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## **Bach as a Modernist?**

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Oral Presentation 4.3

**BACH AS A MODERNIST?**

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J. S. Bach (1685-1750), the brilliant Baroque composer and organist, was known to his contemporaries as a conservative composer. Modern scholars also recognize Bach as the last gasp of the Baroque, and mark his death as the end of the period. As the lighter, pre-classical *galant* style of composition gradually came into vogue, Bach staunchly defended and continued to write dense counterpoint and fugues characteristic of high Baroque. There is little reason to question his prominent position in music history as a traditionalist wary of change.

In this light, Bach's composition of the cello suites around 1720 is surprising. The cello had only recently appeared in Germany (earliest sources say around 1680 in Viennese orchestral playing), and was still evolving: the number of strings ranged from three to five and tuning had yet to be standardized. It was introduced as a basso continuo instrument constructed for the sole purpose of balancing the new, louder sound of the violin. Before the advent of the violin, the viola da gamba, a lower stringed instrument with roughly the same range as a cello, was sufficient for ensemble playing. In Bach's time, however, both instruments were used in orchestral and chamber music. With its softer, more palatable tone, the viola da gamba was treated as a solo instrument while the cello was confined to mere continuo. To demonstrate the contrast between these two instruments, my presentation will include a brief exhibition on both. A work written for solo cello, and unaccompanied cello at that, would have seemed very avant-garde to other musicians of the time. Bach completely stepped out of character with the composition of the cello suites, assuming the role of the forward-looking modernist and anticipating the classical preference for the cello over the viola da gamba.