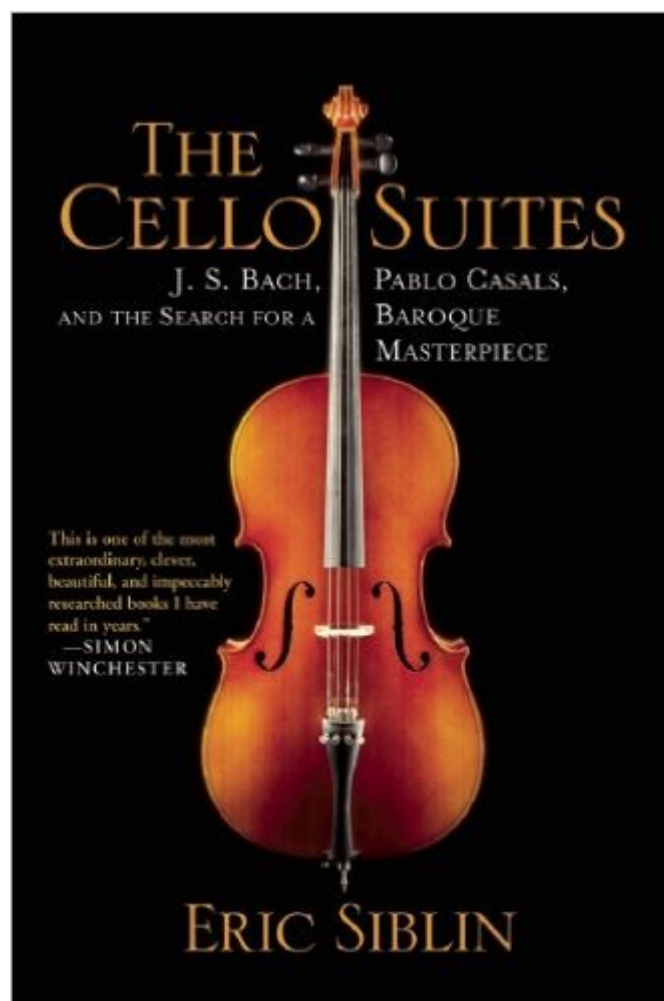


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The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, And The Search For A Baroque Masterpiece



Synopsis

One evening, journalist Eric Sibley attended a recital of Johann Sebastian Bach's Cello Suites and began an epic quest that would unravel three centuries of intrigue, politics, and passion. Winner of the Mavis Gallant Prize for Nonfiction and the McAuslan First Book Prize, *The Cello Suites* weaves together three dramatic narratives: the disappearance of Bach's manuscript in the eighteenth century; Pablo Casals's discovery and popularization of the music in Spain in the late-nineteenth century; and Sibley's infatuation with the suites in the present day. The search led Sibley to Barcelona, where Casals, just thirteen and in possession of his first cello, roamed the backstreets with his father in search of sheet music and found Bach's lost suites tucked in a dark corner of a store. Casals played them every day for twelve years before finally performing them in public. Sibley pursues the mysteries that continue to haunt this music more than 250 years after its composer's death: Why did Bach compose the suites for the cello, then considered a lowly instrument? What happened to the original manuscript? A seamless blend of biography and music history, *The Cello Suites* is a true-life journey of discovery, fueled by the power of these musical masterpieces.

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Customer Reviews

When Eric Sibley wandered into a classical musical recital one day in Toronto, he was unaware that the music he would hear would transform his life. On the program were the solo suites for cello by Johann Sebastian Bach, and Sibley, a onetime rock/pop music critic, is blown away by a kind of music he had never heard before, consciously, and might never have deliberately sought out. This

book, the chronicle of series of musical and personal journeys of discovery revolving around the Bach cello suites, is the result. It immediately appealed to me because of my own love for the music -- although unlike Siblin, I'm not a musician of any kind and unlike him, 'classical' music has always been a part of my life. But I kept reading because of my own fascination with Siblin's tale and the way he has chosen to tell it: weaving together three separate strands of a narrative in much the same way that Bach might have woven together musical themes to produce the final work. The first of these strands revolves around Bach himself; the composer's background and how the history of his compositions can be tied to his own life and experiences in a variety of German princely courts of the 18th century. The second is the lifelong love affair between the 13-year-old Pablo Casals (a future superstar cellist), who stumbled across the then almost-unknown cello suites in the back streets of Barcelona, and the music that have ended up becoming some of Bach's best-known and most-loved works. (Without Casals, the suites could have languished in obscurity, rarely played; now they are a part of the cello repertoire that most cellists aspire to perform.

A philosophy lecturer of mine once remarked that the recently converted make the most passionate fundamentalists. Eric Siblin, a professedly retired rock critic (I'm not sure how one "retires" from a pastime) makes a good example. Stumbling across a performance of Bach's Cello Suites some years ago, Siblin was captivated, converted, and has since leapt into the study and exploration of these narrowly (but profoundly) celebrated pieces with great gusto. (Interestingly, I could find none of Siblin's rock criticism online anywhere. I was curious to see how good it was.) Being no more familiar than Siblin was with the Cello Suites, I bought myself a recording (Pierre Fournier's) and had it on high rotation while I read. For fellow neophytes, then, these are pieces for an unaccompanied tenor instrument that itself usually (but not always) fulfills the role of an accompaniment to a "treble" instrument like a violin. Bach's six Cello Suites span a couple of hours, and you'd be forgiven for supposing that it would be, therefore, a challenging listen. First go-round, for a non-enthusiast, it is. I must say, though, that having listened to it repeatedly over a week I find it bouncing uncontrollably - and pleasingly - around my head all day. But all the same, I don't think I'm ready to jettison Led Zeppelin just yet. There again, I'm not really the converting type. At any rate, on account of their inaccessibility the Cello Suites were commonly supposed, for a long while, to be simply rehearsal exercises. Which is where Siblin picks up the story.

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