

# J S Bach

## Air On A G String



This month **Bridget Mermikides** takes on a Bach classic that was also popularised by Jacques Loussier during the 1960s...

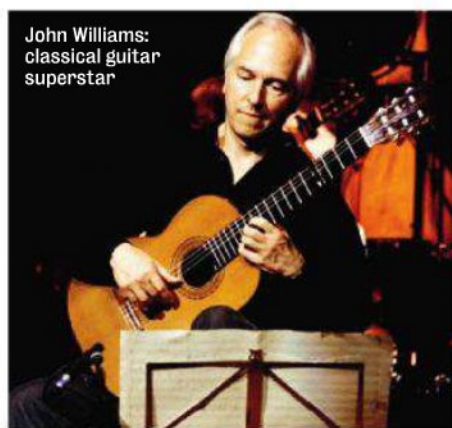
### ABILITY RATING



**Moderate**

INFO	WILL IMPROVE YOUR
<b>KEY:</b> C <b>TEMPO:</b> 55 bpm <b>CD:</b> TRACKS 18-19	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Picking hand control <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Line independence <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Phrasing

ONE OF THE JOYS OF PLAYING classical guitar is its ability to convincingly adopt great music from a wide range of styles and eras. This month we are looking at a piece by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) who - although not widely recognised in his lifetime - is now generally considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time. J S Bach played organ, violin, viola and the harpsichord, and produced over 1000 works of great beauty. His unrivalled mastery of motivic development and counterpoint - the control of multiple simultaneous yet complimentary melodies - had a huge influence on the development of



John Williams:  
classical guitar  
superstar

'Western' classical music. Over 250 years after his death, his work continues to be admired by, and provide inspiration for, musicians from a wide range of styles including jazz, rock, latin, metal, tango and electronic music.

Here we look at a solo classical arrangement of his ever-popular air from his *Orchestral Suite No.3 BWV 1068* composed sometime between 1717 and 1723 and better known as *Air On A G String*. This beautiful piece - although written for baroque orchestra - has been arranged for all manners of instruments, and a 1902 cello and piano arrangement was actually the first of Bach's pieces to be recorded. Its

**“ It re-entered the public conscious in the 1980s when it was used in a series of TV adverts for Hamlet cigars ”**

serene, expressive quality makes it one of the most famous 'classical' works of all time - and it re-entered the public conscious in the 1980s when it was used for a humorous series of TV adverts for Hamlet cigars. Although the guitar as we know it did not exist in Bach's lifetime he did write a set of works for the solo Baroque lute (BWV 995-1000). Regardless, Bach's music is so pure that it can potentially work with any instrument or ensemble, and Bach himself adapted his own music for different instruments, as countless others have continued to do. Arranging pieces for solo classical guitar is challenging, particularly when there are many 'voices' or musical lines,

as is the case with the four-part writing here. I've transposed the original key down from D major to C major to better employ the natural resonances of the guitar, and have voiced the parts as idiomatically as possible. When learning the piece, it's useful to hear orchestral, and other arrangements of the work so that you fully absorb its melody and internal lines. In this way you will have a clear idea of how to sustain and phrase the piece. Practise this one carefully and methodically and you will have a wonderful piece to enjoy and share.

One of the most revered interpreters of Bach's music is the pianist Glenn Gould, but many other musicians have interpreted his music to great effect in a wide range of styles including Alfred Brendel (piano), Mstislav Rostropovich (cello), E Power Biggs (organ), Emerson String Quartet, Jacques Loussier (jazz trio) and the electronic musician Wendy Carlos (Moog). To hear guitar arrangements of Bach, check out the amazing playing of John Williams, David Russell, Goran Sollscher (10-string) and rock guitar interpretations by Yngwie Malmsteen, Paul Gilbert and other neo-classical metal players. **T**

### TECHNIQUE FOCUS

#### FREE STROKE, REST STROKE

Two common picking techniques in classical guitar are free stroke and rest stroke. With rest stroke the picking finger plucks a string and then comes to rest against the adjacent one. With the thumb this is the next string down (towards the floor) and with fingers it's the next string up (towards the face). With free stroke the finger doesn't rest on an adjacent string after plucking, but floats free until it's required to pick again. Rest stroke is often favoured for single note playing, while free stroke is for polyphonic playing (chords and arpeggios).

**TRACK RECORD** If you want to hear guitar renditions of Bach, try *John Williams Plays Bach And Scarlatti* (Decca). Another excellent recording is *Bach: Lute Suites Nos 1 - 4* (Sony), also performed by John Williams. Glenn Gould's *Bach Goldberg Variations* (Sony) and *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* (Sony) are also essential listening! You may also spot a similarity in Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade Of Pale!*

J S BACH: AIR ON A G STRING



Johann Sebastian Bach: one of the greatest and most influential composers

## PLAYING TIPS

## CD TRACK 19

**[Bars 1-12]** The opening bass line jumps octaves in the original orchestral score but on solo guitar it is very difficult to successfully achieve this in combination with playing the upper harmony. The bass notes are therefore simply repeated, which I feel is a reasonable compromise since the harmonic progression is well maintained.

In bar 2 keep hold of the first bass note of F while stretching to the A note on the first string. Immediately follow by placing down a barre at the 1st fret for the F

note on the first string, still keeping the bass note sustained. Sustaining the bass notes as fully as possible is a key component in achieving a convincing sound in this piece so hang on to them and try to avoid clipping them short.

**[Bars 13-14]** In bar 8, when moving onto the last beat use a three-string barre so that the G melody note can be sustained when catching the Bb on the last half beat of the bar. Bar 14 needs sustain on the high A note and the fretting hand fingering is designed to help create a smooth melody line overall.

*♩ = 55*

**Chords:** C, C/B, Am, Am/G, Fmaj7, D7/F#, G, G/F, Em7b5, Em7b5/D, A/C#, Asus, A, A7, Dm, Dm/C, G/B, G, C, C/B, Gmaj7/B, G/B, Am, D/F#, D7, G, Am/C, D7, G, G7, G7/F, Em7b5, A/E, Em7b5/D, A/C#, A7/E, A7b13A7, Dm, Dm/C, E7/B, Bm7b5/A, Am, Dm/A, E/G#, Dm/A, E/B, E/G#

The score consists of six systems of music, each with a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Chord diagrams are placed above the treble staff, and fretting hand fingering is shown below the bass staff. The systems are numbered 1, 7, 3, 9, 5, 11, 12, and 14. The first system includes a tempo marking of *♩ = 55*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and trills.

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 19

[Bars 17-18] On the last beat of bar 12 hold the C bass note and add a 2nd fret barre on beat 4. On the first beat of bar 18 a grace note (appoggiatura) lands on the beat and takes half the value of the semiquaver (16th note).

[Bars 19-end] Drop the volume at bar 19 then crescendo through the next two bars.

In bar 21 on the last 16th note F of beat two, barre the first finger across the top two strings to execute the melody when landing on the Csus4 chord, then 'seesaw' back onto the tip of the finger for the next C chord. Aim to keep clarity and sustain throughout and, above all, have fun with this wonderful piece!

Am Esus7/D E7<sup>b</sup>13 Am D7/F<sup>#</sup> D D7/C

G/B Am/C D7 G G/F C/E C7/E F Fmaj7 D/F<sup>#</sup> G G7

E7/G<sup>#</sup> A A7 Dm Dm/C G/B G7/B G G7/B Csus4 C C/B<sup>b</sup>

F/A C/G C7/G<sup>b</sup>F F/E Ddim F/C G/B G Csus4 C Dm/F Dm7/G G C

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