

# The New York Times

Music Review | New York Guitar Festival

## Bach's Music as a Blank Canvas for Guitarists

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

Published: February 1, 2010

A small-waisted, double-strung version of the guitar flourished in France, Italy and Spain in Bach's day, though not in Germany. Bach never composed for it, but that has not stopped guitarists from drafting Bach into their repertory. His lute music — four suites and other pieces — has long been the foundation for guitarists. Virtuoso players have transcribed the unaccompanied violin and cello works as well.

Bach was the focus of the New York Guitar Festival's fifth biennial guitar marathon at the [92nd Street Y](#) on Sunday, when 11 guitarists, 2 lutenists and a violinist and a harpsichordist — who invited them? — performed in afternoon and evening sessions. But if Bach was the headliner, his music was also a blank canvas on which these musicians projected an overview of the superb state of guitar and lute technique, and the breadth of interpretive imagination that illuminates their work.

The lutenist Paul O'Dette, who assembled the marathon with David Spelman, the festival's artistic director, opened the afternoon session with the Lute Suite in A minor (BWV 995) in a delicate, fluid rendering that embraced both the free-spirited, almost improvisatory nature of the Prelude and the stylistic formality of the dance movements. Here and in his performance of the Sonata in G minor (BWV 1001, originally for unaccompanied violin), which opened the evening concert, Mr. O'Dette played with a crispness that overcame the gentleness of the lute's sound and clarified the counterpoint within textures that, in other hands, often seem merely chordal.

Mr. O'Dette also performed two movements by Sylvius Leopold Weiss, a lute-playing friend and contemporary of Bach's, partly as a way of setting up the one nonplucked performance of the evening, a robust account of the Suite for Violin and Harpsichord (BWV 1025) by the violinist Robert Mealy and the harpsichordist Avi Stein. The point here was that the harpsichord part in the Bach is, except in its opening Fantasia, a direct transcription of the Weiss sonata from which Mr. O'Dette played excerpts.

The other lutenist on hand, Nigel North, matched and at times surpassed Mr. O'Dette in textural clarity in his performance of the Cello Suite No. 4 (BWV 1010). Mr. O'Dette and Mr. North also joined forces to close the marathon with another Weiss work, the spirited, bustling Sonata in C for two lutes.

Two of the youngest stars of the guitar world, Jason Vieaux and Ana Vidovic, offered strikingly contrasting back-to-back performances during the afternoon concert. Mr. Vieaux gave the Prelude, Fugue and Allegro (BWV 998) a stately, sharply articulated and subtly driven reading, in which the closing Allegro gradually took on the exciting qualities of a perpetual-motion piece.

Ms. Vidovic, playing the Lute Suite in E (BWV 1006a), matched Mr. Vieaux's energy — her account of the Prelude, in particular, was thrilling — but also added levels of dynamic nuance that gave her work an inviting shapeliness and flexibility.

Benjamin Verdery, always one of the guitar's grand individualists, contributed the day's most endearingly quirky performance, a version of the Cello Suite No. 6 (BWV 1012) that embraced dynamic extremes, pizzicato repeated sections and other flamboyant coloristic touches, and added flourishes that went well beyond conventional ideas about ornamentation. The reading may have been a provocation, but it was so deliberately over the edge, and so inventive and entertaining, that any objection would be pointless, if not churlish.

Paul Galbraith's performance style, if not his interpretation, once struck guitar traditionalists as eccentric. He plays the guitar vertically, like a cello, and his instrument has a metal peg that rests on a resonating box. You cannot argue with the results: in the Cello Suite No. 1 (BWV 1007) his sound was rich, rounded and remarkably transparent. At times it seemed to have an almost orchestral heft, a quality that eluded the Brazilian Guitar Quartet in its ambitious version of the Orchestral Suite No. 4 (BWV 1069).

The evening segment also included David Leisner's poetic, lavishly embellished performance of the Lute Suite in E minor (BWV 996) and Eliot Fisk's more assertively hard-edged, high-energy readings of Frescobaldi's "Aria Detta la Frescobalda" and the Violin Sonata No. 3 (BWV 1005). And the guitarist and composer Gyan Riley gave the premiere of his "Stream of Gratitude, in Response to Bach's Suite for Lute in C minor, BWV 997," a virtuosic meditation couched in Bachian figuration wrapped in a harmonically updated (and mildly jazz-tinged) cloak.