

Bach WITH HEART

The Suites with two instruments and plenty of feeling

JS Bach

Six Cello Suites, BWV1007-12

Tanya Tomkins *iv*

Avie © AV2252 (53 • DDD)



Since the mid-1960s, when Nikolaus Harnoncourt made the first recording of the Bach Suites on a "Baroque cello" (not released until 1978), only a small number of other early music specialists have stepped forward to offer their perspectives on these works, among them Anner Bylsma (1981), Jaap ter Linden (1997), Susan Sheppard (2000) and Sergei Istomin (2005). The intrepid viola da gamba player Paolo Pandolfo's adaptation appeared in 2001. The latest period player to take up the challenge is Tanya Tomkins. She has recorded the first five on her 1798 Hill (technically not a "Baroque" cello) and the Sixth on a copy of a five-string instrument after Gofriller by Dominik Zuchowicz in a delightfully intimate acoustical setting.

A knowledgeable and stylish player, Tomkins varies the treatment of chords imaginatively and avoids the slavish ornamentation of every repeat. There are moments of genius in the demanding

Sixth Suite, in the repeats of the second section of the Sarabande, where she artfully deconstructs the chords, and in the Gavotte II, where she substitutes a delicately plucked *petite reprise*.

Her performances are characterful and heartfelt: the Preludes expressive, the dances carefully articulated. She does, however, take liberties with the underlying rhythmic pulse. In some of the Preludes (of Nos 3 and 4 in particular) she carries it off by making them sound improvised, and in the epic Fifth, she signals the return to the opening material with an unmarked change in tempo. The dances, though,

are a different matter. Too often Tomkins trifles with the inherent rhythmic character, revelling in *rubato*, especially in the Allemandes – notes are stretched and *ritards* are inserted (No 2) while repeats are perhaps too freely interpreted (Nos 1 and 3). As a group, the Sarabandes are threatened by slow tempo: at her best, Tomkins conveys a palpable sense of private reverie (No 3) and even tragic lament (No 2), even if she does sap the musical momentum elsewhere (Nos 1, 2 and 5). An enormously enjoyable set of discs nevertheless.

Julie Anne Sadie

INTERVIEW

Tanya Tomkins

Most cellists decide at some point to record these Suites because they are among the repertoire's greatest challenges. Creating a single interpretation is difficult because there is so little to go on and even the articulation is up for grabs. Ornamentation, too, can present problems because Bach writes out the music so specifically that you risk sounding ridiculous if you place your own compositional skills beside his. I consulted composer Eric Zivian about the Sixth Suite and he wrote a whole Double for the Sarabande, using just the general harmonic pattern and rhythm.

As a Baroque cellist you perform a great deal of continuo music, so this type of solo

playing doesn't necessarily fit with your musical viewpoint. But certainly in the Sixth Suite, playing on a Baroque five-string instrument makes all the sense in the world in terms of ease of execution. On a four-string modern cello the suite is exceedingly virtuosic because it must be played in very high positions. Still, playing on five strings when you have always played on four forces you to make many adjustments!

In general a modern cello with its steel strings makes a smoother, more regulated, even sound. But the light Baroque bow and gut strings bring out the dance-like character of these works.

Interview by Charlotte Smith