Miller Theatre Program Notes

J.S. Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin

Monday-Wednesday, September 28-29, 2009 12:30PM
Monday-Wednesday, March 22-24, 2010, 12:30PM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) begins his *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001-6) with a warm, resonant four-voiced G-minor chord. This initial sonority, with its two open strings, has become iconic not only for the G-minor sonata and for Bach's solo violin works, but also for violin music in general.

The title page of the single remaining autograph score reads "six solos for violin without bass accompaniment. First book. By Joh. Seb. Bach in the year 1720". More specifically, the year 1720 refers to the completion of the fair copy of the violin solos, but the actual date of composition remains unknown. Bach scholar Christoph Wolff suggests that Bach began composing these violin works already in Weimar and that he was most likely influenced by Johann Paul von Westhoff, one of the preeminent violinists of his time and who also played at the Weimar court. Notably, Westhoff published a collection of solo violin partitas in 1696, the first of its kind, which in all likelihood served as a model for Bach's own solo violin works.

In 1720 (the year on the autograph score), Bach was employed as Capellmeister at the court of Leopold, Prince of Anhalt, in Cöthen (about 75 miles southwest of Berlin), where he had served since 1717 and would continue to do so until 1723, before moving on to Leipzig. Here, unlike later in Leipzig, Bach's musical duties were primarily unrelated to the church, and during this time Bach focused on instrumental music. In addition to the solo violin works, Bach's years in Cöthen brought forth a number of important instrumental works: the *Brandenburg Concertos* (dedicated in 1721 to the Elector of Brandenburg), the first volume of the *Well-Tempered-Clavier* (dated 1722), the six *French Suites* (1722), and also the six suites for solo cello (1720). It may be argued that each of these collections explores the inherent possibilities of its genre, as the *Brandenburg Concertos* do with their wide range of concerto grosso types. Similarly, in the *Sonatas and Partitas*, Bach draws upon and perfects the chamber and church sonata types. Thus, the three pieces entitled "sonata" in this collection consistently exemplify the division of the church sonata (sonata da chiesa) into four movements: a slow, introductory movement and a subsequent fugue that together form a prelude-fugue pair, a contrasting slow movement, and a fast finale. The three pieces entitled "partita" typify the chamber-sonata (sonata da camera), with its stylized dances movements in binary form.

Attention must be drawn to the great feat that Bach accomplishes in excluding all accompaniment instruments from these solo violin works, especially given the universal nature of the continuo part in early 18th-century textures. In excluding accompaniment, Bach was confronted with the challenging task (no less for the performer) of including the basso continuo within the violin part itself. In doing so, Bach had to treat the violin as a polyphonic instrument, one capable of playing full, multi-voice textures and of suggesting multiple, independent voices simultaneously. In movements like the *Adagio* from the G-minor Sonata, Bach accomplishes this by placing a continuously unfolding rhapsodic improvisation over a supporting bass line with standard thoroughbass motions or patterns. This is indicative of a common compositional practice during Bach's time and that is outlined in Bach's favorite thoroughbass treatise, Friedrich Erhard Niedt's *Musicalische Handleitung* (1700), namely that composition is the art of realizing and elaborating upon an underlying thoroughbass line. Bach's truly polyphonic approach to the violin is made further apparent in the autograph

score, where Bach gives each note in the violin multiple-stops a separate stem and often even a different rhythmic value.

Only a violinist with an expert's knowledge of the instrument's idiomatic capabilities could compose such virtuosic music. This is indeed the case with Bach, who, in addition to being a keyboard and organ virtuoso, was also an adept violinist. When he was 18, Bach briefly held a post as violinist in Weimar, and he had violinistic duties in Weimar again between 1708 and 1717. His son C.P.E. Bach later reports that his father played violin up until his old age.

* * *

Partita No. 2 for in D minor, BWV 1004

The *Allemande* of *Partita No. 2* is in a quadruple meter with nearly continuous movement (in this case the 16th note with interpolated triplet figures), beginning with a quick upbeat. Note how this movement introduces a number of underlying chords changes that also appear in the subsequent movements (albeit with contrasting rhythms and melodies), shaping the partita into a larger whole. The *Corrente* is in a triple meter, also with an upbeat. The *Sarabande* features a slow triple meter, with an emphasis on the second beat. The *Giga* is in 12/8 and exhibits a fast continuous triplet motion and a number of wide melodic leaps. The expansive and breath-taking *Ciaccona* is a continuous series of variations on a four-measure thoroughbass and its related chord progression. This four-measure unit is repeated 64 times, each time with "heightened intensifications" (to use the words of Joel Lester) of such elements as surface rhythm, melodic span, textural density, and chromaticism. The dramatic change of mode from minor to major (and back to minor) divides the movement into smaller sections.

Sonata No. 1 for in G minor, BWV 1001

With its rhapsodic and improvisatory figurations, the *Adagio* serves an introduction to the following *Fuga*. With the initial four entries of the subject, this fugue suggests as many as four independent voices (though at times the multiple-stops function more to fill-in the harmony). This G-minor fugue features a unique subdominant answer, the dominant being the usual key of a fugal answer. The *Siciliana* is the only movement not in the tonic minor key of the sonata (instead, it is in the relative major of B-flat); and, its lilting dotted rhythms provide a gentle, melodic contrast to the previous fugue. The sonata ends with a quick, lively *Presto* movement.

Partita No. 3 for in E major, BWV 1006

The sparkling *Preludio* consists of broken chords and bariolage string passages in a continuous 16th-note motion. (Bariolage refers to the technique of quick alternation between a static note and changing notes, often involving the mixing of open strings with stopped notes.) The *Loure* refers either to a kind of bagpipe (the verb lourer means to play with a slurred sound) or to a dance in a 6/4 meter with dotted rhythms. The *Gavotte en rondeau* is a gavotte (i.e. a duple-time dance with a half-measure upbeat and a characteristic rhythm of short-short-long) with rondo-like returns of the refrain. The *Menuet* is a dance in triple time with two-measure units. Menuet II provides contrast to the preceding menuet with its drone in a musette-like style. The *Bourrée* is a lively dance in duple time, beginning with an upbeat and that features much use of syncopation. The concluding Gigue is in 6/8 with swift scalar passages.

Sonata No. 2 for in A minor, BWV 1003
The harmonically open-ended and improvisatory-sounding *Grave* serves as a prelude to the subsequent fugue. Like the *Fuga* of the G-minor sonata, the A-minor fugal subject is short in length (two measures) and begins on a weak beat. The third movement is in the contrasting key of C-major, the relative major. The final movement is in cut-time, featuring fluent 16th-note motion.

Partita No. 1 for in B minor, BWV 1002
In addition to referring to a suite or sequence of dance movements, the term "partita" may also denote a set of variations. (Bach uses the term in the plural for sets of variations on chorales.) In this partita, each of the four dances is paired with a variation or "double". Although the doubles may occasionally vary the register or impart a new color to the harmony, they for the most part replicate the outer voices and harmonies of the dances with which they are paired. The irregular and complex rhythms of the opening *Allemanda* contrast the dance type's customary use of continuous, uninterrupted motion (as in *Partita No. 2*). The *Corrente* is in a triple meter with an upbeat. The *Sarabande* features a slow, sonorous triple meter. The *Tempo di borea* is a lively dance in duple time that features the occasional use of syncopation.

Sonata No. 3 for in C major, BWV 1005
The *Adagio* highlights the pattern of a recurring neighbor-note motive; and, although the piece is built on a simple harmonic framework, the complexity of the local harmonies and of the chromaticism are much greater than in the other solo sonatas. The harmonically open-ended *Adagio* is resolved in the subsequent *Fuga*, a massive tour-de-force of contrapuntal writing. The C-Major *Fuga* (often associated with the chorale melody "Komm heiliger Geist, Herre Gott") differs from those in the other solo sonatas, in light of its considerably longer subject, overall length, and design. Also noteworthy is its use of inversion (al riverso) and how the first 66 measures are brought back in da capo fashion at the end. The third movement (*Largo*) is in a contrasting key. The final movement is in a quick tempo with fast rhythmic values throughout.

Note by Alexander Rothe (Ph.D. student in historical musicology, Department of Music, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences)