

J. S. plays BACH

*Solo guitar
arrangements of the
Third Cello Suite &
Second Violin Partita
by J. S. Bach
(1685-1750)*

Arranged and
performed by guitarist
Jeffrey Hamilton Steele

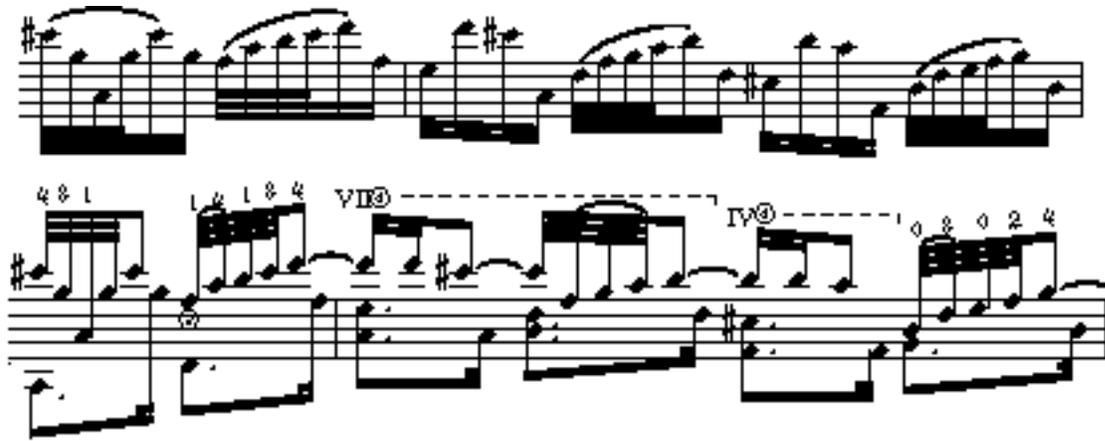
total time: 54:12
Recorded Autumn 2001
in Gloucester MA
Guitar: 1974 Michael
Cone

The Instrument

I have chosen to play both these works on a guitar made for me by Michael Cone, a uniquely constructed instrument built to the dimensions of an early 19th-century guitar. Its bright treble and light bass provide a more suitable sonority for Early Music than does the standard-sized classical guitar favored by most players. Furthering this end, I have tuned the strings a half-step below concert pitch (pre-19th-century “concert pitch” being lower) -- which gives notes more time to “speak.”

Arranger as Composer

Guitarists generally add their own *continuo* (harmonic accompaniment) to these primarily monodic (single melody-line) pieces. While it is a challenge to add anything to so perfect a melodic line -- already containing its own implied counterpoint -- Bach demonstrated how one might do so in his own lute versions of the *Fifth Cello Suite* and the *Third Violin Partita*. Viewing these last two works more as a point of departure as opposed to a treatise, I seek the spirit that results from a collaboration between two composers over that of one striving to do as the other is supposed to have done. The lack of sustain on a plucked instrument creates opportunities for imitative counterpoint. And where Bach has left the harmonic progression ambiguous, sequential harmonic progressions may be interpreted and fully



realized (as shown above in these “before and after” examples from the *Allemande* to the Third Cello Suite).

The Third Cello Suite

While it is not new for guitarists to play this suite, to my knowledge they have always rendered it in the key of A -- owing to the root notes of the three most common chords being available on open strings. To me, however, the work sounds and feels more idiomatic when arranged in the key of G. Where possible, I emulate Baroque lutenists’ practice of playing scale passages across strings -- producing the harp-like effect that came more easily to them as their instruments were tuned in thirds (the guitar being tuned in fourths).

The descending scale that opens the *Prelude* is reflected in the opening bars of the *Allemande*, *Courante* and *Bourree II*. Regarding the *Prelude’s* closing bars, whose forward motion is rudely interrupted by a series of block chords, my teacher Phil de Fremery used to say, “Have you ever been in a situation that you thought you’d never get out of alive?”

This recording of the Third Cello Suite replaces the version released on my 1998 CD, *Voice of Creation*. Though I still take pride in this earlier performance, in this second go-round I was equipped to improve the audio quality.

The Second Violin Partita

Bach did not actually entitle this piece *Partita* but rather *Partia* -- the original *partita* form being a set of variations. Though it concludes with one of the greatest sets of variations (though more properly termed “divisions”) ever composed -- the *Chaconne* -- the *Partia* otherwise consists of the dance movements common to the *Suite*. Though most of Bach’s Suites are introduced with a *Prelude*, this “Suite” -- along with its 17th century predecessors as well as his own *First Violin Partita* -- begins with the *Allemande*.

Like most players, I was drawn to this work by the mighty *Chaconne*. Though I arranged the *Sarabande* and *Gigue* many years ago, the *Allemande* and *Courante* did not make known their guitaristic potential until recently. The latter movement in particular called out for more

than a simple bass line -- resulting in something akin to the lower part in a two-part invention. Shown here are some foreshadowings of the *Chaconne* to be found in the earlier movements, the most notable being in the first measure of the *Allemande* -- anticipating the closing bars of the *Chaconne* like bookends to a life.

-- JHS

Allemande (2nd Violin Part):



Chaconne - dev. 8:



Chaconne - dev. 63 (closing):



Allemande:



Chaconne - dev. 54:

