

Notes on the Program

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Bach's Violin Sonatas and Partitas, BWV 1001-1006

As we celebrate the 300th anniversary of Bach's Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas in 2020, it is easy to forget that at one point, surviving manuscripts of these masterworks were nearly disposed of as butcher paper. The pieces indeed suffered a delayed reception of true appreciation that persisted for many decades after Bach's life, to the point where they were practically forgotten. Kept alive by the occasional use of individual movements as technical studies or bravura pieces, they suffered additional indignities when Schumann and Mendelssohn published accompaniments to "clarify" their harmony. Only in 1802 were the Partitas and Sonatas for solo violin finally published in their entirety. The first violinist to undertake the monumental task of recording the complete set was Yehudi Menuhin in 1936, followed by his own mentor, George Enescu, in 1940. Today, no violinist can imagine their life without these pieces as constant companions.

Bach himself was a highly accomplished violinist. The violin was in fact most likely one of the first instruments he studied with his father, Johann Ambrosius, and his first musical post at age seventeen was as a violinist. It does not come as a surprise that Bach might have used the Sonatas and Partitas himself for his own performances, and his pupil, Johann Friedrich Agricola, recounts that these pieces were personally so meaningful to Bach that he would often sit at the harpsichord and play for himself keyboard versions of the works.

While the six Sonatas and Partitas, BWV 1001–1006 are dated 1720 on the manuscript, Bach scholar Christoph Wolff argues that they were likely written during Bach's Weimar period, between 1708 and 1717. Wolff writes that he was likely influenced by Johann Paul von Westhoff's suites for *violon seul sans basse*, the first of their kind. Published in 1696, they were familiar to Bach, if not a model for his own Sonatas and Partitas.

The title page of the Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas designates them as *Sei Solo a violinist senza basso accompagnato*. Perhaps significantly, the words *Sei Solo* are spaced apart from the rest of the title, and do not constitute correct Italian. (The correct Italian for "six solos" is *Sei Soli*.) Could Bach have made a grammatical mistake? Yet in all the other instances of plurals, Bach manages to have the *-i* ending. As has been noted by scholars, *Sei Solo* translates to "you are alone." With Bach's penchant for double entendres, could he have meant something other than that the violinist plays alone? Both Christian Tetzlaff and Myles Jordan note that in

1720, Bach suddenly found himself alone: having gone on a short business trip that year, Bach returned to find that his wife, Maria Barbara, had not only died unexpectedly but was already buried.

The three sonatas in this collection are modeled on the Italian tradition of the sacred church sonata (*sonata da chiesa*) with four sections: a slow introduction followed by a fugue, a lyrical slow movement, and a fast finale. The three partitas, in turn, are based on the chamber sonata (*sonata da camera*), a collection of four dances. Thus, this collection overall juxtaposes secular dances with sacred church sonatas. The pieces are all in different keys, four of them using G, D, A, and E as their tonic, which exploit the natural resonance of the violin by sharing pitches with the violin's open strings. Additionally, the tonalities of these works form an ascending hexachord: G, A, B, C, D, and E. Bach often composed in sets of six; note the similar number of English Suites, French Suites, Cello Suites, and Brandenburg Concertos, as well as numerous other sets.

Sonata No. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001

The sonata begins seriously with a four-note G-minor chord, the two lower strings ringing freely. The melody is elaborate, weaving long lines between harmonic pillars. Interestingly, Bela Bartok modeled his own solo sonata after this opening, which also begins with a G-minor chord, a most resonant chord on the violin, reinforcing the instrument as a lone orator.

The ensuing Fugue is concise yet architecturally astonishing. It begins with four repeated D's, followed by C and B-flat in the melody. Moreover, if one outlines the first note of each beat in the subject, it too spells out D, C and B-flat. Macrocosmically, each successive structural cadence mirrors this tonal design, with the first cadence in D minor, then C minor, and followed by B-flat major. Each new section is demarcated by these cadences, which are subsequently different in texture, figuration, contrapuntal devices, and even in register from the preceding music.

A gentle Siciliano is heard next, in the relative major. The dance is characterized by its 12/8 meter and a dotted-rhythm melody. This movement concurrently alludes to a trio sonata with two melodic "duet" parts over an accompanying bass.

The concluding Presto is a wild perpetual motion of single notes but with implied polyphony, causing metric instability with its many implicit groupings and voices. Johannes Brahms later wrote two piano etudes based on this piece: one in which the original is in the right hand, juxtaposed by sixteenths in the left hand, and the other where the original is in the left hand, paired with sixteenths in the right hand.

Partita No. 1 in B minor, BWV 1002

Bach's Partita No. 1 is a Baroque dance suite that contains four dances: Allemande, Corrente, Sarabande, and a *tempo di borea* or Bourrée, the latter replacing the customary Gigue. Following each dance is a "Double," essentially variations on the preceding dance using the same underlying harmonies.

The Allemande follows established conventions with its quadruple meter, its moderate tempo, and an upbeat that launches the work. Bach imbues the dance with dotted rhythms emphasizing its ceremonious and philosophical tone. According to Johann Walther in 1732, the Allemande is a rhetorical "proposition from which flows the Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue." As the music progresses, triplets are introduced, bringing about rhythmic diversity. The Double that follows unfolds in even, melodic sixteenths.

The Corrente is in a jaunty triple meter. Its Double truly expresses the "running" meaning of the word *corrente* with its quick scalar sixteenth notes marked "presto."

Bach's Sarabande is noble and in triple meter. Its song-like Double is in 9/8 meter and consists almost exclusively of triplets.

Labeled *tempo di Borea*, this lively Bourrée is in duple meter and propelled by an upbeat quarter note. In the Double that follows, Bach dissolves the rhythm heard previously into running notes that outline the melodic and harmonic contour.

Sonata No. 2 in A minor, BWV 1003

The work opens with a Grave (solemn and slow) that is lyrical and highly ornamented, texturally mirroring the opening movement of the first sonata. However, in terms of content, the journey is far more complex. Violinist Christian Tetzlaff, in his liner notes, associates this sonata with a Passion cantata where tritones and sweeping gestures depict Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Why have I been left alone? Why is nobody now able to stand by my side?"

The A-minor fugue parallels the G-minor Sonata's fugue with a subject of exactly the same length, yet it is far more extensive, filled with skips and leaps, while contrasted by a falling chromatic line. Flowing, running lines separate the more fugal sections.

The Andante is a lyrical and hope-filled cantilena sung over a bass line of repeated notes. As violinist Benjamin Shute has pointed out, compared with the rest of Bach's oeuvre, it is highly unusual for an Andante to be in a major key, perhaps further highlighting this movement's quiet optimism.

In the words of Miriam Fried, “It is hard to imagine a more beautiful, melodic movement. . . . It expresses the most intimate secrets of the soul with the utmost calm and serenity.”

The finale is a dazzling Allegro, with Italianate virtuosity employing echo-like dynamics, calling to mind the interplay between soloist and orchestra as in a concerto grosso.

Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004

The first four movements of Bach’s Partita No. 2 follow the order of the traditional Baroque dance suite with each movement in their classic binary format. The Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue are not overly lengthy and seem to harbor a sense of technical economy (gone are those challenging double-stops heard in the first partita), setting the stage for the massive fifth movement: the Chaconne.

The Chaconne is a work of such scope emotionally, compositionally, and spiritually, that much has been written on this movement alone. Performing it is a tremendous experience in itself, and it is no wonder that so many transcriptions have been written for other instruments.

A Chaconne is essentially a series of variations, in Sarabande rhythm, built over a repeated ground bass. These variations, for Bach, explore the entire kaleidoscope of human emotions, from confidence to Divine consolation to desolation and to exaltation. In turn, Bach utilizes the whole gamut of techniques available for variations: chords, arpeggiation, scales, transposition, inversion, and retrograde are but a few examples within the sixty-four repetitions. The journey can be divided into three primary sections: the longest one is in D minor, followed by an otherworldly D major, and the shortest final section which again is in D minor. Not only is the architecture of these three sections in accordance with the Golden Ratio, but astonishingly, considering all the movements of this set (with the B-minor Sonata Doubles considered as the same movement as its correlating dance), the chaconne falls at the Golden Ratio within the entire *Sei Solo* cycle.

In the words of Brahms, in a letter to Clara Schumann, “The Chaconne is for me one of the most wonderful, incomprehensible pieces of music. On one staff, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived, the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.”

Sonata No. 3 in C major, BWV 1005

The first movement, with its pure and spacious opening, feels like the beginning of something wholly new. It is a meditation upon a single motive (unlike the other sonatas in this set), in this case, the dotted-rhythm pattern. This is juxtaposed by the ever-increasing intensity of the harmony, until the tension is ultimately absolved in a cadenza-like passage near the end.

The second movement is the single longest fugue that Bach ever wrote (354 measures) and has been described as the resolution or the companion piece to the Chaconne. Its optimistic subject comes from a Pentecostal antiphon, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, on which the Lutheran hymn melody *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott* (Come, Holy Ghost, Lord God) is also based. Its contrapuntal ingenuity, technical requirements, and scope are awe-inspiring. The middle exposition is marked *al riverso*, presenting the subject and countersubject upside down. The fugue is rounded off with a return of the opening.

After the intensity of the previous movement, the remaining movements are a release. The Largo is a melodic, florid line over a simple bass. It is interesting to note that this is the only movement in the entire collection that has a different key signature from the surrounding movements, being in F major.

The concluding Allegro assai is jubilant and rejoicing, its textures evoking the likes of trumpets and timpani as in the Christmas Oratorio.

Partita No. 3 in E Major, BWV 1006

After the massive C-major fugue and the even longer Chaconne, the movements become shorter and shorter as this E-major Partita's joie de vivre radiates sunshine and optimism, eclipsing any previous darkness.

The Partita No. 3 is composed of a set of six stylized dances. The Prelude that sets off the work is probably the most famous of all six movements, with its perpetual motion of sixteenth notes and its sunny and celebratory demeanor. Bach often transcribed his own music for other instruments, and he seems to have liked the Prelude so much as to incorporate it into two of his cantatas: "Wir danken dir Gott, wir danken dir," BWV 29, and "Herr Gott, Beherrscher aller Dinge," BWV 120a. Additionally, he transcribed the complete partita for an unspecified polyphonic instrument, often believed to be the lute, from which guitarists perform the work today.

Unlike the other two partitas, the Allemande, Courante, and Sarabande have been replaced with the optional *galanteries*, in this case, Loure, Gavotte en Rondeau, Menuets (I and II), Bourrée.

The Loure is a dance that received its name from an instrument in the bagpipe family bearing the same name. It is a slow dance in compound meter (6/4) with emphasis on dotted rhythms often found at every half measure.

The bucolic Gavotte en Rondeau was one of the chosen musical samples sent out by NASA and Carl Sagan on the Voyager Golden Records as an example of our civilization's "hope, determination, and goodwill," in the words of Jimmy Carter. The movement is cast in duple meter and its first musical phrase begins mid-measure, a characteristic of many 18th-century Gavottes. After the repetition of the main theme, the piece alternates the theme with different episodic material in the form of a Rondo as stated in the title.

In the movement that follows, Bach combines two different selections: Menuet I and Menuet II. A solemnity radiates from Menuet I, while Menuet II is unassuming, pleasant, and pastoral in nature.

The Bourrée is in an agile tempo, beginning with the characteristic quarter-note upbeat. Bach's dynamic markings in the score help create echos between repeated phrases.

The Gigue in 6/8 is a lively and ephemeral finale to the partita and entire set.

Bach's *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato*, in the words of George Enescu, is the "Himalayas of violinists," while Yehudi Menuhin simply stated that it was "the greatest structure for solo violin that exists." Bach's first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote that Bach "understood to perfection the possibilities of all stringed instruments. This was evidenced by his solos for the violin." What can truly be said about this work? Its analytical depth is unending, its emotional complexity is universal, and its spiritual wisdom is ultimately unfathomable.

