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Interpreting Bach's Cello Suites: *Werktreue* vs. *Praxistreue*

Recent scholarship has brought broadening recognition of the important roles that improvisatory practices continued to play in concert life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This recognition poses one of the most significant challenges to the adequacy of representing Bach's performing practices by means of programs that consist solely of written compositions. Indeed, the only evidence of Bach's use of written music in his unaccompanied solo performances is found in an account by a Leipzig contemporary, in which Bach is reported to have used compositions by other composers as starting points for his improvisations. As a possible solution to this dilemma, I propose to perform an unaccompanied, semi-improvised suite of pieces, using compositions by a number of seventeenth and eighteenth-century composers as frameworks, and employing eighteenth-century techniques of improvisatory elaboration. Rather than perform a fixed set of musical "*works*," I seek to re-create eighteenth-century musical *practices* of unaccompanied solo cello playing.

Viewed through an analytic lens, free from the blinders of a modern work concept, Bach's written compositions may be understood as inventories of formal models, and as idiomatic vocabularies of motivic, harmonic and contrapuntal ideas ripe for improvisatory appropriation and elaboration. Clues to the technical means of re-creating the improvisatory practices of Bach's world can be found in a number of sources, including Christopher Simpson's *The Division Viol*, Friedrich Niedt's *Musicalische Handleitung*, and the rich trove of Italian *partimento* exercises. The particular improvisatory techniques that I will discuss and demonstrate include: 1) ornamental elaboration of an existing composition, 2) incorporating thoroughbass realization into a solo sonata to create an unaccompanied piece, 3) using sequences of double-stops and arpeggiated patterns to create a prelude, and 4) the employment of "points of division" over a bass framework to generate a *partimento*-style prelude and allemande.