

J.S. BACH

The Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin
Gregory Fulkerson, violin

Disc A (68:28)

Sonata no. 1 in g minor, BWV 1001	(15:51)
1 Adagio	(3:52)
2 Fuga: Allegro	(4:53)
3 Siciliana	(3:17)
4 Presto	(3:45)
Partita no. 1 in b minor, BWV 1002	(29:26)
5 Allemanda	(5:13)
6 Double	(3:26)
7 Corrente	(3:26)
8 Double: Presto	(3:29)
9 Sarabande	(4:03)
10 Double	(3:32)
11 Tempo di Borea	(3:09)
12 Double	(2:59)
Sonata no. 2 in a minor, BWV 1003	(23:11)
13 Grave	(4:22)
14 Fuga	(7:39)
15 Andante	(5:05)
16 Allegro	(5:57)

Disc B (75:27)

Partita no. 2 in d minor, BWV 1004	(31:22)
1 Allemanda	(4:46)
2 Corrente	(2:42)
3 Sarabanda	(4:39)
4 Giga	(4:16)
5 Ciaccona	(14:56)
Sonata no. 3 in C major, BWV 1005	(25:18)
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7 Fuga	(10:59)
8 Largo	(4:13)
9 Allegro assai	(5:14)
Partita no. 3 in E major, BWV 1006	(19:47)
10 Preludio	(3:44)
11 Loure	(4:08)
12 Gavotte en Rondeau	(3:04)
13 Menuet I-II	(4:21)
14 Bourée	(1:27)
15 Gigue	(1:52)

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The Unaccompanied Sonatas and Partitas of J.S. Bach

Notes by Gregory Fulkerson

We visit the concert hall for many reasons, but chief among them the hope that our lives may be made richer and perhaps even justified by aural communion with transcendent human imaginations. Such a transcendent genius was Bach. His works have spoken to every cycle of musical taste with the exception of the one which directly followed him, and even in the Classical era the greatest composers knew and admired his work. Formalists are swayed by his complex motivic and structural relationships and Byronic dreamers cannot resist the chromatic dissonances with their pregnant emotional implications. Conservative musical scholars feel vindicated by his orderly setting out of rules of counterpoint; avant-gardists revel in the way in which he broke each one.

These Sonatas and Partitas, in addition to being real masterpieces on their own terms, have a historical resonance and a significance with the violin tradition which makes a performance of these works a major statement. In today's information-saturated era, accepting this challenge means finding a way to reconcile the differences in approach suggested by the instrumental tradition, his

torical accountability, and personal taste. In recent years, the Original Instruments movement has opened our eyes to the communicative possibilities of the lighter sonorities and the dance-like qualities of stringed instruments as Bach knew them. On the other hand, the mainstream violinistic tradition has found an emotional depth in Bach's works which can connect us with the continuity of human endeavor and the universality of the artistic impulse. To unify these two traditions in practice means to bring the insights of the historical performance movement — transparent textures, generally quick tempi, and sprightly articulation — to the tradition of great violin playing — beautiful tone, first class technical values, emotional connection, and personal vision.

The Composition of the Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin

It is generally accepted that Bach wrote these works for solo violin when he was Kappellmeister at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen. We have a magnificent copy in Bach's own strong handwriting dating from 1720, so they certainly were not written any later than that. But it is also conceivable that these works were a project completed over several years. During the last year of Bach's period in Weimar he was Konzertmeister of the court orchestra and was also engaged in writing a complete cycle of cantatas over four years. His keyboard transcriptions of concerti by Marcello and Vivaldi (BWV 972-981) show that he was involved in serious study of the Italian manner of composition. This was perhaps furthered by interaction with Johann Georg Pisendel (1687-1755), the concertmaster of the Court orchestra at Dresden, who had

been a violin student of Vivaldi. Bach left Weimar in 1717 under a cloud — his attempt to break his contract resulted in his being thrown in jail — and it is certainly possible that some of his manuscripts were lost in that transition. In any case, these solo violin works are in the same general category of completeness and intellectual scope as the other major instrumental works Bach was writing and assembling in Cöthen — notably the *Brandenburg Concerti* and the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In addition to providing a complete overview of the possibilities of the forces involved, these ambitious projects represent the high point in Bach's initial compositional goal of incorporating Italian freedom and ease into the highly organized Northern style.

Previous Unaccompanied Violin Music in Germany

The task of writing for a violin unaccompanied had been tackled previously by German composers as early as 1674 with the Passacaglia of Heinrich von Biber (1644-1704), and continuing with Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705) who made a sensation in 1682 performing his Suite for solo violin at the French royal court, and later published Six Partitas for solo violin (1696), each in four movements. Westhoff was in Weimar at the end of his life, and Bach probably knew these works through personal contact with him there. Both Biber and Westhoff were adept at double stopping to a remarkable degree. Finally, Pisendel's *Sonata a violino solo senza basso* (1716) may be the direct inspiration for Bach's set. A comparison with Pisendel's Sonata shows that Bach's most important advance was his compositional technique. By the

melodic independence of each contrapuntal line and the complexity of voice-leading relationships, Bach creates the illusion of complete harmony both in polyphonic and in single line music. Bach's interest in Italian music led him to combine the austere complexity of these German antecedents with the emotionally direct Italian style. The fruits of Bach's labors are three Sonatas, of increasing severity, and three Partitas, of correspondingly increasing gaiety.

The Importance of the Order of the Sonatas and Partitas

These works were conceived as a connected set, at least from the time of the fair copy. The ordering of these six pieces, and in particular the pairing of each Sonata with a Partita, is indicated clearly on the title page. From our knowledge of Bach's love of riddles and numerology, it is not conceivable that there is no significance to this ordering, although I have not seen such speculations before now. It seems reasonable to assume that Bach conceived of a set of six works which together would survey the imaginative possibilities of solo violin playing in both the Sonata da chiesa and the Suite. I suggest that his survey was historical as well, moving from the older style of his ancestors to the progressive galant style. In the First Sonata and Partita, Bach writes in a self-consciously old fashioned style, especially as to harmonic movement and form, as if to pay homage to his antecedents. The second pair is characteristic of Bach's late Weimar style after his synthesis of Italian traditions. And finally, the third pair looks at the future, not just in the galant dances of the E major Partita, but also the long range harmonic structures and the homophonic

approach to counterpoint of the C major Sonata. Further instances of this theory can be found in the six *Brandenburg Concerti*, but (significantly) with a different pairing. The 1st and 6th *Brandenburg Concerti* are in old style, the 2nd and 5th in Italian flow, and the 3rd and 4th with Tonic-dominant unification. I leave it to the theorists to prove or disprove this theory, which in any case stimulated my own imagination in interpretation.

The implications of the 20th century redating of Bach's works through examination of watermarks and other physical details have thrown the older classification (based on internal musical evidence) into confusion in every case in which it has been used. What that implies is that Bach wrote in different styles as it suited his momentary needs. His only stylistic evolution was from his earliest period (*Cantata 150, Capriccio on the Departure of His Beloved Brother*) through his study of Italian musical flow. I suggest that his mastery of that task is the primary reason for the virtual cessation of his compositional activity after 1725 with the exception of specific grand projects.

Bach as a Violinist

One point which has been debated over the years is the level of Bach's own violin playing and in particular whether he or anybody else at that time was good enough to play these pieces. I suggest three arguments in support of his performance ambition: First of all, there are fingerings in the manuscripts, which indicates that practical performance was at some point attempted. Secondly, I find it incredible that anybody could look at Bach's education and job history and assume that he was anything less than an

excellent violinist. His first instrument was the violin — he began with his father at the age of six, before studying any keyboard instruments. He worked his way through school playing the violin, his first employment after school was as a violinist, and just prior to his position in Cöthen he was employed as Konzertmeister in Weimar, a court with a rich violin tradition. His keyboard writing certainly is testimony to the general physical coordination of his fingers, and we know from today's young virtuosi the residual ease of technique which comes from early study. He probably did not have the brilliance of more celebrated virtuosi; in particular the solo sonata by Pisendel demands more ease in high positions than Bach requires, the ability to stretch a tenth, and also some tricks of staccato bowing. The most salient difficulty in Bach's pieces is the complexity of his unusual double stopping, which take full advantage of closed positions. But this had been part of German violin tradition since Biber, and that is the third point: that many of the physical difficulties that later (Italian-trained) violinists have found in these pieces were not necessarily so problematic for Bach, who seems to have been quite at home with the most complicated left hand movement. In my opinion these pieces were definitely intended for practical performance.

Sonata no. 1 in g minor, BWV 1001

The opening Adagio is after all not so slow, for the harmonic rhythm is in the noble quarter note chords. The quicker notes are florid elaboration in the Italian manner, and are strongly reminiscent, even to some identical figurations, of Corelli's *Sonatas opus 5* which were published in 1715 with "original"

ornaments. That edition does not give rhythmic values to the melismas, and in fact to perform them in a natural manner requires varying the pulse of the quarter note. In Corelli's music, that type of rubato sounds quite compelling, even Italian, but it seems not to have been a congenial concept to German artists. Bach followed Pisendel's practice and wrote out the melismas in a strict rhythmic notation, which might be understood as an attempt to interpret what the freedom of the Italian style might have been about had it not been free.

In adapting fugal technique to a solo violin, Bach was inspired to alternate dense contrapuntal sections with relatively homophonic interludes of violinistic character, much as in a concerto grosso. This method was sufficiently successful that Bach later adapted this fugue for lute (BWV 1000) and for organ (BWV 539 with a different prelude.) The Siciliana has marvelous voice leading, which the violin tradition represented by Galamian's fingerings takes full advantage of, and the peaceful mood is characteristic of Bach's slow movements. The final movement is in 6/8 time almost in the manner of a fast gigue. But the presto marking suggests something demonic and very exciting.

Partita no. 1 in b minor, BWV 1002

In this serious and ambitious Partita, Bach takes stock of his antecedents and summarizes them with his characteristic mastery. The use of four dance movements and the references to the French style recall Westhoff's Partitas. Pisendel's Sonata is referred to in three characteristically veiled ways. The otherwise strange interpolation of Lombard rhythm in bar 5 of the Allemanda seems to be the clearest reference. Pisendel's final movement is a Giga fol-

lowed by a Variation, and Bach expands that plan by following each of his four dance movements with a Double. And finally, Bach respectfully avoids direct comparison by eschewing a Giga, substituting instead a *Tempo di Borea*. These Doubles are each a variation of the harmonic structure in a single-line (Italian) violinistic style within which two and often three voices are embedded. There is no a priori reason to play the doubles in related tempi, but it sometimes happens that way.

The majesty of the Allemanda with its massive chords and florid ornamentation is suggestive of the keyboard Allemandes of Couperin's first book of harpsichord pieces (1713), and in my opinion the dotted rhythms should be exaggerated to conform to the French tradition. Despite the wide range of emotional content suggested by the rich harmonies, there is still a feeling of remove and of austerity which is characteristic of this Partita in general. The first double is striking in its use of two-note slurs as a primary texture element. The multiple layering of voices is as complex as any single line piece Bach ever wrote.

The energetic Corrente which follows is as Italian as the Allemanda is French. Violinists sometimes need reminding that the translation of Corrente is 'running.' It is followed by the brilliant Presto double which at speed is as difficult and as virtuosic as any perpetual motion in the literature.

The magnificent Sarabande has been well served by tradition. The general pacing of the Partita and the harmonic richness of this piece suggest a moment of repose at this point. The Double is also extremely evocative at a slow tempo.

The final dance is given the unique marking *Tempo di Borea*. It is possible that the title refers simply to the odd number of bars in the piece which would technically speaking make it undanceable. But the title could also be a

punning reference to the Borea wind which races through Italy in the winter, as noted by Pisendel's teacher Vivaldi in his sonnet written to accompany his *Concerto opus 8 no. 4 "Winter"* (1725, but possibly composed earlier and seen by Pisendel?). The concluding Double has an energy and a rhythmic sturdiness which ends this Partita in a serious mood.

Sonata no. 2 in a minor, BWV 1003

The opening Grave, like the Adagio of the first Sonata, consists of melismatic figuration embellishing slow chords in a three-part formal structure. On close examination, however, the Grave is found to be more adventurous in its harmonies, with a resulting increase in emotional range. The contrapuntal interaction of the melodic line with the bass provides the added drama and is a marvelous working of the Italian principles into the more severe German style. The progressive tendency continues with the transition to the fugue, even to the prefiguring of the fugue subject with the mordent in the penultimate bar.

The felicitous combination of polyphony and concertante style in this great fugue shows Bach at his mightiest genius. When I first tried to make sense of the formal structure of this fugue, I used the methods taught to me by my music theory teachers with no great success. There is no structural harmonic relationship of the cadence points; Bach just seems to pick off the keys one by one until he stops. But the structure does seem to resemble what one might find in the first movement of a Concerto Grosso. And, after all, that shouldn't on the face of it be so strange. Composers often need to set limits on their pieces for artistic imagination to take root — Bach characteristically set the

most severe ones, and his genius allowed him to solve them with such amazing fluency that the underlying strictures are often never detected. With that in mind, this fugue could be seen as an attempt by Bach to write a 'Double Concerto in the Italian Style for Two Violins and Orchestra, in Fugue throughout, for the Violin Alone.' This conception helps clarify the tempo (similar to a *Brandenburg Concerto*) and also the relative value of the 16th note passages: rather than being filler for the contrapuntal meat of the piece, as in the g minor Fugue, they become the principal theoretical point of the piece, and the counterpoint (always in the orchestral sections) is in a fatherly background relationship to the flights of virtuosity eventually coming to the rescue and tying up all the loose ends with the fantastic moving pedal point at the end.

The Andante is one of the great pieces for solo violin. It seems not to have been composed but rather to always have existed. The stream of continuous melody is reminiscent of the celebrated *Air on the G String*. The dramatic final Allegro assai has a sturdiness which fits the generally tragic mood of this great sonata.

Partita no. 2 in d minor, BWV 1004

It is sometimes forgotten by performers and contemporary audiences that the invariable association of minor keys with sadness was a convention more of the Romantic era than the Baroque, and really only became standard with Schubert. Bach uses d minor here to express the wonderful and timeless combination of common humanity and nobility. These sentiments are those of Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Homer, and they are the eternal inspirations of the greatest art of Western Civilization.

The first four movements are the standard grouping of Allemanda, Corrente, Sarabanda, and Giga — the only occurrence in these Partitas — all done in the Italian style, with primarily single line writing. This is followed by the greatest piece of music ever written for the violin alone, the magnificent Ciaccona. In the early 18th century, a common use for the Ciaccona and the almost indistinguishable Passacaglia was in French ballet music, and especially for finales of fully staged, professionally choreographed ballet evenings. A major advantage gained in such cases is that the repeating bass line creates unity over a large musical form, allowing for tremendous variety in character and even tempo. Bach may well have become acquainted with this tradition as a student in Lüneburg, which is when he acquired his knowledge of French Baroque dances. A comparison of this Ciaccona with the Passacaglia from Lully's opera *Armide* is quite suggestive. Bach clearly had the idea of writing an integrated set of dances followed by a Ciaccona from the start — in the first phrases of each of the first four movements the characteristic bass line of the Ciaccona appears; the reference is quite clear in the Allemanda and Corrente, becomes increasingly abstract in the Sarabanda, and is rather playfully hidden in the Giga. The Ciaccona refers back to the earlier movements elliptically, though the use of the Sarabanda rhythm has confused generations of violinists into thinking that it was Ciaccona rhythm.

In this Ciaccona, Bach in 14 minutes takes us through the entire range of human experience, from discovery and joy through tragedy and resignation, to redemption and rebirth. Here is the ultimate justification of writing for solo violin.

Sonata no. 3 in C major, BWV 1005

The first movement unfolds gradually from a single note with constant dotted rhythm in measured tread. The most strikingly progressive aspect of this Sonata is the use of key relationships to outline the large formal structures, while on a smaller level appearing to flaunt the traditional harmonic rules about related keys. After seven bars, for instance, we arrive quite naturally at the unrelated key of B major, and do not return to C major until the end of the movement. In the context of Bach's time, the diminished seventh chords and other dissonances must have seemed dangerously anarchic, and even today the essentially non-functional treatment of local harmony makes the chords seem unexpected and new.

The glorious fugue which follows is, at 354 measures, Bach's longest for any instrument or combination. It is a masterpiece of the highest order. Sustaining a large structure with limited melodic materials through long-range harmonic pacing is a characteristic technique of the Classical era, and this fugue shows that Bach understood it too. The subject is from a chorale, and is accompanied by a descending chromatic figure with just enough rhythmic variation at the end to be considered a countersubject. The fugue begins on the dominant, but as it moves to the tonic it turns unexpectedly away; the first cadence in C major comes only at the close of the exposition. A brief interlude leads to the second contrapuntal section, a fantastically inventive fragmentation of epic proportions, largely in minor keys. A longer interlude featuring an extended pedal point on D ends up a very satisfying G major cadence, and here Bach turns both subject and countersubject upside down to embark on a passage (marked *al reverso*) of

aggressive, fearless polyphony, with harmonic rhythm twice as fast as the rest of the fugue, which verges on harmonic chaos. A reprise of the previous interlude leads to the dominant, and here Bach's genius leads him to the perfect denouement — a literal repetition of the fugal exposition with but three changes — an extra voice in the first two statements, and an extra G on the last chord. This recapitulation, a formal idea which Bach had used in his *e minor lute suite* BWV 995, looks backward to the da capo aria form and forward to the classical style, and creates the huge arch which is responsible in large measure for the inexorability of this fugue. The number of elements Bach balances is absolutely staggering, and to describe the systems and construction patterns in Bach's larger works hardly explains his genius. On the contrary, it makes even more extraordinary his ability to create such a balanced and interconnected whole.

The Largo in F major which follows is a simple pastoral song showing Bach's gift for continuous melody. It is the only slow movement in this set of six unaccompanied works which lacks a continuous rhythmic or dance foundation. This suggests the use of a quite free rubato based on the melodic and harmonic aspects of the piece. The final whirling Allegro assai shows how well Bach understood the instrument for which he was writing. This is virtuoso music at its best.

Partita no. 3 in E major, BWV 1006

The E major, the last and lightest of the three Partitas, looks forward to the galant style which was carried forward by Bach's sons. It begins with the famous Preludio, an exuberant scurry of sixteenth notes. Bach later arranged this Preludio for organ solo with orchestral accompaniment for use in festive

Cantatas in 1729 (BWV 120a) and 1731 (BWV 29); he also arranged the entire Partita for lute (BWV 1006a). Bach was fond of numerological games, and those who like to indulge in such pleasures may note the prominence of the number 9, both in measures between sections and in the sequence structures which are often built in 9-beat units. Of course the opening two bars have exactly 14 notes (B+A+C+H=14).

The historical origins of the Loure are somewhat obscure — I learned that it was a rustic dance associated with lambs bounding in shepherds' fields — by Bach's time it was used as an elaborate French theatrical dance with an exaggerated (normally doubly) dotted rhythm. This Loure is followed by an elegant and somewhat urbane Gavotte in rondo form, a pair of poised and graceful Menuets performed as a set, a rollicking Bourée, and a Gigue in perpetual motion which sees us out the door. Though titled in French it is a thoroughly Italianate Giga. This Partita goes about as far as Bach ever wishes to go towards what he might have considered modernism, and compared to the style of the b minor Partita, it is a great distance indeed.

I would like to thank all those who have given me help in this project over the years, and especially Paul Kling, Ivan Galamian, and Dorothy DeLay for violinistic inspiration, and to Albert Fuller and Fritz Rikko for historical performance information. I am especially indebted to my friend and colleague Lionel Party for his brilliant insights into Baroque music in general and specifically into the nature of the Ciaccona and its roots both in French ballet and in 16th century Italian Keyboard music.

-Gregory Fulkerson

Gregory Fulkerson has been acclaimed as one of the outstanding violinists of our time. It was as a champion of American contemporary music that Mr. Fulkerson first rose to prominence, taking first prize in the 1980 International Music Competition sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Hall. As a recitalist, soloist with orchestra, and chamber musician, Mr. Fulkerson has distinguished himself in performances of traditional and unusual repertoire from Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms to Sibelius, Glass, and Barber. With the Philadelphia Orchestra under Riccardo Muti, Mr. Fulkerson gave the world premiere performances of Richard Wernick's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, a work composed for and dedicated to him (recorded on BRIDGE 9082). Mr. Fulkerson's recording of the complete Charles Ives Sonatas, with pianist Robert Shannon (BRIDGE 9024A/B), has also won the praise of critics on both sides of the Atlantic, and has been called the definitive recorded performance of this repertoire. In 1992, Fulkerson toured four continents in the title role of Philip Glass's opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, and is featured on the Nonesuch recording of that work.

Gregory Fulkerson was born in Iowa City in 1950. He earned a degree in mathematics from Oberlin College and received the D.M.A. from the Juilliard School in 1987. Included among his teachers are Paul Kling, David Cerone, Robert Mann, Ivan Galamian, and Dorothy DeLay. Gregory Fulkerson is currently Professor of Violin at Oberlin College, Conservatory of Music. He performs on a violin made by J.B. Guadagnini in Turin, 1774.

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