

**Song Exploder**  
**Yo-Yo Ma - Prelude, Cello Suite No.1 in G Major**  
**Special Episode**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

Yo-Yo Ma: My name's Yo-Yo Ma. The Prelude came into my life when I was four years old. It was literally the first piece of music I learned. I think I've performed the Prelude 100 times maybe, more. And 58 years later, I'm still learning from it.

*("Prelude, Cello Suite No.1 in G Major" by JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH)*

Hrishikesh: Yo-Yo Ma is perhaps the most famous and well-loved cellist in the world. He was born in Paris in 1955; his family moved to the US when he was 7. He played for President Kennedy that year. He played at Carnegie Hall for the first time when he was 16. He's won 18 Grammys and he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. For this special episode of Song Exploder, the last episode of this year, Yo-Yo Ma is going to break down this piece - which he didn't create, but he's performed so many times. It's the Prelude from Johann Sebastian Bach's Cello Suite Number 1 in G Major. It's one of the most famous pieces of music written for the cello. Yo-Yo Ma first recorded the Bach Cello Suites in 1983, at age 27. He recorded them again in 1998, and now, at age 62, he's recorded them for what he says might be the last time. It's for an album called *Six Evolutions: Bach Cello Suites*. Yo-Yo Ma spoke to me about what's changed over the years about the way he approaches this piece of music. But first, a little history. For that, I turn to author Eric Soblin, who wrote an award-winning book on the history of Bach's cello suites.

*(Music ends)*

Eric: My name's Eric Soblin and I'm the author of *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*. The date that's traditionally used to refer to the composition of the Cello Suites is 1720, but the reality is that that's a guesstimate. Because Bach's original manuscript went missing, it's one of the many mysteries that surrounds this colossal music.

Hrishikesh: In the early 18th century, there wasn't a lot of music written for solo cello.

Eric: It was very much a background instrument, sort of plodding in the background like an unadventurous bass line for the most part. So for Bach to write solo music for the cello was super radical at the time.

*(Cello)*

Hrishikesh: Bach died in 1750. He'd been a successful composer, but not massively famous during his own lifetime.

Eric: He was respected in many circles, essentially musical circles. You know, a musician's musician he was.

Hrishikesh: And he hadn't made any plans to preserve his own work. It wasn't until decades after his death that his music started to become popular.

Eric: And so many pieces of his canon didn't see the light of day for a long time. And one of the pieces of music that took the longest to see the light of day was the Cello Suites.

Hrishikesh: They were discovered one day in 1890 by the cellist Pablo Casals. He was only 13 years old. He found a second-hand copy of the Cello Suites in a bookstore in Barcelona.

Eric: He bought the music, he took it home, and immediately started to tackle it. And this was something that wasn't easy because unlike cellists today he didn't have umpteen recordings of the Cello Suites. He didn't have teachers who could show him how to play it. He had nothing but these notes on paper. And the way Bach wrote notes on paper wasn't the way say, Beethoven or many later composers wrote music. Namely, he left out a lot of instructions, suggestions of dynamics, do you play it loud or softer, etc. So it was in some ways very much up to the performer. The music's a bit like an inkblot test and that makes it fun and exciting. It's like there's no original. There's only cover versions of the Cello Suites. Now Casals became the greatest cellist of his time. So he went a long way towards popularizing this music.

Hrishikesh: In 1936, Pablo Casals recorded the Cello Suites. It was the first time anyone had ever recorded them.

*(Pablo Casals' recording of the Cello Suites)*

Hrishikesh: When I interviewed Yo-Yo Ma, I played this for him. I was wondering, do you remember the first time you heard this recording?

Yo-Yo Ma: I grew up with this recording. This was, for cellists, this was the exemplar of saying, "Okay, Bach's suites, these are they." What I get from listening to that is a sculptural approach, you know, you can hear him sort of tapping his fingers onto the fingerboard. You know, it's like, dah, dah, dah, it's very tactile, it's very physical. And you know, he's carving out notes and this is what I grew up with. I haven't heard these in years so it's really incredible to have a chance to hear it.

*(Pablo Casals' recording of the Cello Suites)*

Hrishikesh: Who introduced this piece of music to you?

*(Music fades out)*

Yo-Yo Ma: My father. He loved Bach. He was in Paris during the Second World War. And they had blackout nights, no lights. And he played violin so during the day, he would learn the Bach sonatas

*(Violin)*

Yo-Yo Ma: and partitas for violin by heart. And then at night, because you can't do anything else, he played the music.

*(Violin)*

*(Violin fades)*

Hrishikesh: So you started playing the cello and this music when you were 4 years old? You must have had to play like a quarter size cello.

Yo-Yo Ma: I had a sixteenth size cello.

Hrishikesh: [Laughter] That's so cute [laughter].

Yo-Yo Ma: Yeah, it's really cute, and I was-. So in Paris, there was no chair that was low enough, so my first lesson took place at the violin dealer's place and I sat on three telephone books.

Hrishikesh: [Laughter] That's just too cute.

Yo-Yo Ma: So how does a four year old kid start playing Bach Suites? It sounds hard but if you actually think of it, the beginning of the Suite goes,

*(Cello Suites intro)*

Yo-Yo Ma: these are open strings and you put one finger down

*(Cello)*

Yo-Yo Ma: and then again open string.

*(Cello)*

*(Cello ends)*

Yo-Yo Ma: That's a pattern that anybody can learn. So that's day 1 out of 42 measures. So the next day, you use two fingers. That's day 2 and so on and so forth. So it's actually quite simple. So I had an early start and by the time I recorded for the first time, I'd already been playing them for 24 years.

Hrishikesh: I'm going to play the first version that you recorded of this in 1983. How does it sound to you now?

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 1983 recording of the Cello Suites)*

Yo-Yo Ma: Very good cello playing, the notes are very even. You know, everything is just very measured. Very confident. Yeah, good cellist.

Hrishikesh: [Laughter] It feels like a backhanded compliment, a little bit.

Yo-Yo Ma: [Laughter] Well you know, it's good playing. But I try and do forensic musical analysis. Okay, what does this evidence say? What does this person know? What do they care about? The person cares about having a nice sound. This person likes to make things look good, right? But this music, it starts your imagination going, "Where's he taking us?" And then I see well, there's this stop in the middle.

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 1983 recording of the Cello Suites)*

Yo-Yo Ma: Has that person thought about that great interruption? Does that person hear the pedal point that's in there? I'd say, maybe subliminally a little bit but not something that is front and center. It's basically, let's get this over with, then stop, no silence, no silence, let's go.

*(Music fades)*

Yo-Yo Ma: So you get someone's priorities when you listen, and you always get someone's priorities. If you know what, you know, the instrument, it is really wonderful to be able to say, "Oh okay, this person cares about this, cares less about that." You get someone's value system. This music, the structure of it is totally clear. So in order to bring this to life, you actually have to breathe life into it. And that pause, it's something totally violently unusual. It screams out at saying, something happened.

Hrishikesh: Okay I want to play that same spot, the moment where there's that break in your new recording in the 2018 version.

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 2018 recording of the Cello Suites)*

Hrishikesh: What is your forensic analysis tell you about the person who's recorded that version?

Yo-Yo Ma: There's more attention to changing landscape. There's less emphasis on saying, "Let's make a beautiful sound," and there's different kinds of texture. There's greater fragility. There's more attention to the bits of landscape that says, "Hmm, wait, look at that. Check that out." So what does all this mean? Like a great book that you read several times during your life, each time you read it, it's the same book but you certainly get very, very different material from the same stories. "Oh, I didn't see that. I didn't notice that before. What is that?" So there's an evolutionary process.

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 2018 recording of the Cello Suites)*

*(Music fades)*

Yo-Yo Ma: There's no question that with life experience as you experience loss and love and tragedy, you are slightly changed. And as a musician, you make your living from being sensitized to these changes and digest them and make sure that you

are always giving your full self to whatever you're doing, which means that any experience that you've had has to be somehow revealed in the process of making music. And I think that almost forces you to make yourself vulnerable to whatever is there to be vulnerable to, because that actually is your strength.

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 2018 recording of the Cello Suites)*

Yo-Yo Ma: I'm not trying to prove anything other than this is the best I can do. I make mistakes, but it's like that vulnerability to say, "You know I accept I am not perfect." The reason I want to record this perhaps for the last time is that I feel this is what I can contribute. This is the best that I can do for the music that's written for my instrument.

*(Yo-Yo Ma's 2018 recording of the Cello Suites)*

*(Recording ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's Yo-Yo Ma's 2018 recording of the "Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major," by Johann Sebastian Bach, in its entirety.

*("Prelude, Cello Suite No.1 in G Major" by JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Yo-Yo Ma and the Bach Cello Suites. You'll find a link to buy or stream the music, and a link to buy Eric Soblin's book: *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*.

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