



VESA LASSILA

WATER THROUGH ICE

J.S. BACH: SUITES FOR ALTO GUITAR

WATER THROUGH ICE:

LUTE WORKS BY J.S. BACH TRANSCRIBED FOR ALTO GUITAR

Disc 1

Suite in C Minor (Original G-minor), BWV 995

- | | |
|---|------|
| 1. I. Prelude | 5:50 |
| 2. II. Allemande | 4:56 |
| 3. III. Courante | 2:25 |
| 4. IV. Sarabande | 1:51 |
| 5. V. Gavotte I –
Gavotte II en Rondeaux | 4:48 |
| 6. VI. Gigue | 2:16 |

Suite in G Minor (Original E-Minor), BWV 996

- | | |
|-------------------|------|
| 7. I. Prelude | 2:34 |
| 8. II. Allemande | 2:19 |
| 9. III. Courante | 2:18 |
| 10. IV. Sarabande | 2:31 |
| 11. V. Bourrée | 1:15 |
| 12. VI. Giga | 2:58 |

Suite in C Minor, BWV 997

- | | |
|--------------------|------|
| 13. I. Prelude | 3:20 |
| 14. II. Fuga | 6:13 |
| 15. III. Sarabande | 3:49 |
| 16. IV. Gigue | 3:06 |
| 17. V. Double | 3:42 |

Total playing time 56:45

Disc 2

Suite in G Major (Original E Major), BWV 1006a

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|----------------------------|------|
| 1. I. Preludio | 4:48 |
| 2. II. Loure | 3:06 |
| 3. III. Gavotte en Rondeau | 3:13 |
| 4. IV. Minuett I – II | 4:28 |
| 5. V. Bourrée | 2:09 |
| 6. VI. Gigue | 2:37 |

Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro in F Major (Original E-flat Major), BWV 998

- | | |
|-----------------|------|
| 7. I. Prelude | 2:37 |
| 8. II. Fuga | 5:48 |
| 9. III. Allegro | 3:58 |

Partita in F Minor (Original D Minor) BWV 1004

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|--------------|-------|
| 10. Ciaccona | 12:03 |
|--------------|-------|

Total playing time 45:07

VESA LASSILA, ALTO GUITAR

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

With a complexity of figures and motives, we can understand Bach's well-planned musical narrations as poetic, musical rivers that move as water runs through ice, with musical diversions only adding to the harmonious journey. It is this vision of Bach's music as a driving force of nature that informed both the title of the release and inspired my goal of transcribing these works for the alto guitar. I also aim to take the listener through the story of Bach's compositional life, as the totality of these suites represent many different points in Bach's life. Whereas Bach's task in the creation of his music was to elevate and connect people with God. My goal as an interpreter is to re-connect Bach himself with listeners.



With a little imagination, one can easily view the alto guitar as the modern instrument version of the baroque alto lute. Both have extensions of the bass register with additional strings in order to make playing contrapuntal baroque music a possibility. My own instrument, created by Finnish luthier Keijo Korelin in 2009, presents the player with incredible possibilities to bring multiple contrapuntal lines to life. The balance of the alto guitar contains a rich and powerful bass register alongside a light descant and clear voice. The instrument's middle register provides stability to the sound throughout. The tone and sound world of the instrument gives a modern life to Bach's music, while still holding true to the historical authenticity of the works as written for the lute.

As a musician, the possibilities of the alto guitar opened a wider range of bass lines, meaning that unlike when performing Bach on the modern guitar, one doesn't have to reduce the rich voice in the lower register but can instead employ the full two octaves as were written for the lute. The shorter scale of the fretboard allows for more open solutions in the fingerings and articulations in order to better bring out Bach's glorious counterpoint.

The source for the **Suite in C Minor (Original G Minor), BWV 995**, is an extant transcription in Bach's hand of the Cello Suite, No. 5, BWV 1011. The lute version was written on double staves and compared with a manuscript of the cello version in Anna Magdalena's hand, shows how Bach filled out the comparatively bare scoring for cello. The *Prelude*, composed in French Overture style, which also characterizes the following intricate *Allemande*, is mournful. The *Sarabande* stands in contrast with the other movements with a melody unsupported by chords. The two-part *Gavotte* exhibits an Italian simplicity with chords

emphasizing the duple time in the first part, and in the second part, a lively, lilting quadruple compound time.

In this Suite, I approach the French *notes inégales* technique with a goal of constantly varying rhythms in shorter diminution to keep the longer and weightier beats straight forward. This interpretation keeps the Suite alive and creative in every moment while complementing Bach's constant variation of motives.

The **Suite in G Minor (Original E minor), BWV 996**, has several surviving manuscript sources and copies, dated between 1710–1717, made by Bach's pupils. The *Prelude* opens with speech-like phrasing in the French style and continues with fugal polyphony. The *Allemande* and *Courante* are again in French style with arpeggiated chords and dotted rhythms, while the *Sarabande* has an aria-like, bound, melodic line. The lively dialogue of the *Giga* moves constantly in 16th notes with clear rhetorical breaks.

I have positioned the transcription to fully culminate in wonderful and lively *Giga*. Each of the previous dance movements work to present the characters which return for this conclusion and culmination. Lifting and underlining the role of the *Giga* should allow the listener to better hear these aspects of the preceding movements within the finale.

The **Suite in C Minor, BWV 997**, has no surviving autograph, but there are various versions in tablature and scores. The Suite opens with the delicate *Prelude*, leading to the larger *Fugue*, which has a circulation in the form of *da capo*, repeating an opening section in the end. We can speculate on the meaning of these solutions in composing that Bach has made. The deep, charming grace of the *Sarabande* follows the fugal dialogues into the polyphonic *Giga* and *Double*.

My idea in this Suite was to use alto guitar to bring forward the contrasts between the rich bass register and clear descant. This contrapuntal contrast keeps the listener in a feeling of constant forward motion. The *Fuga* and *Giga* test the limits of instrumental possibilities and technical capacity. This is a reflection of Bach's original composition which reveals musical structures through extremes.

The **Suite in G Major (Original E Major), BWV 1006A**, primarily composed for violin in 1720, has survived in autograph and arrangements for lute and harpsichord. The grand *Preludio* opens a long form of endless continuity in rhythmic diminution patterns. The Suite continues with the tranquil moments of *Loure* and narration leads into the lively *Gavotte en Rondeau*. The *Menuetts* are the heart of the suite. *Bourée* and *Gigue* lead to the ending in polyphonic style and in faster tempo.

Playing this piece, is like building a church. The *Preludio* rhythmic patterns slowly progress into larger and larger forms which form the keystones of the Suite as a whole. The goal in my interpretations are to follow that journey.

The **Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro in F Major (Original E-Flat Major), BWV 998**, has an autograph written after 1734 for lute and harpsichord. The Prelude opens with gentle, poetic figures, which lead to the Fugue. This *Fugue* also has a circulation in the form of *da capo*, and the theme is built over the beloved choral theme "Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her." The lively *Allegro* closes in a reflection of the form of the trinity.

The focus in the work from a performance standpoint is to play the rhythmic figures of the *Prelude* in portamento in order to make a contrast between articulations and the different layers of applied polyphony. The goal is to bring out Bach's long-lasting internal harmonic tensions so the listener experiences the *Fuga* as a meditative path to resolution.

The **Ciaccona F Minor (Original D Minor), BWV 1004**, primarily composed for violin in 1720, has an autograph and many transcriptions for guitar. In this recording, I perform my own transcription. The *Ciaccona* has an interesting contrast between deep rhetorical narration and repeated rhythmic patterns. It is a perfect ending to the album as one can sense in the narration that the ice has slowly melted, and the river has received its freedom from the dark forces of winter.

- Vesa Lassila

VESA LASSILA

Vesa Lassila is a Finnish guitarist born in 1973 and grew up in the city of Ylivieska. He began playing the guitar at the age of twelve and began lessons under the tutelage of Jorma Styng. Lassila studied classical guitar in Helsinki at the Oulu Conservatory under the guidance of Timo Korhonen, Ismo Eskelinen, and Ilkka Virta. At Piteå Music Högskola, Sweden, Lassila studied under Jan Olof Ericsson. He has also taken part in master classes held by Oscar Ghiglia, Jukka Savijoki, and Roberto Aussel. Lassila works as a guitar professor at the Institute of Music in Ylivieska, located in northern Finland.



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