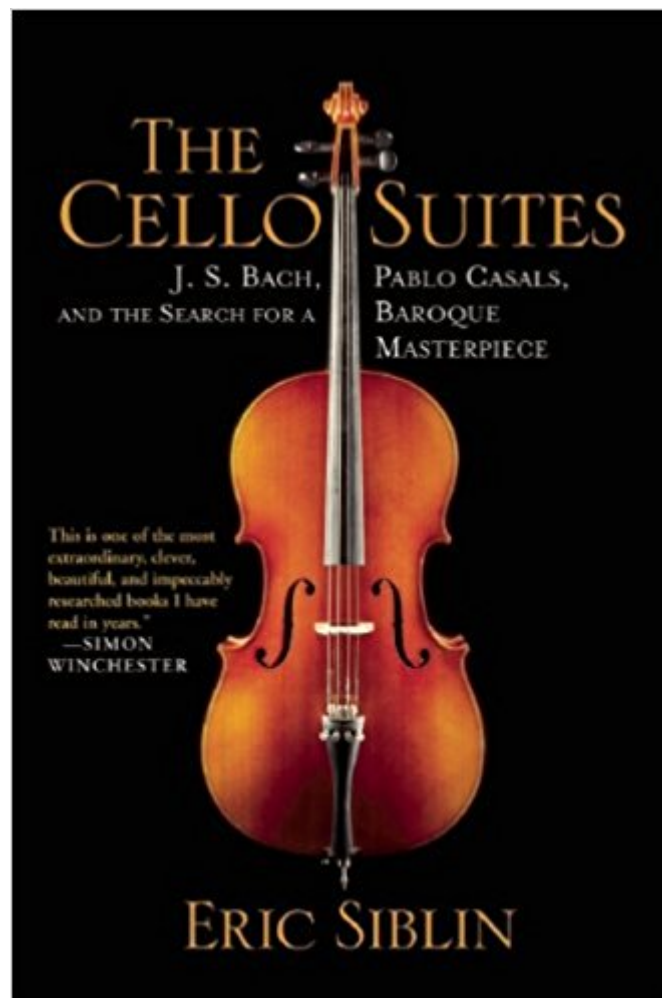




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# The Cello Suites: J. S. Bach, Pablo Casals, And The Search For A Baroque Masterpiece



## Synopsis

One evening, journalist Eric Siblin 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 Siblin's infatuation with the suites in the present day. The search led Siblin 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. Siblin 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The ironies of artistic genius and public taste are subtly explored in this winding, entertaining tale of a musical masterpiece. Music critic Siblin parallels short, fluent biographies of composer Johann Sebastian Bach, whose six suites for solo cello were long disparaged as minor student exercises, and cello virtuoso Pablo Casals, whose landmark recording of the pieces catapulted them into the

classical canon. Their lives are a study in contrasts: Bach is an obscure workaday musician who feels wasted being merely the cantor of a Lutheran boarding school; Casals, a musical superstar and anti-Fascist exile, is a romantic hero. Siblin intertwines his own story of trying to engage with the suites. He takes cello lessons, savors a rich variety of performances, including one on the marimbas, and embarks on a search for Bach's long-lost manuscript to discover clues to the enigmatic score. (Scholars aren't even certain the suites were written for cello.) Siblin is an insightful writer with an ability to convey the sound and emotional impact of music in words. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** A former pop-music critic, Siblin was transported to the eighteenth century when his imagination was captured by a performance of Bach's Six Suites for Solo Cello. He embarked on a journey—part historical, part personal—to discover for himself the music that has remained a pillar of the cello repertoire since Pablo Casals recorded the suites in 1936. Siblin traveled to Leipzig looking for traces of the German composer, and to the Catalan coast of Spain to trace the steps of the suites' first modern master. Included in his thorough research are interviews with cellists such as Mischa Maisky and Anner Bylsma, who describe the complexities of the music and the challenges it presents to the soloist. In Siblin's history of the composer, Bach is far from the stuffy image often applied to classical music; he appears restless, brash, and proud, occasionally landing in jail for upsetting a patron. Siblin's writing is most inspired when describing the life of Casals, showing a genuine affection for the cellist, who, caught in the throes of the Spanish civil war and World War II, used his instrument and the suites as weapons of protest and pleas for peace. --Elliot Mandel --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was so entertaining that I read it in one sitting. Eric Siblin, a former popular music critic, really rocked it on the cello and wove together the stories of Bach and Pablo Casals and The Cello Suites in a very clever and informative book for the general reader. It is fun to read and I really enjoyed it. If you love the cello, you must read it. The book is a light read, but not lacking in research and thought. Musicologists might pick up some errors in it, but his exploration into the world of classical music and approach to the subject is original. Since this is the author's journey into a new musical world, we walk along with him, learning as he learns. The details of Bach's life are not well known because he did not leave much behind beside his music. At one point early in the book, the

author describes a meeting of musicologists who mention that they know what Bach drank but not what he ate. I am not that obsessive even about Beethoven. Sheesh. I am more interested in key or relevant biographical details, the context, and how it relates to the music of the creator or performer. This is not an exhaustive examination of a subject, which are often exhausting anyway. The number of recordings of The Cello Suites by fine cellists is staggering, and though the music has been heard so often in the mainstream, it is not part of it because it is stuck in the stuffy world of classical music. Eric Soblin points out quite correctly that classical music was not always so stuffy, and a more relaxed presentation might attract more people to concerts today. I agree.

Eric Soblin has written an engaging book that weaves together three stories: a carefully researched portrait of J.S. Bach, the story of the great cellist Pablo Casals and his personal quest to determine the story of the original manuscript of Bach's six suites for solo cello. I enjoyed every page of this book and the personal, real stories of two of the most extraordinary musicians that ever lived. Eric's love of his topic is palpable and powerful. Beyond a passion for his topic, Eric also is a wonderful writer and researcher. As though the story itself were not enough, the endnotes, chapter notes, bibliography and index prove that this former rock music critic has major chops as a scholar of music. But, we're not talking a dull treatise but a labor of love. My hours spent with the cello suites have been deeply satisfying thanks to this fantastic book!

I have been running through this book with a true Bach's suites for a cello lover. The dedication of each chapter to one of each pieces is a great idea, for you can hear them while the poetry and the almost detectivesque searching for their "truth" is at last been completed with the last piece of the sixth. As myself being an amateur cello suites player and being able to understand all that the great performers have felt along their lives with them, I can say that the book has given new "wings" to my dedication, and replenished with imagination the hard and joyful task of trying to learn to play them. The book seems to bring space to the future of this great music, for it will change the opinion of many that rather overview them as "dull" or overpower them. With a kind of fixation that says "well this must be good for it is Bach's" which is true but not the "Truth". It's much more than good, and the writer has been able to express it with his own determination of being himself being "soul touched" by it. I will get to this book many times, for it will accompany my fatigues and encourage my love for the suites. Rosa Cobos

As a thirteen year old, Pablo Casals rummaged through a second store near Barcelona's famous

las Ramblas looking for sheet music for his newly acquired cello and coming upon an old "tobacco-colored cover page" and a copy of Bach's Cello Suites, he bought it for a few pesetas, ultimately introducing its complex inescapable beauty to the world of music; thus begins Eric Soblin's enchanting personal odyssey into the multi layered composition. More than a portrait of Casals, far more than a clever foil for Soblin's aspiring musical efforts, the book is an intoxicating introduction to the inner complexities of the six solo cello pieces and, the cello as a music instrument, which will entice the interested reader, knowledgeable or not, to buy a recording from any number of artists - take your pick - if for no other reason that Soblin's book will cause you to have that urge. If, as the nineteenth music critic, Eduard Hanslick, described classical music as "forms animated by sound," then listening to these complicated recordings, one will begin the never-ending journey into the six pieces, into the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach, and into yourself as well.

The author weaves what could be a confusing story artfully, interestingly and with even a bit of humor. He tells about the life of Bach, his family and his career as it moves around the nobility of Germany. And the interesting story of how the cello moved from a instrument to provide just background to a solo instrument. At the same time the author brings us to today as he attends concerts of some of Bach's masterpieces. And then along comes Casals- his life in Spain, his escape from the war and his life of beautiful music. And finally there is the lost masterpiece. I do not have a focus on reading general history or music history but I enjoyed the book and recommend it to any one wanting to learn more about Bach, Casals, and or the cello.

i came across this book when i decided to learn cello and designed my own immersion studies , reading everything i could and this book made me understand so much about the bach suites which i am now studying.eric soblin travelled so many countries to follow pablo casals and all the other places pertinent to bach suites, and he even learn how to play the cello !!i recommend this to all cellists, and to all musicians interested in bach !!

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