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SURPRISE! CELLO SUITES ADAPT NICELY TO HOMESPUN INSTRUMENT

by Howard Reich, Music Critic

To most folks, the banjo is that twangy, backwoods instrument that gave "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Deliverance" their country-fried flavor. Listen to some fast-picking bluegrass player do his stuff, and it's difficult not to think of Jed Clampett and clan rolling into Beverly Hills in their rusted junk-heap of a car.

To Chicago instrumental virtuoso Michael J. Miles, however, the banjo is something quite different: an instrument of nobility, capable of addressing scores by one of the most towering intellects in Western music, J.S. Bach. Yes, that J.S. Bach, the baroque master whose organ toccatas and fugues can shake the foundations of almost any church.

To prove the point, Miles, who teaches at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, has spent the past seven years laboring over a most unlikely project: a recording of two cello suites by Bach, transcribed for five-string banjo. No overdubbing, no orchestral accompaniment, no vocals, no instrumental doubling, nothing: just an unamplified banjo assisted by a lone bass player (to get the bottom notes that even Miles concedes his beloved instrument cannot reach).

By simply strumming his banjo's soft-spoken nylon strings, Miles has dared to take on some of the most dramatic and profound music ever written.

The question is: Does this man have delusions of grandeur, or has he simply lost touch with reality? "Neither," says Miles, whose new recording "American Bach" (RTOR Music) should explain to friends and family why he has been holed up in his studio for nearly the past decade.

"The popular perception of the instrument has been shaped by the mass media, which is why everyone thinks that all the banjo can do is accompany 'The Beverly Hillbillies,' " he says, smarting at the notion. "But the instrument's possibilities are endless, and because the five-string version of the banjo has only been around for about 150 years or so, there is so much yet to be explored and played on the instrument."

Give Miles credit for fearlessness, if nothing else, for he could have taken a much easier path -- say, playing the comparatively simpler piano sonatas of Mozart or some ditty by Haydn. Anything, in fact, that isn't as intricate, contrapuntal and full of notes as Bach.

The remarkable thing, however, is that Miles has succeeded. Somehow, this rubber-fingered fellow has managed to make the long and sinuous melodies of Bach -- though

rife with trills and arpeggios -- sound perfectly natural (well, almost) on the humble banjo. His recording, which also includes Miles' beguiling "Suite for the Americas," respects the stylistic traditions of baroque playing while bringing into the mix the quaintly ringing sound of an unmistakably American folk instrument.

Even the highbrows have been impressed, though cautiously so. "I was just talking about him during a lecture I recently gave in New York," says the eminent cellist Janos Starker, whose recordings of Bach's cello suites endure as major achievements in classical music. "The lecture was called, 'The Indestructible Bach,' and I said I know Bach is indestructible because there is this banjo player in Chicago, and he is playing Bach!

"But it is a remarkable feat," concedes Starker, who is not known for giving praise easily. "My first reaction to his playing was a smile, and then amazement at how far the man has gotten with it. I have admiration for him, because he is enhancing the possibilities of an instrument that is not known for approaching classical music." But Starker, it turns out, was Miles' central inspiration. From the cellist's recordings, says Miles, he learned the phrasings, articulations and stylistic demands of Bach's cello music. Then Miles set about transcribing these scores for an instrument the composer never had laid ears on.

For Miles, the Bach recording represents the pinnacle of a long journey that, at least early on, seemed to have no real destination. Having played a variety of instruments in pop and folk bands, Miles graduated from the University of Illinois in 1976 with a major in speech and theater. Shortly thereafter, he decided he was tired of being a musical jack of all trades and focused on the banjo.

But rather than pursue the traditional bluegrass manner -- with its fast-plucking right-hand notes and standard song repertory -- the self-taught musician took an alternative route. He learned to play in the "clawhammer" style, in which the thumb and middle finger of the right hand brush downward on the strings (rather than plucking upward, as in the crisp bluegrass style). The result is a sound that's not only warmer and more melodious than its bluegrass counterpart but one that embraces "a whole new repertoire," says Miles. "If you're playing clawhammer banjo, you're not expected to do the same bluegrass tunes that everyone else is. You can play classical music and a lot of other styles, as well."

By the late '80s, Miles had developed a remarkably sophisticated technique, which can be heard on his first album, "Counterpoint" (RTOR Music). The work impressed many banjo aficionados, including the formidable Pete Seeger.

"Only today I was able to get to listen to your tape of clawhammer banjo duets," wrote Seeger, in a letter to Miles, "and I hasten to write again to let you know it is one of the most beautiful tapes I ever listened to in all my 70 years. It is enough to make me want to start learning how to play the banjo all over again."

Having inspired words like these from Seeger persuaded Miles to dream even bigger. Since Miles long had admired guitarist John Williams' recordings of Bach transcriptions, he thought perhaps he could do the same for the banjo.

Scaling this musical Everest, however, was not easy. After two full years of work, for instance, Miles went into the recording studio, heard a playback of what he had wrought and headed directly back to the drawing board.

"It just wasn't good enough -- the dynamics, the phrasing, they just weren't quite right," he says. "I thought that if I'm going to put this out there for all the world to hear, I'd better get it right."

So Miles relearned how to sculpt phrases and balance voices in the baroque manner. Though one or two other clawhammer banjoists (such as John Bullard) had taken on Bach, none -- to Miles' knowledge -- had addressed entire suites.

Miles, in other words, was venturing into uncharted territory, bringing Bach to an instrument that had originated centuries earlier, in Africa. Carved from tree trunks and fitted with one or two strings, the precursor to the banjo (known by various names, including banjar and bonja) was a simple affair, though an ingenious one.

"If the drum is the first instrument," says Miles, who's also a historian on the subject, "the banjo was the second."

The slaves who brought their knowledge of banjos with them to the United States made new instruments here, thereby planting the seeds for the emergence of a distinctly American sound. By the mid-19th Century, in fact, banjos had become popular in the homes of middle-class whites. Eventually, the banjo made its way into the concert world, in such formidable works as George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and his "Porgy and Bess," in which Porgy sings "I Got Plenty a Nuttin' " to banjo accompaniment.

But with the exception of a brief revival of interest in the instrument during the '50s and '60s, thanks to folkies such as Seeger and bluegrass pioneers such as Earl Scruggs, the banjo has been nearly forgotten in American musical culture.

Perhaps its sound is too soft, its origins too rustic to appeal to modern, urban audiences. Yet there's plenty more to be said on the instrument, as Miles' work attests. "I found that there's a whole universe of sounds and colors that are unique to the banjo, that not even a guitar can approach," says Miles, who picks up his instrument to illustrate the point. Indeed, neither harpsichord nor guitar carries quite the bright and resonant sound of Miles' banjo.

As for those who might claim that Miles' efforts are sacrilegious, it's worth noting that baroque compositions routinely were played by various instruments, and that Miles is hardly the first to transcribe a Bach masterwork. No less than Johannes Brahms transcribed Bach's Chaconne in D minor for violin, recasting it as a magnificent work for piano (in which the pianist uses left hand alone).

"I respect the purist approach, and there is a rational argument that the cello is where the music should remain," says Miles. "But when I play this music for people and they say, 'I can't believe a banjo can do this,' when I see an audience of 500 people moved by this music -- well, how can you argue with that?"