

Voices of Music presents Bach Violin Sonatas

Carla Moore, baroque violin

Hanneke van Proosdij, harpsichord

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In comparison to the rich legacy of instrumental and vocal music preserved in his Cantatas, relatively little chamber music of J.S. Bach survives. Surely there must have been more, as historical accounts suggest a lively musical scene for instrumental music not only from Bach's Cöthen period but also, as Christoph Wolff suggests in his 1985 article on Bach's chamber music, from his tenure at Leipzig. It is also reasonable to include among the chamber music works, from the point of view of Historical Performance, music which would have been presumably performed by a large chamber ensemble, such as the six Brandenburg Concertos, as well as the Concerto in D minor for two violins and strings. Even considering the more traditional canon, it is clear that the works which do survive are compositions of extraordinary refinement, and also that the sonatas for violin, with both continuo and obbligato parts for keyboard, are among the best of Bach's music for smaller ensembles.

A comparison to the Brandenburg concertos may be made to the collection specifically for violin and obbligato keyboard, for which one of the many titles runs as follows: *Sei Suonate à Cembalo certato è Violino solo* ("certato" here means that the keyboard part is written out in full). Any collection of six pieces was numerically significant to Bach, as musicologist John Butt has noted: Bach liked groups of six, and, like the six Brandenburgs, the collection was probably drawn from several different sources.

A number of writers have suggested that, owing to the first position of the word "cembalo" and the word "certato" in Bach's original title, these pieces are really harpsichord sonatas with violin accompaniment. They make a good case, except that a close inspection of all the original sources reveals that the original title page from the oft-cited collection is missing, the titles are not in Bach's handwriting, and that taken as a whole, each individual title in the parts are all slightly different. In a number of sources, the pieces are referred to only as "violin solo" or "violin sonatas." However, the "certato" title does importantly highlight a new and exciting method of composing instrumental sonatas: a method in which the keyboard player is provided with an intricate, written out part which essentially creates the sound of a trio sonata—the right hand of the keyboard instrument often sounds a melody in the manner of a second solo instrument.

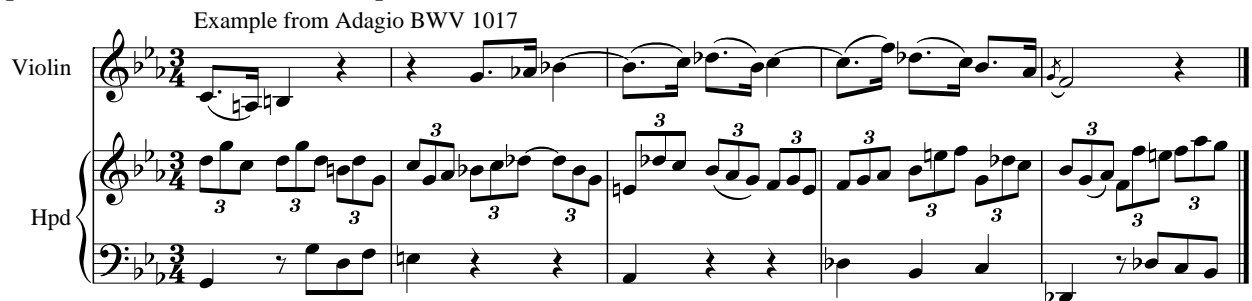
Although it is impossible to say for certain if Bach created this new genre, he was certainly the first to write a significant number of complex pieces using this new technique. The quality of these pieces and their position in history is reinforced by a brief note, penned many years later by Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach: "The six harpsichord trios are among my dear father's best works. Even after more than fifty years, they still sound excellent, and are delightful." Note that here Carl Philipp does not even mention the violin, and refers to the composition as "trios", emphasizing (somewhat inaccurately) the contrapuntal basis of the works.

In addition to the "obbligato" sonata, we will also perform the continuo sonata in G major in which only a bass line with figures is provided for the continuo. Although the accompaniment for these pieces is much less elaborate, it is clear from the figures and the overall musical structure that a trio-

like melody is called for in many places in the music—the figures above the bass notes sometimes provide a basic outline for a counter melody. One can imagine that in the hands of Bach or his skilled family these continuo pieces could be instantly transformed into “cembalo certato.”

One of the true delights of preparing this program, and in reading about the history of these pieces, was working with the seldom-performed Fugue in G Minor for Violin and Continuo BWV 1026. An unusual piece in many respects, the Fugue combines a number of contrapuntal devices over an imitative and harmonic framework, and, needless to say, requires every ounce of technique from the soloist. Extended episodes of two part writing are leavened with triple stops and an extended pedal point alternating between the D strings of both the violin and the cello. Of the Fugue, violinist Carla Moore writes: “What a wonderful surprise was in store when I opened the new edition Hanneke and I had just bought of Bach’s complete sonatas for violin and harpsichord, and discovered the G Minor Fugue. I had never come across this work before—it is not in any edition of the sonatas I have seen, and it is not part of the standard Bach sonata repertory. It reminded me of the excitement and thrill of discovery I experienced in college when I began performing music by composers not taught in the modern violin curriculum—Biber, Castello and Couperin—and how it changed forever the way I think about music. What a wonderful treat it has been to learn this suspenseful, high-energy piece.” The violin sonatas present a small number of interesting musicological puzzles. Some of these, such as the position and number of the slurs and trills are simply worked out according to our best musical judgment. A particular thorny issue that comes up time and again in baroque performance is that of places in the music where the parts are written in different meters:

Example from Adagio BWV 1017



The image shows a musical score for Violin and Harpsichord (Hpd) from Adagio BWV 1017. The Violin part is in 3/4 time and features dotted rhythms. The Harpsichord part is in 3/8 time and features triplet rhythms. The score shows the first few measures of the piece, with the Violin part starting with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, and the Harpsichord part starting with a triplet of eighth notes.

In this example, the violin part—particularly the dotted notes—is written so that the beat is divided into four, whereas the keyboard part is divided both into two and three. Musicians and scholars have debated this point extensively; in this case we felt that the advice of Bach’s student J.F. Agricola, who studied with both Bach and Quantz, was directly on point. Agricola writes in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (Berlin, 1769, III/757):

“When you see a dotted rhythm against triplets, the note after the dot should be played at the same time as the third note in the triplet. This however is only the case in the fastest tempo. In all other cases the note following the dot should be played after the triplet. Otherwise the difference between duple meter in which these rhythms appear, and 3/8, 6/8, 9/8 and 12/8 would be eliminated. This is what Johan Sebastian Bach taught to all his pupils; and also Quantz teaches this in his book.” Choosing Agricola’s slightly slower tempo, we felt that the contrasting rhythms allow each part to be thrown into relief, creating a supple and elegant musical texture.

—David Tayler, Ph.D.