

Mark Kosower at Trinity: Bach Suites Part Two (July 3)

by Nicholas Stevens



Would it matter if the best-ever performance of Bach’s *Suites* for solo cello took place in a cinder block closet with no one listening? The question, which one could safely and simply answer “no,” may seem like a dull retread of the classic “if a tree falls…” formula. However, it raises a question of its own: how much *can* the venue and framing of a performance do to elevate a musical experience?

Can we attribute some of the special glow of a concert to the room, spoken introductions, and circumstances without giving excellent musicianship short shrift? In the case of a live-streamed concert by cellist Mark Kosower this past weekend, this writer’s answer is *yes* — or *ja*, in Bach’s German.

The second installment of Kosower’s “Bach for Humanity” benefit series for Music & Art at Trinity Cathedral found the cellist once again alone in a cathedral — or almost alone. Trinity’s music director Todd Wilson reminded viewers that while the program was free, the performer and presenter encouraged donations to benefit Arts Cleveland’s COVID-19 relief efforts as well as Music & Art itself. (You may still do so [here](#).)

Yet in addition to Wilson, other presences made themselves known in the space. The cathedral’s acoustic suited Bach the church musician’s compositions perfectly, Kosower’s echo a ghostly — or perhaps angelic — twin to his sound. (And what a sound!)

The cellist began with Bach's Fourth Suite before continuing to the second and sixth. Almost eschewing vibrato in the Prelude, Kosower drew bold and gentle arcs over Bach's dotted rhythms, by turns searching, reaching, and grasping at higher truth. Seldom do single long notes sound so much like questions that then receive pensive or witty answers.

The Allemande remained merry yet grainy, the Courante unfolding as an essay in expressive articulation. The Sarabande sounded sun-drenched yet anguished, hesitating to descend from the divinity of melodic peaks. Bach's wit shines through in the first Bourée, so Kosower wisely made the second stately, almost processional. The repetition of the first sounded weathered upon emerging. The Gigue went fast enough to convey excitement without venturing into frenzy, a fitting end to this affably contemplative work.

Before launching into the Second Suite, Kosower reminded viewers that ten of Bach's twenty children died before reaching adulthood, and his first wife died with no warning while he was out of town, recalling grim scenarios from the present moment.

The man knew loss: this premise informed every movement of Kosower's rendition, from the Prelude, which sounded like a scene straight out of the Crucifixion, to an Allemande that summoned the aches and confusion of fever dreams. The Courante charged ahead as if fleeing fate, although Kosower nonetheless devoted attention to each note. The Sarabande ended with the saddest final cadence this reviewer has yet heard, a resolution like the slump of grief-burdened shoulders. A measured approach to the Minuets cleared the way for another blistering Gigue.

Suite No. 6 swept away the gloom with uniformly triumphal strokes, Kosower as graceful and limber at the start of the Prelude as he was emphatic later on. The Courante proceeded in a clipped fashion until the end, when another wonderfully indulgent final note broke the spell. The slow Sarabande yielded to a pair of Gavottes in which the first lingered lovingly and the second drifted by smoothly. Ending with emphasis again, Kosower stuck his landing in the Gigue.

Concluding the live stream, Wilson reminded viewers that a third benefit concert will come their way on September 18. Yet moving on from this concert, the words that continue to resonate most clearly came from Kosower: simply put, the wonderful cellist also makes for an ideal concert emcee, dispensing historical facts as well as promotional information with an ease and confidence that eludes many a musician.

The concert remains posted on Music & Art at Trinity's [Facebook page](#), available even to those without accounts. Listen now and experience uplift, so sorely needed and here so amply provided.

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