



"American Bach Tab Book" by Michael J. Miles review by Tim Jumper

Playing classical music on the banjo has a long history dating from the latter decades of the 19th century when S.S. Stewart and others sought to “elevate” the banjo, with its “primitive” stroke (clawhammer) playing style, from its humble origins in the slave cabin and its association with the lowbrow antics of the minstrel show to the “legitimacy” of genteel, middle-class parlors and the concert stage. This process was set in motion as early as 1865 when Frank Converse’s method books adapted to the banjo the fingerpicking techniques of the classical guitar. This innovation would eventually open up a vast new repertoire and make possible the playing of sophisticated arrangements of complex music, when coupled with the widespread availability of affordable mass-produced banjos with fretted fingerboards which eliminated much of the difficulty of playing notes and chords accurately and in tune in any position on the neck.

In recent years, selections from the music of the great European masters have been part of the repertoire of a number of 5-string fingerpicking virtuosos—John Bullard, Paul Smith, Peter Pardee, Bill Crofut, and Bela Fleck, to name only a few. In 1997 Michael J. Miles broke new ground by transcribing and recording two of the six cello suites of J.S. Bach—in clawhammer style! (His CD, *American BACH*, was reviewed by Dan Levenson in the December, 1997 issue of *BNL*, which also featured tabs for a Bach gigue and the Gigue and Dorian movements from Michael’s own Suite for the Americas.)

Since their rediscovery in 1890 and subsequent popularization by the great Catalan (Spanish) cellist Pau (Pablo) Casals, the Bach suites have come to be regarded as, arguably, the greatest music ever written for the instrument by, arguably, the greatest composer. (In his recently published *“Reinventing Bach”* [highly recommended], cultural historian Paul Elie summed up the singular genius of J.S. Bach by calling him “a Leonardo of sound.”) For a cellist, performing the Bach suites is akin to climbing Mount Everest—a difficult feat to accomplish, beyond which there is no higher goal. Performing the suites on a different instrument adds yet another level of difficulty. Thus, to continue the analogy, a banjoist performing the suites in the usual way, i.e. fingerstyle, is like climbing Everest but without bottled oxygen: extremely difficult, but possible. However, performing the suites clawhammer style is like making the climb not only without the oxygen, but also on your knees! If you think I exaggerate, I invite you to examine Michael’s new book containing the complete transcriptions from his landmark recording, and to listen to his CD. **I venture to say that his performance of the two Bach suites exceeds by an order of magnitude any music ever performed by anyone on clawhammer banjo.**

Michael has transcribed Suite I in G and Suite III in C, using double-C tuning (gCGCD), in both tablature and standard notation. Each suite consists of a Prelude followed by six dance movements: *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, a pair of either *Minuets* or *Bourees*, and *Gigue*. Each movement starts with a fairly straightforward melodic theme, but by the time Bach is finished running it through his kaleidoscopic modulations, false cadences, and contrapuntal swerves, you will traverse the entire fingerboard from top to bottom and do a fair amount of fifth-string fretting in between. This is not music for the faint-of-heart or the slow-of-hand.

Unlike folk music, which admits of innumerable versions of a given tune, classical music is restricted by the score, meaning that the performer is required to play precisely what the composer wrote, and in the case of Bach, it is often music of daunting complexity. This calls for a high degree of technical

skill and a level of musical discipline that lies well beyond the comfort zone of most clawhammer banjoists, and I include myself in that number. This is not meant to discourage anyone from attempting these suites, but only to give some idea of what they are, and of what it takes to play them. To put it another way, Bach's music is a galaxy beyond Galax and a far cry from *Cripple Creek*.

(Personal aside: Whenever I play Bach—he wins. In arranging a few of Bach's shorter pieces for clawhammer, my approach has been to adapt them to my level, that is to say, down. [See *Bach up and Push*, BNL, September, 2010.]

Among stringed instruments, no two would seem more disparate than the cello and the clawhammer banjo, but upon reflection a couple of similarities emerge. Both have about the same tonal compass, and both use a comparable two-stroke method of sounding the strings: the cello's back-and-forth bowing corresponding to clawhammer's alternating finger and thumb picking motion. And while chords are easily played on the banjo, the cello's bridge configuration limits its ability to sound more than two notes simultaneously (double-stops versus three- or four-note chords), which composers deal with by arpeggiating the chords. In the final analysis, neither instrument is perfectly suited to every piece in the suites. With its deep, vibrato-laden sonorities and legato bowing technique the cello shines in the slower movements but struggles to achieve the brisk lightness required by the faster ones. Conversely, the banjo's bright, snappy twang gives it an advantage in the faster dances, while its lack of sustain, especially evident in the high register, handicaps it in the slower ones. Balancing an instrument's strengths against its weaknesses so as to produce good music is one of the greatest tests of a musician's artistry and skill.

In addition to the Bach suites, Michael's book contains his own five-movement *Suite for the Americas*, which also appears on his 1997 CD and consists of *Prelude*, *Courante*, *Dorian*, *Gigue*, and *Guaracha*. Having been composed specifically for clawhammer banjo, this music is 5-string friendly, and thus, while far from easy, is more immediately accessible than the Bach.

All five pieces in the suite are inventive and full of interesting sounds, but I found the *Dorian* and *Guaracha* movements with their catchy, syncopated riffs especially fun to play.

Michael's protean talents and musical mastery extend from traditional folk and old-time, through the blues, and into pop and jazz, but his rendering of the Bach suites is a brilliant tour-de-force that effectively obliterates the limits of what was thought possible on clawhammer banjo. His book offers Bach's music, as well as his own, straight up and undiluted, note-for-note as it was composed, to anyone willing to accept the challenge of playing it. It's hard to imagine any clawhammer banjoist exceeding what Michael has accomplished in the classical genre—performing Beethoven's late quartets on a gourd fretless perhaps—but until someone does that or something like it, Michael J. Miles stands as the undisputed king of “clawssical” banjo. (Both book and CD, as well as other performance and instructional material, are available at www.MilesMusic.org.)