

A black and white photograph of a woman with curly hair, Ursina Maria Braun, playing a cello. She is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a window or architectural structure. The right side of the image has a red vertical overlay.

audite

Bach | Gubaidulina

Ursina Maria Braun

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. I. Staccato – Legato 1:22

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012

II. Allemande 7:09

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. VI. Flagioletti 2:41

10 Preludes, No. VII. Al taco – Da punta d'arco 1:13

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009

II. Allemande 3:56

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. VIII. Arco – Pizzicato 1:11

10 Preludes, No. IX. Pizzicato – Arco 3:36

10 Preludes, No. III. Con sordino – Senza sordino 2:47

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008

II. Allemande 3:45

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. II. Legato – Staccato 2:31

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 4 in E-Flat Major, BWV 1010

II. Allemande 4:17

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. V. Sul ponticello – Ordinario – Sul tasto 3:07

10 Preludes, No. IV. Ricochet 1:20

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007

II. Allemande 4:30

SOFIA GUBAIDULINA

10 Preludes, No. X. Senza arco, senza pizzicato 3:28

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Suite No. 5 in C Major, BWV 1011

I. Prélude 6:44

II. Allemande 4:35

III. Courante 2:31

IV. Sarabande 3:24

V. Gavotte I + II 5:03

VI. Gigue 2:52



The Difficult Ascent to the Summit of Art

Gradus ad Parnassum, the ladder to perfection, cannot be climbed with a single bold leap, but only with many small steps and continuous work. There are a multitude of methods to this end – particularly in our era, when an entire industry promises to “optimize” our error-prone selves with seminars, smart technology, and how-to manuals. But even these are neither free nor effortless, since the principle is always the same, from mindfulness training to musical instruction to religious exercise: repetition, practice, improvement, and further development until complete mastery of the mind and body is attained.

In many religions, spiritual exercises serve as an inward-directed approach to God and gods, while musical etudes are usually only a matter of stubborn practice of technical or harmonic basics. But composers with a more universal mindset have always understood that training of the basics can also bring one closer to the “essence” of music. The piano etude cycles by Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, and Ligeti have set standards: here, the sacred realms of art are only revealed once all intricate tasks have been solved with masterful ease. This, too, can be said of the two series of works for unaccompanied cello from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries which Ursina Maria Braun has boldly brought together on this album.

An imaginary dialogue between Johann Sebastian Bach and Sofia Gubaidulina, between the Central German court and church musician and the headstrong composer from a small town in the former Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, who lived near Hamburg for many years until her death in March 2025. Like most musicians, Gubaidulina admired the Leipzig Thomaskantor. “I am constantly learning from him and will continue to learn from him,” she wrote, and in works such as the *Meditations on the Bach Chorale “Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit”* (1993) or the large-scale *St. John Passion* (2000), the composer, in the spirit of Bach, explores “the message of the kingdom of heaven” and “the relationship between God and man through the figure of Jesus.” Even if there are profound differences between her own Russian Orthodox faith and Bach’s Lutheran religion (for example, the Russian Orthodox Church rejects the use of instruments during worship), Gubaidulina was convinced that not only music, but also music-making is a religious act that brings people closer to a mystical union with God: “It seems to me that without religion, the deepest meaning of life is lost. Without religion, there is no serious reason for composing, this is absolutely clear to me.” A credo that applies not only to the musical setting of religious texts, but to any kind of music, including instrumental pieces such as the *Ten Preludes* for solo cello.

The Grande Dame of Russian Modernism

During the Soviet years, Gubaidulina had to continually uphold her faith against the communist ban on religious practice. She was born in 1931 to a Tatar father and a Russian mother in what is now Tatarstan in the central Volga area, an Islamic region where her grandfather worked as a mullah. She spent her youth in the capital Kazan and received solid instruction in piano and composition before going on to study in Moscow with Nikolai Peiko, an assistant to Dmitri Shostakovich. “During my youth,” she later recalled, “a figure like Shostakovich was extremely important to me, as a person, as a musician, as a composer. At that time, he was a personality without whom I might not have been able to live.” Particularly decisive was Shostakovich’s encouraging her to go her own way, even if it was the “wrong” one according to ideological criteria.

After graduating from the Moscow Conservatory under Vissarion Shebalin, Gubaidulina chose the difficult life of a freelance composer at the age of thirty-one and initially kept her head above water writing film music – a genre where one could learn a lot, had to work quickly, and, because it was less controlled by the state than concert music, offered enough room for experimentation. With the Astreya Ensemble, she created a terrain for improvisation somewhere between avant-garde and folk music, and gradually well-known soloists such as Gidon Kremer also began to champion her works. In 1985, she was able to travel to the West for the first time, and *perestroika* created a more culturally open climate in the Soviet Union. However, in view of the political uncertainty and the catastrophic supply conditions in the disintegrating state, Gubaidulina decided to move to Germany in 1991. In the West, the direct, emotionally ardent intensity of her music fell on fertile ground. Her works were performed all over the world, she received international awards (including the Japanese Praemium Imperiale and the Swedish Polar Music Prize) and is now considered the undisputed grande dame of Russian modernism.

Although the *Ten Preludes* for cello are among the smaller occasional works in her varied œuvre, they reflect her highly individual tendency toward concentration and interiority, as well as her friendship with performers such as the cellist Vladimir Toncha, to whom the pieces are dedicated. They were written in 1974 as études for a planned collection of instructional pieces, and the headings reveal that each of the short movements explores specific bowing and sound techniques of the stringed instrument: staccato and legato, harmonics, playing with a mute, on the bridge (*sul ponticello*), or on the fingerboard (*sul tasto*), with the top of the bow or on the “frog,” plucked pizzicato, or the ricochet, where many rapid notes “bounce off” the string under a bow impulse – the literal translation of this technique which was perfected by Niccolò Paganini.

This sounds like a systematic and perhaps somewhat mechanical practicing program. But Gubaidulina combines these basic playing methods with many other techniques such as glissandos, double stops, trills, tremolos, and large leaps, so that in the end (and here Bach certainly comes to mind) we have a true compendium of modern cello technique, each element of which needs to be practiced meticulously and in small steps in order to arrive at the Parnassus of accomplished playing. And because art is not only a matter of technique, with these miniatures Gubaidulina also provides a compendium of her own expressive world, telling ten little stories that feature grotesque jesters, swashbuckling heroes, and romantic lovers, small tragedies and everyday encounters. With the Tenth Prelude, she finally enters new musical territory and allows the interpreter to become a co-creator: Here, the notes in the score are tapped on the string with the fingers of the right hand, while meandering lines call for the production of a particular effect with the two thumbs on the C string, intended to be “reminiscent of the tremolo of the snare drum.”

“He fully understood the possibilities of all stringed instruments”

Gubaidulina's Preludes are certainly varied and eloquent enough for them to be played in succession as *one* work. So why combine them with Johann Sebastian Bach's Suites for solo cello? Many factors play a role. The one and perhaps central aspect in terms of listening is that we do not perceive historical music – especially if it dates back three hundred years – with the ears of Bach's contemporaries, but with those of the twenty-first century, which have been shaped by having heard pop and jazz, electronics and avant-garde experimental music. Bach's harmonic and tonal music comes up against the sonic world of a composer who pushed to the limits of what was familiar and permitted in both her art and her life – thus mirroring a basic feeling of her (and our) existence.

Ursina Maria Braun's compilation is a listening adventure full of contrasts, but with subtle correlations that can be noticed right from the beginning. The first of Gubaidulina's Preludes ends with the note F-sharp, which is taken up in the following Allemande of Bach's Sixth Suite as the third of the tonic key of D major. The seventh Gubaidulina Prelude ("al taco – da punto d'arco") concludes with an ascending line which is also found in the Allemande of Bach's C-major Suite, and is now perceived by us as an echo. The final note C of the Allemande, in turn, is echoed at the beginning of Gubaidulina's Eighth Prelude ("arco – pizzicato"). Just three examples of many correspondences that Braun reveals between Gubaidulina and her great role model Bach.

Another aspect of the intertwining of both musical spheres is that Bach's solo suites may also have been written as instructional pieces for the cello. "The idea", says Ursina Maria Braun, "and the background of the works by Gubaidulina and Bach are not so far away from each other – with these pieces, cellists can practice the most common techniques of the music of their time." Shortly after 1700, Antonio Stradivari had developed the "classical" form of the cello, but a variety of designs and string tunings still existed in Bach's time, as reflected, for example, in the Sixth Suite for a five-stringed instrument. Generally speaking, the baroque cello's range at the time was limited by its shorter neck and the absence of the thumb position; the instrument still had no endpin and was wedged between the knee and lower leg. Nevertheless, with his Suites, which were probably written at the same time as his famous Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin while he was Hofkapellmeister in Köthen, Bach created the basis for modern cello playing. "He fully understood the possibilities of all stringed instruments," his son Carl Philipp Emanuel stated in his obituary, "this is borne out by his solos for the violin and the cello without bass."

While Ursina Maria Braun performs the dialogue between Gubaidulina and five Allemandes from Bach's Suites on a modern cello from the 1770s by Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi, she plays Bach's complete Fifth Suite on a historical instrument with gut strings from the seventeenth century by the English violin maker Edward Pamphilon. A special feature of the Suite in C minor is the down-tuning of the A string by one whole tone – a Baroque practice that in this case results in a more mellow sound. Unlike the other Suites, here the six French dance types are, musically speaking, very French – most striking in the Prélude, which is in the form of a Lully overture: the introductory Grave with its full, rich chords is followed by a four-part (!) fugue. And seemingly effortlessly, Bach the instrumental master achieves the feat of suggesting polyphonic writing on the cello, "virtually," so to speak – a tour de force that already foreshadows the sophisticated combinatorics of his late works. "The Fifth Suite," says Ursina Maria Braun, "is one of Bach's most varied and large-scale suites for cello. Even though this complex masterpiece presents a challenge, I enjoy playing it again and again, as it is a constant source of new discoveries."

Michael Struck-Schloen

Translation: Aron Epstein



Ursina Maria Braun's musical career is characterised by its enormous versatility. A prize-winner of the Leipzig Bach Competition, she is active as a soloist and chamber musician as well as a solo cellist in renowned ensembles, and is also a sought-after composer.

She began her training as a junior student with Thomas Grossenbacher at the Zurich University of the Arts, where she also received composition lessons from Andreas Nick. Her Bachelor's and Master's studies with Clemens Hagen and Heinrich Schiff then took her to the Mozarteum University Salzburg and the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Additional studies with Reinhard Goebel deepened her interest in historical performance practice, which she has made an essential focus of her work.

During her studies, Ursina Maria Braun received numerous awards, including first prize at the international CONCORSO 12 Enrico Mainardi in 2012, the study award of the Migros Kulturprozent in 2016, and second prize and the audience prize at the International Bach Competition Leipzig. During the coronavirus pandemic, she initiated an innovative concert series on the Kapuzinerberg in Salzburg and won second prize at the Musica Antiqua Competition in Bruges in 2021.

With her chamber music partners such as Kit Armstrong, Denes Varjon, Pietro de Maria, Florian Birsak, Reinhard Goebel, Julian Prégardien, Dmitry Smirnov, Lorenza Borrani, Alfredo Bernardini, Franziska Hölscher, Erich Höbarth, and Dorothea Oberlinger, she has performed at festivals such as Styriarte Graz, Carinthischer Sommer, Thüringer Bachwochen, Bachwochen Ansbach, Suoni delle Dolomiti, Stresa Festival, and Mittelfest and has already performed in concert halls such as the Wiener Musikverein, Teatro della Pergola in Florence, Wigmore Hall in London, and Konzerthaus Berlin. As principal cellist of the Concentus Musicus founded by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, she is part of one of the most respected ensembles for historical performance practice. In addition, she performs as a principal cellist with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Camerata Salzburg, the Kammerakademie Potsdam, the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, and the Munich Chamber Orchestra.

As a composer, Ursina Maria Braun receives commissions from the Musikpodium Zürich, Musikkollegium Winterthur, Swiss Chamber Concerts, Azahar Ensemble, Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic Orchestra, and Sinfonietta de Lausanne. The Salzburg-based cellist regularly passes on her enthusiasm for music in projects with students at the Zurich University of the Arts, the Scuola di Musica di Fiesole, and the Orchestra Giovanile Italiana and leads a cello class at the Tirolean State Conservatory in Innsbruck. As of autumn 2025, she will hold a professorship in cello at the Bruckner University in Linz.

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info@audite.de • www.audite.de