We return to the king of baroque and look at a guitar arrangement of this famous cello piece

J S BACH
PRELUDE FROM CELLO SUITE NUMBER ONE

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Germany in 1685. He was the son of Johann Ambrosius Bach, a town and court musician. He began his own musical career at the age of 15, as a church organ mechanic and tuner.

Musical composition was his primary passion but, like many other composers, he achieved limited recognition for his work during his lifetime. Of the thousands of compositions now available, only 12 were published while he was alive.

Bach's name is now almost synonymous with baroque music, and he is commonly regarded as the greatest composer that ever lived. However, spurious titles such as "greatest composer" are as pointless as "greatest guitarist."

In his lifetime Bach did manage to write an enormous amount of music in every conceivable style - instrumental music, choral music, orchestral concerti, masses, the list goes on.

He was also quick to re-transcribe his music for other instruments, and no doubt approved of this month's arrangement of one of his violin/cello preludes for guitar. Guitar and cello share a similar position on the frequency spectrum and music for the cello often works well on the guitar. Of course, there was no guitar in Bach's time, not in the sense that we know guitar today, but I am sure that Bach would have composed some very unique music for our colourful instrument.

Bach wrote his six suites for unaccompanied violin/cello while he was music director at Cöthen in Germany, sometime between 1717 and 1723. He was fortunate to have the services of some highly skilled musicians and it was their great musicianship that inspired him to compose numerous works including his collection of cello suites.

Bach enjoyed widespread national recognition in his lifetime, although contemporaries such as G F Handel were more widely recognised. It wasn't until almost 50 years after his death in 1750 that Bach became recognised as the genius that he was.

A suite, in the Baroque meaning of the word, was a collection of dance tunes. A suite generally opened with a Prelude and then presented a number of dances in various time signatures and moods. The first cello suite was originally composed in G major, but is commonly played in D major on the guitar. This month's lesson featuring the prelude from Suite Number One is the most accessible of the six.

The opening four bars present the primary chords (D, G and A) played over a steady D bass note. In BAR 5, Bach introduces a G# note to move the harmony into the closely related key of A major. At BAR 11 the D# diminished seventh chord (implying a B7 chord) shifts the tonal centre to E minor and via the F#7 chord in BAR 13 to the key centre of B minor. It is only a short hop, skip and jump back to the relative major key of D major.

Having re-established the original key, Bach explores the keys of A and A Mixolydian alternately over the following fifteen bars. At BAR 31, Bach creates a pedal E note against which he plays notes from the A Mixolydian mode.

At BAR 37 the pedal shifts to a bass A note. At BAR 39, the harmony moves back to the D major chord, although still over a bass A note. Only in the final bar does the harmony finally resolve to the D major chord in root position. This long passage in the dominant harmony (the harmony of the A chord) has an underlying tension that is constantly forcing a return to the tonic chord of D major. I have suggested various dynamics in the transcription and on my recording.

The detailed fingering has been carefully considered to help you re-create a smooth phrasing. Feel free to explore other fingerings if you feel it is appropriate. I hope you enjoy working through it and I'll see you next month.
"Impress your girlfriend, mother and yourself with this beautiful Bach prelude."

PRO TIP
AS I EXPECT that most of the readers who work through this month's lesson will not have formal classical training. If possible, try to use the fingernails on the right hand to create a strong full tone. The piece will work equally well on the steel string guitar - if the baroque police come knocking on your door (when they decide to leave me in peace), then quietly suggest that Bach himself would approve and, were he alive today, would most likely be a fusion guitarist.

J S Bach: the father of all modern music!
JS Bach: Prelude from Cello Suite Number One

Guitar Techniques May 2004