impressions including associations with elements of nature e.g. streams, sunny conditions, and mountains radiant and bright. He also assigns specific colours to Suites and movements within Suites.

In similar vein Wen-Sinn Yang, at the commencement of the Second Suite, provides imaginative impressions and assigns colours. As illustration the following three contrasting examples are provided: First Suite: bright green; delightful and awakening, a beginning Spring in G major; Second Suite: dark brown or dark blue; thoroughly contemplative, brooding and philosophical; Fourth Suite: ground colour of purple, or dark purple; expresses something majestic, and inner tranquillity.

For the non-cellist probably the most illuminating information is that provided at the commencement of Suite No. 3. Sinn Yang explains that unlike the Partitas and Sonatas for Solo Violin, original scores for the Cello Suites do not exist. Consequently no definitive articulation marks are available. These ideally would tell the performer which notes are connected and which should be played with separate strokes of the bow; they are extremely important for performance. In the recent past cellists have tended to pay little attention to the prescribed bowing, playing in accordance with individual taste.

There are no differentiations of phrase marks so how do the notes fit together? He proposes in the same way as a spoken sentence. Regarding articulation marks, how are the individual words pronounced? Sinn Yang suggests the analogy of being sung as contrasted with spoken words. He provides several illustrated examples on the cello from the Prelude of Suite No. 3, played

separately or 'spoken' and then contrasted with connected or 'sung.' The astute listener who in the past may not have been unable to articulate his preferences will now immediately understand the key elements of the various interpretations, and the basis for his preference.

Prior to the commencement of Suite No. 4, Sinn Yang ventures into graphic imagery. He describes the beginning of a tour through a large church. As the music progresses through other keys at a measured pace, so does the tour through the church. The windows and altar show stories or events from the Old and New Testaments, possibly even The Passion of Christ. As we proceed the music becomes increasingly dramatic; suddenly it stops on a low C sharp minor, the altar is approached and Christ is seen on the cross? The light confuses and moves one deeply. This is made audible in a stirring cadence by wide arpeggios and continuous scales.

Looking back on the church the same sight is seen as with the beginning four measures. But we also see or play these measures in a different light; the experience has changed us. This is the central aspect of the music; not that it can have an effect or cause a change of itself but that it influences feelings and individuals. This may not be for long, but for a brief moment the music takes on a different reality.

Wen-Sinn Yang's playing has been described as follows: 'He plays technically at the highest level with a lovely, full sound and impeccable intonation. He phrases sensitively and has the fullest grasp of the philosophical dimensions of the music he plays.' The Cello Suites are an apt example that, in every way, demonstrates the virtues attributed to him. In relevant movements he leans more towards articulation that reflects a 'spoken' rather than a 'sung' interpretation thus providing a clearly focused line more reminiscent of Mischa Maisky than Anner Bylisma. To my ears the latter's executions sometimes sound muddled.

At opportune moments between phrases, elegant and artistic gesticulations of the left hand reminds one of those made by a ballerina or flamenco dancer.

Having viewed the recording of the Suites for Solo Cello which Rostropovich first recorded as a total cycle in 1990 when he was 63, I was reminded of how technically difficult and physically challenging the cello can be. In contrast, and while a much younger man, Sinn Yang's playing gave the impression that a magician was executing illusions with consummate ease.

No review of this performance would be complete without reference to the delightful sound quality provided separately on CD or as an integral part of the DVDs.

This is probably a combination of engineering excellence, venue, and performer's technique and last but not least, a fine instrument. For this recording a cello by the violinmaker Teckler (1666-1747) was used. Born in Füssen, Teckler completed his apprenticeship in Venice and ultimately became one of Rome's leading luthiers. The instrument used here bears the date 1720, making it contemporary with the composition of the Cello Suites.

This particular cello exhibits a beautifully balanced mid-range/treble with power and sustain. The robust and resonant bass can, on occasion, be felt in the diaphragm. Overall the audio section of this presentation is a sonic delight.

Witnessing creative genius, supreme musicality, and the intriguing liaison between anatomy and physiology required for such amazing digital dexterity leaves one, irrespective of spiritual disposition, with an impression that all this did not happen by mere chance and that higher forces are at play. It may be that J.S. Bach, the great musical proselytiser had, as part of his objective, expression of this very point when he composed these masterpieces: magnificent music, didactic endeavour and a testimony of his Creator?

Only physical presence could transcend the musical epiphany bestowed by this superb presentation.

Zane Turner