

BACH'S LUTE WORKS FROM THE GUITARIST'S PERSPECTIVE

*Tilman Hoppstock's critical evaluation of the lute suites for guitar players:
Vol. 1 BWV 995/996*

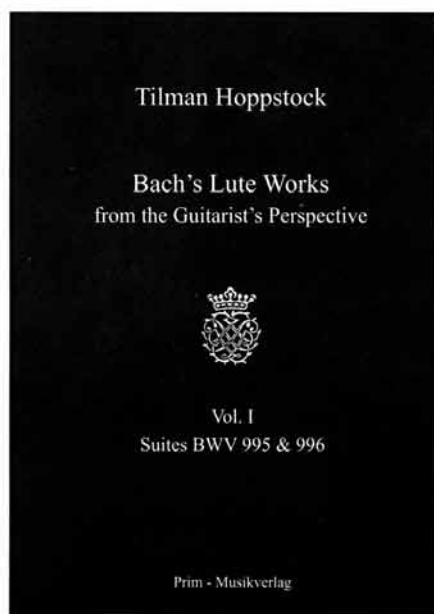
By GUY TRAVISS

GERMAN CELLIST and guitarist Tilman Hoppstock is often associated with the music of Bach. Although we find evidence for this in his recordings and performances, it is for the much acclaimed urtext edition of the lute suites that we identify Hoppstock with this composer, not forgetting his many other Bach transcriptions and performance editions. *Bach's Lute Works from the Guitarist's Perspective*, Hoppstock's most recent Bach publication, serves that reputation further and demonstrates a significant development in Hoppstock's research-based approach to this music. The book is published by PRIM-Musikverlag, a publishing house founded by Hoppstock himself in 1993, and is the first volume to be released of what will ultimately be a three-volume set. Volume one deals with suites 995/996. Volume two (prelude BWV 999; fugue BWV 1000; and prelude, fugue & allegro BWV 998) will be available in English in 2013, but at this time there is no announcement concerning the third and final volume (suites BWV 997/1006a). The entire series will eventually be published in both English and German, with the latter available in advance.

So how can we define this first project? Paramount of course is the notion of how the performer approaches suites 995/996, and Hoppstock establishes his reason for having this discussion in the book's preface: 'The idiomatic aspect of lute music in general and Bach's compositional style which is frequently not particularly oriented towards the instrument provides a constant stimulus for interesting concepts and appears to be a central topic for all performers who have devoted themselves to Bach's works for lute' [pg. 6.]. The book elucidates a number of facets of this music, offering insights into musical components such as harmony, movement structure, polyphony, tempo and articulation. For guitarists the challenge in exploring these elements is one of judgement, as Hoppstock explains: 'To bring these things together on the modern instru-

ment is always a compromise; we cannot play in the same way as lutenists do, but we can borrow some of their ideas. When we approach a trill, for example, maybe we shouldn't play it on two strings? But sometimes it's much easier and sounds better. We don't have to follow 300-year-old directions. It's the same with the piano: if you were to play it like a harpsichord it would sound terrible; but to perform harpsichord music on the piano without any knowledge of the harpsichord would also be a mistake'. The text is illustrated with over 500 musical examples and is accompanied by a disc with around 100 audio excerpts that help to facilitate the wealth of concepts and theories supporting Hoppstock's observations. At face value this book is aimed at guitarists, but the content is not exclusive to the guitar or lute and this is one of the key points on which to extol the virtues of Hoppstock's work.

We can consider this series to be the sum total of Hoppstock's experience with the subject to date. However, since embarking on the book in 2006, Hoppstock found many new things to consider during the process of writing itself: 'I started to talk about these things 20 years ago, and of course I have written down many of my ideas. To begin with I thought I would have everything there in my head, but I found I had many new ideas while working on the book', says Hoppstock. Much of Hoppstock's research involved consulting those musicians who specialise in music from the period in question; these included the harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt, baroque cellist Anner Bylsma and lutenist Hopkinson Smith. Despite being able to exploit these resources, Hoppstock is quick to point out that the nature of historical enquiry means individuals such as these still may only speculate on the music: 'Even these musicians who are deeply involved in this stuff have said to me that they cannot know for certain how this music is performed. But for me they offer



another source of information when I listen to their playing and the things they have to say about the music. When you learn a baroque instrument, you grow up with the language of that instrument. When you learn the piano or in our case the guitar, you have a different starting point musically'. This understanding of the baroque musical language is for Hoppstock an integral part of the preparation process, and is often best achieved by guitarists through the harpsichord player: 'We can learn so much from them. The harpsichord doesn't have any dynamics, for example, so what we gain from their performances is an insight into how they use other musical ideas such as rubato to achieve a sense of articulation. To me the harpsichord is very close to the guitar, especially for Bach; much more than say Froberger's harpsichord music. It is very difficult to express Froberger on guitar in the same way'.

Hoppstock's approach to this book is aimed at equipping the reader with a plural outlook on the suites:

'What I have not tried to do with this book is only give one idea on how this music should be performed. I always try to comment from different directions. At times I give examples by writers, musicians and composers from different epochs. Even if I am convinced in one idea I would never say, "This is the way it should be done". Hopkinson Smith feels the same way about this issue, and for me that really supports the way I have done things. He comes up with a suggestion and then gives you an argument, but he will always let you do what you want to do in the end'. At this point it is worth reviewing where Hoppstock's ideas are in relation to historical performance practices. The notion of attempting to recreate things exactly as they were has been more or less prevalent in musical thought at different times, and it is interesting to measure the extent to which this trend influences Hoppstock and his colleagues today: 'I think a lot of these specialists in ancient music are far more relaxed now. A conductor such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt is also interested in working with musicians on modern instruments. In my experience playing with musicians coming from this old music: the baroque cellist Anner Bylsma or the singer Christoph Prégardien for example - they accept that we don't live in Bach's time. I think it was necessary, however, for us to have experienced the dogmatic attitude we adopted 30 or 40 years ago, if only to show how it could be

done. We now live in a time where everyone is very open-minded and there are many different directions to take'. Hoppstock makes a case in point when he considers a comparison between our perception of Bach today and how the composer himself might have actually practised his own music: 'It is interesting to imagine how Bach would have performed his music. We would probably say: "Mr Bach, you don't play like Bach", because we imagine a different thing altogether. Stravinsky gives us

a good example in this sense: the tempo of his music is always very much faster in his own recordings. Today's conductors are well aware of how Stravinsky performed his own works, but it would be ridiculous to perform them the way the master does. It's helpful to imagine how the composer would perform their music; but what you finally do, no one is going to lock you up for it'.

An important aspect of a publication of this kind is the position it is likely to take within the literature. To discover what that might

mean for Bach's *Lute Works*, we can firstly think about Hoppstock's remarks on the issues currently affecting the way guitarists perform Bach: 'Nowadays the technical standard of playing is much better. Although, to me, guitarists still don't seem to RECOGNISE the differences between the suites, and this is the same as thirty years ago. On the other hand the influence of lute players on guitarists is much greater than before. But even when guitarists say how wonderful these lute players are performing the suites, I cannot hear the influence very often on the guitar itself'. In terms of education, Hoppstock suggests that our grasp of the lute works can be greatly improved by placing the music in its proper context: 'Many guitarists are not that interested in playing other lute music. Take Weiss: we only play three or four of his lute pieces. To access Bach's music, it helps to go through other baroque music which is very often much more simplistic. If you play a sarabande from the early Baroque, for example, it's not important that it's lute, harpsichord or even chamber music. A Bach sarabande is more complicated because often you are not so close to the dance-like character of the sarabande: the form is hidden underneath all the ornamentation and other embellishments. But it is still the route of the style, and it is very important to know this. You have to decide how far away from the sarabande element you want to be in

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these instances. In the 995 sarabande there's really nothing to dance to, but still there are the big structural points of the dance inside the music. It doesn't mean that you have to play a dancing sarabande, but if you go through the history of the dance and understand what it is it adds another dimension to that piece', says Hoppstock.

Bach's Lute Works from the Guitarist's Perspective in its first volume examines a number topics, the scope of which is difficult to deal with in so few words here. It is worth once again quoting Hoppstock directly from the text in an attempt to reveal the essence of what he has set out to accomplish: 'Should I have succeeded in presenting useful information, awakened the fantasy of the reader and simultaneously provoked contrary opinions within the framework of a critical examination of this subject, I will have fulfilled the purpose of my task' [pg. 6.]. The final word should perhaps go to the eminent Dutch organist, harpsichordist, conductor and pedagogue Gustav Leonhardt, who succinctly puts what Hoppstock has achieved in this first edition:

'I read your text on Bach's music for lute with great interest. I wish your publication all the success it deserves and hope that numerous guitarists will occupy themselves with the content of this meticulously written book.'

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