

The Five Bass Clarinet Suites of J.S. Bach

Did you know that Bach wrote the finest concert pieces ever written for the bass clarinet? Did you know that he wrote the best concert etudes ever written for the bass clarinet? How about the finest technical studies for flexibility, or the best tonal and intonation studies for the instrument? Well, I know you know that he wrote the finest music to learn how to read the bass clef for the bass clarinet, right? Well one out of five isn't bad.

Bach may not have known it, but he was by far the best composer to write for the instrument. The Suites, challenging and full of great music, make fantastic concert pieces or etudes. You can teach a student how to phrase in a very romantic style, taking great liberties with a great deal of rubato and developing an independent style of playing. Or you can teach the Suites in a very strict style, reflecting the period in which they were written. You can play these with great discipline or great freedom, in any style you wish. They can be music of any period, for any time.

I have performed some of these pieces at concerts as complete suites, as well as individual movements. When I used to take auditions, I would use the Bouree 1 and 2 from the Third Suite as my prepared piece. It usually made a very good impression. Leonard Bernstein remarked to me, "That was a remarkable job young man", (I was 24 at the time), when I was in the finals for the New York Philharmonic years ago. I think he was really surprised to hear someone back in the mid 60s play Bach on the bass clarinet. Good music is good music on any instrument.

I play them as written with no transposition and very little editing. When I come to double stops I play them as broken cords or grace notes, sometimes reversing the order of the notes if it suits me. Of course breathing is a tremendous problem in these pieces, so you have to be a little creative if you can't circular breathe, which I can't. You can leave some notes out or do some creative phrasing so that it sounds like you meant to slow down at a certain place and take a breath. You can also simply take a breath wherever it makes sense musically.

You can use the slow movements to help develop your student's tone quality, as well as a smooth legato and lyrical style. Use the fast ones to develop their technique and flexibility. Use all of them for phrasing. I do not teach or play the sixth suite because of the use of the tenor clef. Five suites seem quite ample to satisfy my appetite.