





An Evolving Relationship

Kim Kashkashian's
recording of Bach's
Cello Suites reflects
a lifetime of careful
contemplation

By Brian Wise

For Kim Kashkashian, recording J.S. Bach's six Cello Suites began with a host of probing questions—about articulations, published editions, and choice of instruments. Yet there was one matter she considered settled from the start: performing the suites on a modern viola.

"Whether you play them on the cello or on the viola, it's just a question of what octave you're in," says Kashkashian. "It's not even a key change. And knowing that Bach often transcribed his own music for other instruments—in ways that were much wilder and far-reaching in scope—then going from cello to viola is just nothing."

Kashkashian brings to Bach a resumé that is decidedly hard to pigeonhole. Critics frequently identify an eloquent, sober, speech-like quality to the Detroit-born violist's playing, honed through a longstanding advocacy of former Soviet-block composers, including Giya Kancheli, György Kurtág, and Lera Auerbach.

At the same time, Kashkashian's arrangements of Spanish and Argentine songs in recent years have highlighted a lighter, more ebullient character in her playing, a quality that would inform Bach's dance movements. And even her pensive recordings of Tigran Mansurian's music—representing her family's Armenian heritage—might find echoes in the intimate sarabande of Bach's Fifth Cello Suite.

Kashkashian considers Bach her "greatest life companion" and the composer has lived in her recital literature since at least 1981, when she performed the First Cello Suite at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1994, she and label-mate Keith Jarrett recorded the

composer's three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord (also works that are frequently linked to the modern cello). And in recent years, she has often commingled Bach and Kurtág in concert.

"You play Bach all your life long and you learn every day from it," says Kashkashian, who turned 66 in August. "The music is a mirror of your failings and it's a mirror of your strengths. It teaches you about everything. I'm not practicing or playing these pieces less now than I did before I recorded them. It's still a process, which I would never want to live without."

She adds: "People have asked me about this for years: How come you don't have the Bach suites out? I guess I just wasn't quite ready."

The recording, scheduled for October release on ECM, may have arrived sooner had injury not temporarily derailed her plans. Kashkashian was leading a studio class at the New England Conservatory, where she is on faculty, when a misstep caused her to trip over the side of a desk and crack two ribs. The accident sidelined



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her for about six weeks, and upon return to the instrument, she was forced to wear a compression belt. “You never know which muscles you are using just to breathe deeply—and how much diaphragm support plays a role in sound production—until you can’t expand!” she wrote in an email.

When in late 2016 and early 2017 Kashkashian entered the recording studio (New York’s American Academy of Arts and Letters), she used two instruments built for her in the 1980s: a viola by German luthier Stefan-Peter Greiner, and a five-string viola from the Italian workshop of Francesco Bissolotti. The latter is used in the Suite No. 6, which calls for a fifth upper string tuned to an E. Some scholars believe that Bach wrote it for a viola pomposa, violoncello piccolo, or another undetermined instrument. (Terminology varied in the 18th century and the manuscript produced by the composer’s second wife, Anna Magdalena, merely specifies “five strings.”)

Indeed, there’s further evidence that the entire sequence was composed for a violoncello piccolo or perhaps a cello da spalla (imagine a large viola but strapped over the shoulder like a guitar). This would bolster any violist’s claim to the suites, but Kashkashian sidesteps the question. “When you transcribe Bach, you can’t break it,” Kashkashian asserts. “It is so perfect on the cellular level, and on the big architecture level, that you simply can’t harm it.”

For Kashkashian, “the biggest challenge in playing any of the solo Bach string music is: How do you interpret the three- and four-note chords? I think the common practice of dividing the chords ‘two and two’ is probably not the closest to what might have been done back in the day.” Rather than weighting every multiple-stop evenly between the beginning and end of the chord, she aims to arpeggiate at a speed derived from the music’s “character and emotional content.” This can result in a “very, very close arpeggiated chord.”

“That, for me, is the real question that recurs, especially in the dance movements for the suites,” she continues. “What does it mean to play a double-stop and what does it mean when you add a third note and a fourth note?”

With no surviving manuscript in Bach’s own hand, Kashkashian developed her own edition, building on several 18th-century sources (including those by Anna Magdalena

and Johann Peter Kellner) and modern editions by James Collorafi and Reinhard Goebel (the latter unpublished). She also took inspiration from Bach, *The Fencing Master*, cellist Anner Bylsma’s 2001 analysis of the suites.

The process of developing the edition forced Kashkashian to scrutinize every tempo, phrasing, and articulation. Ultimately, her edition lays out two sets of articulations, one “straight” and the other embellished, the latter of which she uses in the repeat sections.

To this listener, Kashkashian largely sticks to received practices when it comes to the more than 100 trills in the suites (a topic on which whole books have been written). But as the writer Paul Griffiths observes in the recording’s liner notes, Kashkashian has other devices in her arsenal. Ornaments at times will subtly mimic the broader contours of the music; a triplet, for instance, might inspire an ornament in a triplet form. “If he is picking up on that, I would have to thank my subconscious,” says Kashkashian.

She says that she has performed on Baroque instruments and bows in the past, but ultimately, didn’t feel a connection. “I could have used gut strings or a Baroque bow but I leave that approach to those who do it best,” she says. “I use the voice and the instruments that I’m accustomed to using and that I hope I’m most effective with. For me to have grabbed onto something that I don’t spend a lot of time doing and try to produce my best expression of these pieces would not have made sense.”

ECM founder Manfred Eicher first proposed recording the Cello Suites after hearing Kashkashian perform Bach at a church in Austria. The veteran producer had signed the violist some 30 years earlier, after noticing her performance of a Hindemith viola sonata on a German radio broadcast. Her first album for ECM was a recital of elegy-themed works, and has been followed by more than two-dozen recordings since.

Eicher took an active role in the new recording, from placing microphones to determining the final order of the suites. Instead of a strict chronological sequence, he developed an arc starting with the Suite No. 2 in D minor and ending with the Suite No. 6 in D major.

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“He always tries to be with the musician and he always offers the most helpful and thoughtful comments,” Kashkashian says of Eicher. “It’s totally relaxing and good to put you back where you belong in the music.”

Not one for marketing gambits, Kashkashian doesn’t plan a promotional tour for her new album, stating that her life as a performer is separate from her life as a recording artist. This point is echoed by composer Lera Auerbach. “Kim Kashkashian is a consummate recording artist,” she writes in an email. “In our time, the recorded version of a work is a determining factor and the principal tool, beyond the score, for other artists to become familiar with a new work.”

After such concentrated arranging, rehearsing, and recording Bach, Kashkashian says that her relationship to Bach’s Cello Suites is continually shifting, and no one suite stands out above the rest in her personal repertoire.

“We go through phases with all of them,” she says. “I go through phases maybe a couple of months at a time when the C-minor suite speaks to me. Then I’m going through a phase, probably because it’s mirrored in the emotional content of my life, when the E-flat suite would be saying the most to me. It gives unbelievable comfort and peace and joy.”

“Then maybe there will be a time in my life, some months later, when the G-major suite will do the same thing. It’s a cyclical process. I don’t know if it’s that way for many of us, but at best it is.”