

## BACH PAIN

A white twin-sized bedsheet was coated with cyanotype and exposed with twenty-five sheets of tracing paper containing the pitch contour lines of J. S. Bach's cello suites (numbers 3, 4, 5, and 6). With a pencil, I traced out every page, which was then thrown away after the cyanotype was exposed.

Initial inspiration was from Yo-Yo Ma's remarks about Bach enlisting the listener to complete the music, and the pain of practicing the suites (Martinez, 2019). Having worked on the suites for more than a decade now, these statements ring true. Because the cello is primarily used melodically, harmony in the suites is often 'spread out' over time. Unlike groups of notes played simultaneously, which are immediately recognizable as a certain chord, a sequence of notes in a single bar (or across bar lines) is much more harmonically ambiguous and sometimes a chord can be suggested without playing all the notes. As such, consciously or unconsciously, we are 'enlisted' and forced to participate in Bach's cello suites. And as any Bach-lover will declare, the more devotion and pain you give to him, the more rewarding and beautiful is the music, whether you are playing it or simply listening.

Related to this is the blueprint. For many years, industrial drawings were reproduced through cyanotype exposures of ink on tracing paper. Now obsolete, the blueprint survives today in language, referring to a plan of a project. Bach's compositions, and sheet music in general, are much like the colloquial blueprint: a theoretical outline of how a certain piece will be constructed, but with the realization left to the artist.

So my goal was to combine Bach and blueprints. Ideally I would have had a large enough surface to fit all six suites, but my spare bedsheet was only big enough for four. The associations with sleeping and mattresses then linked Bach to back pain.

To prepare the sheet for exposure, I pinned it on a wall and coated it with several layers of cyanotype. I deliberately changed the concentration ratios of the part A and part B chemicals in the solution as I moved down, to see if I could achieve different coloration. I also attempted contours in the layering to resemble the lines on the tracing paper. To expose the sheet, I chose not to use an indoor UV source, preferring sunlight and the variability of the weather. This made the process rather more stressful because the wind threatened to blow away any paper that was placed on the sheet, even if it was taped. I used a glass panel to hold down the paper but it was too small to cover the sheet entirely and so the sheet was exposed in five sections. The humidity of the grass also affected the quality of the exposure.

As expected, the final result was somewhat chaotic. Numerous tracings were poorly exposed and accidents of tape, folds, and wrinkles littered the sheet. Some pages, however, had excellent resolution.

## POST-CRITIQUE REFLECTION

Viewers noted the chaos of the images and appreciated that the confetti-like appearance gave the bedsheet a somewhat whimsical nature. Being an abstract work, the bedsheet invited a range of interpretations. Though I hoped that the title would bring up associations with music, I did not expect the audience to identify the pages as Bach; in the end it was hard for viewers to even see the pages as music. The "pain" I wanted to convey instead came from the white streak in the middle of the bedsheet, which was unplanned. In general, the piece was amusing but unable to immediately evoke any deeper meaning. In the spectrum of chaos and order, perhaps I had leaned too heavily into the former.

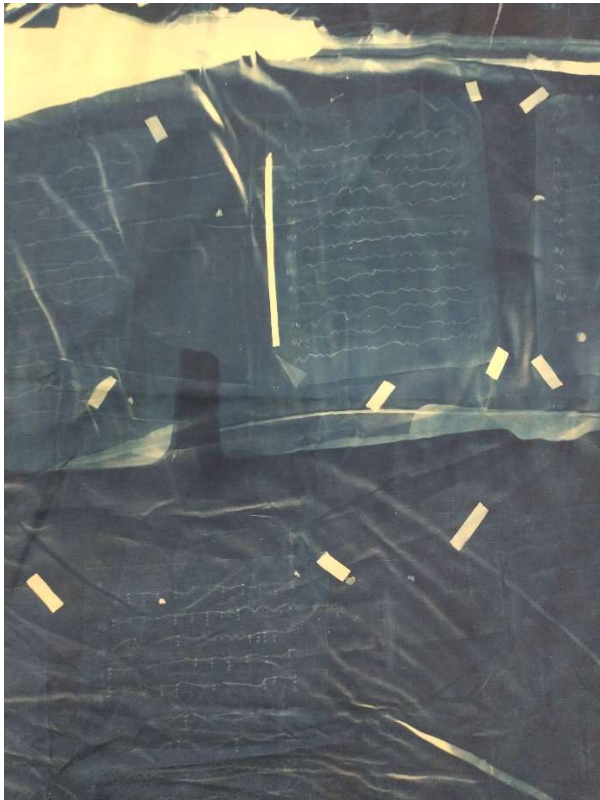
## REFERENCES

Martinez, Norma. 2019. Yo-Yo Ma, On Bach's Six Cello Suites. Texas Public Radio. Available: <https://www.tpr.org/arts-culture/2019-04-18/yo-yo-ma-on-bachs-six-cello-suites>

## APPENDIX A: INSTALLATION VIEW



APPENDIX B: DETAILS





## APPENDIX C: PROCESS



Here can be seen the wooden boards and glass panel for row-by-row exposure of the cyanotype in front of Milbank Hall, Barnard College, on April 23, 2024. Thanks to Elliot Fix (shown) for the help.