

János Starker's 1957-59 Columbia recordings of Bach's six Cello Suites occupy a fascinating place in the history of these works on record. They were not his first engagement with the Suites: earlier Nixa recordings had already established him as one of the most formidable Bach cellists of his generation. But these Columbia recordings caught him in a new phase of artistic command, still young, still incisive, yet already in possession of a rare fusion of technical discipline, tonal authority and interpretative maturity.

The Gramophone followed the sequence closely as the records appeared. Reviewing the Columbia disc of Suites Nos. 2 and 5 in April 1958, the critic noted that there was little difference in the "quality" between these performances and Starker's earlier discs, while stressing the importance of the new recording. A solitary unaccompanied string instrument gives the engineer nowhere to hide: any weakness in focus, dynamic range or surface quality is mercilessly exposed. Yet this new Columbia issue was described as excellently produced and as containing two of the best Suites in the set. The D minor Suite was heard as sombre and noble, while the C minor Suite, with its *scordatura* tuning, drew particular admiration for the intelligence with which Starker made Bach's single melodic line suggest a richer web of implied voices.

By the time Suites Nos. 1 and 3 appeared, reviewed in September 1959, Starker's Columbia cycle was beginning to look like something more than a replacement for deleted earlier discs. The reviewer wrote that Starker's performances had reached "a level of technical polish and interpretative ease hitherto unattained." Comparison with the Nixa versions was instructive: the earlier performances retained their importance, but the Columbia recordings showed a greater freedom from effort, more expressive poise, and a subtler control of movement and dance rhythm. The famous G major Suite was found steadier and perhaps slightly less buoyant than before in its lighter dances, but the *Sarabande* was praised as finer, more expressive and beautifully poised. The C major Suite, already one of the great showcases of Starker's clarity and energy, retained its lightness and flexibility while gaining in presence and authority.

The cycle was completed on record with Suites Nos. 4 and 6, reviewed in April 1961. Again the critic found many of the expected qualities fully present: assurance, strong rhythmic life, clean articulation and an ability to make Bach's linear writing sound harmonically alive. There were reservations about the E-flat *Prelude*, whose arpeggiated writing can easily become mechanical, but Starker's command of the faster music, especially in the D major Suite, was warmly recognised. The Sixth Suite has always presented special challenges for modern cellists. Associated in the Anna Magdalena Bach manuscript with a five-string instrument, *à cinq cordes*, it asks the four-string cello to reach beyond its natural comfort zone. Starker's achievement is to make this formidable music sound happy, secure and commanding.

What emerges across these reviews is not a picture of indulgent romantic Bach, nor of austere scholarly reconstruction. Starker's Bach is muscular, clear-eyed, inwardly expressive without theatrical excess. His discipline never freezes the music; rather, it allows the dances to breathe, the harmonic implications to speak, and the rhetoric of each movement to unfold without exaggeration. The Suites are presented as living structures: architectural, yes, but full of sinew, pulse and human heat.

For this Pristine release, the original recordings have undergone XR remastering, with Ambient Stereo processing applied to the earlier mono material. The later recordings were made in true stereo, and have therefore been preserved and remastered as such. Some of the original mono sound was constricted, but the playing beneath it was extraordinary. Pristine's remastering opens the image, clarifies the cello's body and resonance, and brings the listener strikingly close to the physical act of performance: bow, string, wood, rosin, breath. The result is not a modernisation of Starker's Bach, but a revelation of it. These recordings, already admired in their own time, now speak with a renewed immediacy that makes their greatness easier to hear, and harder to resist.



J. S. BACH Suites for Solo Cello

disc one (53:19)

BACH Cello Suite No. 1

in G major, BWV1007

1. 1. Prélude (2:16)
2. 2. Allemande (4:40)
3. 3. Courante (2:20)
4. 4. Sarabande (3:22)
5. 5. Menuet I & II (2:54)
6. 6. Gigue (1:34)

BACH Cello Suite No. 2

in D minor, BWV1008

7. 1. Prélude (3:52)
8. 2. Allemande (3:46)
9. 3. Courante (1:39)
10. 4. Sarabande (3:54)
11. 5. Menuet I & II (2:38)
12. 6. Gigue (1:46)

BACH Cello Suite No. 3

in C major, BWV1009

13. 1. Prélude (4:15)
14. 2. Allemande (3:15)
15. 3. Courante (2:16)
16. 4. Sarabande (3:10)
17. 5. Bourrée I & II (3:28)
18. 6. Gigue (2:11)

János Starker, cello

disc two (62:22)

BACH Cello Suite No. 4

in E-flat major, BWV1010

1. 1. Prélude (3:53)
2. 2. Allemande (3:12)
3. 3. Courante (2:22)
4. 4. Sarabande (3:19)
5. 5. Bourrée I & II (3:51)
6. 6. Gigue (1:28)

BACH Cello Suite No. 5

in C minor, BWV1011

7. 1. Prélude (7:01)
8. 2. Allemande (4:50)
9. 3. Courante (2:13)
10. 4. Sarabande (2:49)
11. 5. Gavotte I & II (4:08)
12. 6. Gigue (1:35)

BACH Cello Suite No. 6

in D major, BWV1012

13. 1. Prélude (4:28)
14. 2. Allemande (4:55)
15. 3. Courante (2:26)
16. 4. Sarabande (3:27)
17. 5. Gavotte I & II (3:42)
18. 6. Gigue (2:44)

XR Remastered by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of János Starker

Recorded in London, 1957-59:

Suites Nos. 1 & 3
22-23 May 1958
EMI Studio No. 1
Abbey Road
Presented in Ambient StereoSuites Nos. 2 & 5
30 May & 3 October 1957
Kingsway Hall / London
Presented in Ambient StereoSuites Nos. 4 & 6
31 January-1 February &
9-10 June 1959
EMI Studio No. 1
Abbey Road
Presented in Stereo

Total duration: 1hr 55:41

© 2026 Pristine Audio