

## Notes on Guest Suites – Jacky Lansley

Stillness, silence, tone and ideas of ‘mistuning’ have always been part of my vocabulary and it is very clear to me that music has educated me as a choreographer. Cunningham and Cage as collaborators questioned and enabled the idea that dance and music need not be interdependent. They both worked with silence and with the everyday. Jonathan and I could not have approached the cello suites without the influence of these modernist pioneers.

Jonathan Eato brought a useful analysis of the *cantus firmi* – a melodic infrastructure which forms the basis of Bach’s composition. In places the choreography attempts to embody this hidden structure and has felt like composing music (and I invited Jonathan to imagine composing dance). My early dance training was in fact a kind of musical training. Musicality is embedded, as it is with all the dancers I am working with on the project. However the conceptual framework of *Guest Suites* is also exploring discord and disharmony. It is about questions, rather than answers and at times a deliberate fracturing of form as the only meeting place with Bach. The audience will sometimes see the performers step out of the frame to explore perspective – becoming objective spectators of their own performance. We have all been concerned not to get historically trapped, constantly reminding ourselves that Bach in his own life was a working artist struggling with economic concerns and desiring to make contemporary work away from his day jobs as a choir master or court organist. One question - whether or not the suites were *études* (practice exercises) we have found intriguing and inspired me to use dance movements, familiar as technical practice, which are fascinating in themselves and reveal the dancer’s effort and process.

As a very young dancer I had the opportunity to work with the great Mary Skeaping who researched and re-found precious historical European dance forms. I was part of her first re-creation of John Weaver’s ballet ‘*Mars and Venus*’ which used material made up of 18<sup>th</sup> century Sarabandes, Courantes and other dances - which I have quoted and translated in several movements in this work. Bach’s music, I feel, involves something of the folk origins of dance prior to its courtly refinement. The court courante, for example, was performed as an extremely slow dance whereas Bach’s courantes are much faster, as were the original country dances. When I invited Hannah Mi as a guest into the project and we began to work on the Gigue from Suite 3, taking our first steps to place ancient belly dance alongside Bach’s cello voice, we were struck by how easy it seemed. Hannah is an exceptional performer and I felt confident she would find the key, but the whisper of a primitive gypsy dance was already there in Bach’s Gigue.

The cello suites are built from old dance forms – courante, allemande, sarabande, minuet – it is not at all surprising that choreographers should be drawn to them; and there have been several of us. It is both the music and the structure which has been inspirational – 6 suites of 6 movements (here we are using the first 3 suites) – in a way a very contemporary structure, where short movements stand alone like a collage. The cello gives us a very full, rich orchestral sound yet the image of the solo performer can be linked to a distilled minimalism. We are attempting to make something of depth, beauty and meaning and, with the support of Bach to explore dance as an art form that can be as profound and relevant as any other. The music has invited me to be surprisingly playful with chance strategies. In the Gigue from Suite 2 the performers are working with found gestures from one single morning in their lives; a linking to simple everyday rituals and patterns which allows them to be emotionally present.

In Jonathan's Allemande in Suite 3, Esther Huss is working with 15 random newspaper photographs of individuals which have fused into a powerful solo. In the Minuet from Suite 2 Tim Taylor and our outstanding cellist Audrey Riley perform a duet supported by Eato's laptop electronics. Who here is the musician, the dancer, the composer or the choreographer? It is an experiment that pushes the boundaries of all these disciplines. As the title suggests *Guest Suites* aims to invite and welcome ideas, processes and people across artistic borders. It has been a multi layered and unfathomable process which would not have been possible without the generosity and spirit of the performers.

## Suite Inserts - Jonathan Eato

The contemporary condition is a complicated one. It is not simply about privileging the here and now, the latest and most fashionable, but about situating this alongside our understanding of the past and our hopes for the future. Since Pablo Casals' twentieth century 'rediscovery' and subsequent championing of the Bach Cello Suites these works have remained a touchstone for artists across a wide range of disciplines and practices. Examples include Maria McManus' poetry collection *The Cello Suites* which adopts Bach's structure, and Yo-Yo Ma's 1997 film project that pairs the Suites with choreographers, ice dancers, architects, film makers, and Kabuki artists. However, having first discussed this project with Jacky, my principle point of concern has been how the Suites can be opened up to allow contemporary practitioners space for creative engagement and dialogue with the original. To put it bluntly, what room is there here for me as a composer?

Quite early on in the collaborative process Jacky and I decided that I would compose a number of responses – we're calling them *Suite Inserts* – to the Bach. These would then be interpolated into the performance of the first three Bach Cello Suites that underpin *Guest Suites*. Just as Bach drew his inspiration from dance forms developed in an earlier period, I have written two allemandes, a courante and a minuet, albeit in a highly abstracted form. We also wanted to acknowledge the role that Pablo Casals played in rehabilitating the Suites and so in addition to my interpolations, some movements of the Bach are heard played on historic recording by Casals.

Scholarly research has shown that some of Bach's solo string music is based on inaudible *cantus firmi* (pre-existing melodies forming the basis for new compositions). My point of entry was to imagine how contemporary dance, choreographed to the original Bach, could reach back to the eighteenth century and embody a physical *cantus* that in turn supports the construction of new musical architectures that are both removed from, and connected to, the original Bach.

Working alongside performer and scholar John Potter for my first couple of years at the University of York had a huge effect on my understanding of how it is possible to engage with repertoire from all eras in all sorts of ways, and I was especially happy therefore to collaborate with cellist Audrey Riley on this project. Audrey and I first met playing in concert with the contemporary music ensemble Icebreaker, but in addition to her knowledge and experience of new music, Audrey also brings a wealth of expertise from her work with contemporary dance companies as well as being in demand for her playing and arrangements by some of the worlds biggest names in pop music. The music for *Guest Suites* may not sound like a fusion of jazz, pop, baroque, and contemporary (at least I hope it doesn't) but to be able to work with a musician who understands and has a point of access to these different practices has been crucial for me in finding a compositional voice in which to respond to Bach.