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Bach, Celebrated With Strings
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When David Spelman was a guitar student in the 1980s, he attended a master class in Santa Cruz, Calif., led by Benjamin Verdery, an iconoclastic young player known at the time for his devotion to new music and for occasionally slipping a transcription of Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" into his programs. Mr. Spelman became an impresario instead of a guitarist, but the instrument has remained close to his heart: among his projects is the New York Guitar Festival, now in its 10th year, with offshoots in Amsterdam; Adelaide, Australia; and other cities.

And something Mr. Verdery said in Santa Cruz stayed with Mr. Spelman too.

"He said to try and listen to at least a little Bach every day—that it could have a profound effect on one's thought process and sense of well-being," Mr. Spelman wrote in a recent e-mail message about the central event of this year's festival, an all-day marathon on Jan. 31 at the 92nd Street Y, with Bach as its focus.

"I can't say I've been listening to Bach every day since that class," Mr. Spelman added. "But when I came up with the idea for the marathon, I was listening to Bach every morning—mostly the solo works, but also the B minor Mass and various cantatas."

His marathons have typically been eclectic: established players and young aspirants play short sets in which they take on either the repertory's virtuoso showpieces or new works, including those commissioned by the festival. You might think that focusing on Bach would limit that variety, but Mr. Spelman seems not to have felt constrained.

He is collaborating in the programming with the superb lutenist and guitarist Paul O'Dette, who will perform both on his own and in lute duets with Nigel North. Mr. O'Dette has not announced the works he will play, either on his own or with Mr. North, but he is an incomparable interpreter of Bach's four lute suites, so it would be surprising if he did not play at least one. Mr. North, in his solo set, will play a transcription of Bach's Suite No. 4 for Unaccompanied Cello (BWV 1010) and a suite by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, a Bach contemporary who composed copiously (and deliciously) for the lute.

Not surprisingly, transcriptions of Bach's solo works for lute, cello and violin dominate the program. Mr. Verdery, whose advice partly inspired the marathon, will play the Sixth Cello Suite (BWV 1012). Eliot Fisk's account of the Third Cello Suite (BWV 1009) promises to be a highlight, as does the traversal of the Violin Partita No. 2 (BWV 1004), with its monumental Chaconne, by the eloquent young guitarist Ana Vidovic. David Leisner and Jason Vieaux will each perform a lute suite, and Paul Galbraith, who holds the guitar as if it were a cello (with a peg resting on a resonating box), will play another of the cello works.

For sheer size, weight and ambition, the marathon's center of gravity may be the Brazilian Guitar Quartet's transcription of one of Bach's four orchestral suites. (The quartet has not announced which, but it has recorded them all.) Lute works by Bach's contemporaries (Ferdinand Ignaz Hinterleitner, anyone?) will be scattered throughout the program. And in keeping with the festival's mandate to present new music as well as old, Gyan Riley will give the premiere of a suite commissioned by the festival and inspired by Bach's Lute Suite No. 2 (BWV 997).