

LIN HE PLAYS BACH

Sonata No. 1 in G minor for solo violin, BWV 1001 Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin, BWV 1004

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

It was while employed as *Kapellmeister* to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen from 1717 to 1723 that the German composer **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** wrote much of his chamber and orchestral music. Among these works are the six sonatas and partitas for solo violin as well as the suites for solo cello, *Brandenburg Concerti*, and the first book of his pedagogical collection, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. These were mostly happy years for Bach as his patron Leopold was a young man with a love and understanding for music as well as a great respect for its local embodiment—Bach himself. Indeed, Bach and his patron developed a close friendship, at least until Leopold married and his new wife had little patience for music. Bach also had opportunities to travel in order to repair organs in nearby cities as well as give recitals. Nevertheless, there were also personal tragedies, principally the death of his wife, Maria Barbara. By December 1721, however, Bach had met and married his second wife, Anna Magdalena, who worked as a court singer. She would help raise the children produced by Bach's first marriage, including Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel, who themselves would become respected composers, and she would also bear him several more children, including another future composer, Johann Christian. Anna Magdalena additionally assisted her husband in musical matters, copying-out works like the cello suites to sell and provide extra income for the family. In return, Bach produced his *Clavierbüchlein* (the famous "notebook") as his present to her. Then, in 1723, this ever-growing family relocated to Leipzig where Bach spent the rest of his life in service to that city's churches.

The sonatas and partitas for solo violin, now assigned the numbers BWV 1001 to 1006 in their composer's catalog, consist of three works of each type. The three sonatas correspond to the Baroque church sonata in that they are each in four movements with abstract titles indicating only their tempos and following the pattern, slow-fast-slow-fast. Discussions of sonata principle are irrelevant here:

this was, of course, a Classical-era convention which had not yet emerged as of the late Baroque. The three partitas, meanwhile, follow the chamber sonata model in that their movements consist of stylized dances; in fact, the word "partita" was largely synonymous with "suite" in Bach's day. Chamber sonatas, partitas, and suites typically included four core dances—the allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue—again often in the pattern, slow-fast-slow-fast. Bach, in his violin partitas, applies most of these dances most of the time, but also adds other dances like the bourrée, chaconne, loure, gavotte, and minuet. The sonatas and partitas are preserved in a beautiful manuscript, dating from 1720 and in Bach's own handwriting. This manuscript is designed especially for its players with notes which are clearly legible and staves which are spaced to accommodate page turns. Dynamics, bowings, and phrases are unmarked, however, so that the performer is at liberty to determine these for himself.

The sonatas and partitas are remarkable works in that they establish a contrapuntal idiom for the violin which is essentially a melody instrument. This happens through double, triple, and even quadruple stops in which multiple notes are played simultaneously, as well as through an ingenious approach to line which engenders a sort of "aural counterpoint." In other words, we as listeners can imagine unplayed notes based on the expectations Bach sets up through his intricately-conceived melodies. This speaks not only to Bach's mastery of counterpoint, even at this early stage in his career, but also to his practical knowledge of the violin. We often forget that Bach was an adept violinist who knew well the technical capacities of the violin; he might have even been able to play these demanding works himself. Carl Philipp Emanuel once commented of his father, "From his youth up to fairly old age, he played the violin purely and penetratingly... He understood completely the possibilities of all stringed instruments." Even so, no evidence exists that the sonatas and partitas were ever played, by Bach or any other

violinist, within their composer's lifetime. Indeed, there is no evidence that the *Brandenburg Concerti* were ever played either. Neither set seems to have been written for a specific occasion, not at Cöthen anyway. The *Brandenburg Concerti* were, in fact, written to entice the Margrave of Brandenburg whereas it has been speculated that the sonatas and partitas were written for a violinist in Dresden—the revered Johann Georg Pisendel. Bach had met Pisendel in 1709 and again in 1717 when he played his own sonata for solo violin; given the timing, this work might have been Bach's immediate inspiration for his set of six unaccompanied works.

These two factors taken together—both the contrapuntal ingenuity of the sonatas and partitas as well as their lack of accompaniment—have defined the reception history of these works. Although German-speaking composers had been writing unaccompanied pieces at least as far back as Heinrich von Biber, the noted experimentalist who around 1676 had written a *Passacaglia* for solo violin, by the time Bach was composing his set, accompanied sonatas had instead become the norm thanks to the examples of Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi, and other Italian masters. Bach's solo violin works, therefore, not unusually, mark the culmination of an earlier German practice at odds with the current Italian trend. As a side note, the accompanied violin sonatas, BWV 1014 to 1019, which Bach produced within his first years in Leipzig were no more conventional: rather than draft a semi-improvised *continuo* part in need of realization, Bach carefully wrote-out his harpsichord accompaniments. In the late eighteenth-century when the majority of Bach's output remained unknown, violinists still prized the sonatas and partitas as study pieces, although they were judged unsuitable for public performance owing to the absence of accompaniment. The London-based violinists, Johann Peter Salomon and George Bridgetower, associates of Haydn and Beethoven, respectively, each owned copies. In 1798, the French violinist Jean Baptiste Cartier included the *Fugue* from the Sonata in C major, BWV 1005, in his survey of violin literature. And, in 1802, the complete set was published for the first time by Simrock in Bonn.

Not until the mid-nineteenth century, however, when Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, and others saw fit to add the “missing” accompaniments, were there any public performances. Hence, the public's first encounter with this music was on February 8, 1840, during the “Third Evening of Musical Entertainment” at the Leipzig Gewandhaus when Mendelssohn at the piano and Ferdinand David on violin performed an accompanied version of the *Ciaccona*

from the Partita in D minor. This arrangement was published in 1847 and, within a few years, Schumann had taken things even further by systematically creating accompaniments for every movement of the six works. David himself, nevertheless, had already prepared the versions of the sonatas and partitas which would prove the most enduring when, in 1843, he published a second edition of the violin solos with added dynamics, phrasings, and comments on arpeggios—the very markings which Bach had excluded from his manuscript. David's version would be taught at the Leipzig Conservatory and form the basis of nineteenth-century understanding of these works. In both cases, the piano accompaniments and editorial markings to the violin lines were meant to expose structures and harmonies their creators' felt Bach had left implicit; instead, they obscured and Romanticized Bach's true intentions, although they did have the positive effect of raising public awareness of the works themselves. As the twentieth century approached, the violinist Joseph Joachim, a colleague of Brahms, would endeavor to not only publicize the sonatas and partitas, but also begin to restore their composer's true intentions. Still, Joachim's approach was to play excerpted movements, rather than full works and certainly never a full cycle of six. The honor of recording the first full cycle would go to Yehudi Menuhin in 1936, although, to this day, violinists still seek to better understand Bach's masterful but sometimes enigmatic sonatas and partitas. Indeed, George Enescu regarded them as “the Himalayas of violinists.” Surely, he meant that, more than just being beautiful, they were also the greatest challenge for violinists to surmount.

The Sonata No. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001 begins with an *Adagio* which is dramatic and also mysterious. The tonic chord of G minor is fully-voiced at both the beginning and end of this movement through the use of quadruple stops where all four of the violin's strings are made to sound at once. Multiple stops are, in fact, used throughout the *Adagio* to intensify particular moments. Stops also allow for counterpoint as different voices, particularly the bass, moves at a slower pace than the main melody. The second movement is marked *Fuga. Allegro* and naturally features even more counterpoint. Here, the counterpoint is both real and aural though, in that Bach sets up a four-voice fugue with a subject reiterating a single note four times before very quickly diverting into a single, faster melody and then crossing-back into counterpoint at his next best opportunity. On other occasions, his single melody lines will also quickly jump registers, so as to catch the important inflection points even if every fugal component cannot be played. Essentially, therefore, Bach is

approximating a fugue, capturing all its important moments, but leaving our minds to imagine the lesser material which transports us from point A to point B. The third movement is marked *Siciliana*, a title referring to a type of aria in a slow, compound meter. The genre often had a pastoral association or even that of Christmas. The *Siciliana* included here comes as a respite to the drama of the preceding two movements. This instrumental aria is free-flowing and lyrical, just as a sung aria would be. The final, fourth movement, *Presto*, brings a swift conclusion to the Sonata. Structurally, it follows a repeated binary form, saving its multiple stops for the ends of both sections. Other than these pivotal moments, it consists entirely in a relentless melody line, devoid of the intricate counterpoint of its predecessors.

The Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 is in five movements, including the four core movements of the Baroque suite with a monumental chaconne appended to this structure. The first movement is marked *Allemanda*, a title referring to a German dance, set in common time and paced at a moderate tempo. By Bach's era, the allemande, typically placed first in suites, had also developed characteristics of a prelude and could be weighty as well as improvisatory. The quick sequences liken it to the first prelude of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I* and also the First Cello Suite. Unlike those, however, it has a ferocity about it, not unlike the *Presto* of the G-minor Sonata we just heard; the lines here are, nevertheless, more jagged. The second movement is marked *Corrente*, referring to a lively dance in triple meter which takes its name from the French word for "running." Regardless, this movement seems almost stunted compared to the rapid *Allemanda*. The third movement is marked *Sarabanda*, referring to a dance with Spanish associations but ultimately arising from Spain's American colonies. At least in Germany and France, the stylized form of the sarabande was slower in tempo than some of the other common dances. Unlike the preceding movements which include little counterpoint or stopping, Bach's *Sarabanda* is built around these elements, and uses them to maintain interest in this relatively free-flowing, although triple-meter, movement. The fourth movement, *Giga*, the usual conclusion to the Baroque suite, relates to the jig, a folk dance of the British Isles. In Bach's Partita, the *Giga* is in compound quadruple meter and moves at a fast tempo with rapid sequences similar to the opening *Allemanda*, although phrases here are longer and more elegant.

The *Ciaccona* which concludes the Partita in D minor is approximately the same length as the preceding four

movements combined. Rather than a careless addition, however, the other movements have prepared us for the *Ciaccona*, exposing us to its despaired emotional realm and even suggesting its theme to a certain extent. The chaconne was a dance genre which, like the sarabande, probably originated in Spain's American holdings; in particular, the chaconne was associated with the lower classes, including slaves and Native American groups. Bach's *Ciaccona*, nevertheless, relates more to a German organ tradition whereby variations are built over a repeated bass line or harmonic pattern, a practice also associated with the passacaglia. The massive *Ciaccona*, called by Menuhin, "the greatest structure for solo violin that exists," includes an incredible thirty-two variations! The theme is stated in predominately quadruple-stop chords at the outset, a harmonic pattern which is then repeated throughout the course of this fifteen-minute movement. Variations are diverse in technique as well as mood: some are highly contrapuntal while others are purely melodic, and, toward the center of the movement, there are several variations in the major mode. The musicologist and violinist Helga Thoene has suggested that Bach wrote the *Ciaccona* as an outpouring of grief after the death of his first wife, Maria Barbara, and that it includes references to chorale tunes on the topic of mourning. Music was rarely autobiographical in Bach's day, however, and this seems like just another Romanticized notion imposed on Bach's vision, one more concerned with the practicalities of formal structure and playing technique. Regardless, as we explored earlier, the *Ciaccona* had tremendous impact within the rediscovery of Bach's music and continues to be viewed as the zenith—"Everest," perhaps, to continue Enescu's metaphor—among the sonatas and partitas for solo violin.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 following the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." He has shared this pioneering research at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN; in March 2020, he will present at the Music by Women Festival in Columbus, MS. During Jackson's studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight Anderson

Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world's leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, acting as Director of Scholarship of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. A special project he is developing for the 2020 festival, "A Scholarly Presentation in Lecture and Music: Solomon Northup in the Central Louisiana Sugarhouse," has recently been awarded a prestigious Rebirth Grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, music blogger, avid reader, and award-winning nature photographer.

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