

The magic of solo violin

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Abstract

J.S. Bach's solo violin works are widely regarded as representing one of the most sublime levels of musical thought in the entire Western canon. 2020 marks the 300th anniversary of these influential works. Interspersed with live performances of two complete works for the violin, we outline the historical reasons that the unaccompanied violin recital today is more the exception than the rule, and explore ways composers who preceded Bach influenced his music, and how Bach, in turn, influenced later composers.

Introduction¹

If I were to hazard a guess about how many people in this room have ever attended a solo piano recital, I would be reasonably confident in saying no fewer than seventy-five per cent. If asked to make a similar guess about how many of us here tonight have ever attended a solo violin recital — and by this I mean a complete recital of unaccompanied violin, without piano — I would say no more than ten per cent.

Why is the solo violin recital today so much more the exception than the rule? The cornerstone of the solo violin repertory are the six solo violin sonatas and partitas that Bach wrote in 1720 when he was in Köthen. During this time Bach was director of music to Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Köthen. In this period, that begins in 1717 and ends in 1723, Bach concentrated primarily on chamber music. The Brandenburg Concertos date from this time.

The six pieces for solo violin represent one of the most sublime levels of musical thought

in the entire Western canon. When a violinist makes a recording of these works, it is an ordeal by fire, because he or she knows that they will be compared to the greatest violinists in the history of recorded sound. It is telling that the three premier violinists of the last century — Heifetz, Arthur Grumiaux and Nathan Milstein — all recorded these pieces.

The crucial point is that after the time of Bach, the solo violin genre went out of fashion. This continues to be a source of major regret among violinists. Imagine how much richer the world would be if there were an entire cycle of solo violin pieces courtesy of Mozart.

So when we come to the classical era, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms all wrote for the violin, but only with accompaniment, either keyboard in the case of sonatas, or orchestra in the context of concertos. It is not until the romantic era that the genre of unaccompanied violin returns. The major figure from this period is Paganini.

The solo violin caprices of Paganini in many ways constitute the composer violinist's answer to the *Transcendental Études* of Franz Liszt. Each collection of pieces was written by a composer who was an una-

¹ This talk and these performances (including the world premiere of David Hush's Violin Partita) occurred at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, on 27 February 2020.

bashed virtuoso of his day, and both collections are designed to show off the technical prowess of their respective instruments. In the twentieth century, we see composers of major stature writing for unaccompanied violin. Ysaÿe, Bartók and Hindemith are cases in point.

I am pleased to report that as I speak, the solo violin genre is alive and well. Composers all over the globe are writing for it. While the number of solo violin pieces will always be eclipsed by the range of pieces written for the piano, it is heartening to observe that many composers are writing for this idiom and are showing no signs of slowing down.

It is somewhat misleading to speak of Bach's six works for solo violin as a single collection, for in reality they comprise two cycles, namely, three sonatas and three partitas. The three sonatas all adhere to the same formal design. In the first movement, while the music is strictly notated, it has the aura of an improvisation. The second movement always consists of a fugue. The third movement is slow and more relaxed than the formidable fugue that preceded it. The final movement always consists of a fast movement.

While the three sonatas all adhere to the same formal design, I do not for a minute wish to suggest they sound alike. On the contrary, it is a testament of Bach's supreme genius that, similarities in formal design notwithstanding, he contrived to invent quite different works.

The three solo violin partitas consist of a succession of dance movements. The dances on which the partitas are based come from all over Europe. For example, while the sarabande hails from Spain, the gigue is of Irish origin. No two partitas offer exactly the same succession of movement types.

While the solo violin partitas are profoundly different from the sonatas, one vital trait shared by all six pieces is the technique of implied harmony. Regardless of whether Bach asks the violinist to play a four-note chord or a single melody, he is always using the violin to project a multi-voiced texture. It is telling that on the cover page of Bach's original manuscript he appended the words *senza basso accompagnato* to the title. This is Italian for "without bass accompaniment."

In Bach's day there was a time-honoured tradition of compositions for a single melodic line and a bass or *basso continuo*. The harpsichordist would play the notated bass part with his left hand complemented by chords in the right hand. The figured bass would indicate how the chords in the right hand are voiced. A case in point is Bach's Sonata for Flute and Continuo in E minor, BWV 1034.

But with the solo violin works, Bach went out of his way to emphasise a point that was far from merely rhetorical — namely, that his compositions for unaccompanied violin were fully-fledged pieces in their own right requiring no fleshing-out of the harmony on a keyboard. In short, his solo violin works are self-sufficient: a veritable law unto themselves.

While the Viennese music theorist Heinrich Schenker has offered valuable insights into Bach's writing for solo violin, it was not until 1999 that the first book on the subject appeared: *Bach's Works for Solo Violin: Style, Structure, Performance*, by Joel Lester. As a respected theorist and accomplished violinist, Lester was ideally placed to write this book. It offers a goldmine of information about Bach's technique of implied harmony. One thing is certain. In applying this technique, Bach drew upon the solo violin compositions of his predecessors. In short, he did not invent the technique. Rather, he

absorbed it and applied it with stupendous results. In a similar way, he absorbed the basic principles underlying the instrumental concertos of the Italian school epitomised by Antonio Vivaldi and drew on these principles with amazing results.

Johann Paul von Westhoff was a violinist and composer born in Dresden in 1656. He wrote six partitas for solo violin, published in 1696. It is possible that von Westhoff met Bach in Weimar in 1703. Without a doubt, there is a discernible connection between von Westhoff's writing for solo violin and Bach's. The second movement of von Westhoff's First Partita in A minor almost certainly influenced Bach in writing the first movement of his Second Partita.

The Austrian violinist and composer Johann Joseph Vilsmayr was born in 1663. He wrote six partitas for solo violin, published in 1715. The Prelude of his Fifth Partita in G minor may well have influenced Bach in writing the Chaconne of his Second Partita.

There is an important distinction between the solo violin works of Bach's predecessors and contemporaries on the one hand and those written by Bach himself on the other. The works of Bach's predecessors and contemporaries are generally played today only by baroque specialists on historical instruments, whereas the solo works of Bach have been championed by the greatest violinists of the twentieth century continuing well into this century, on modern instruments, in addition to baroque specialists.

Sometimes, Bach may use register to distinguish different voices — for example, a melody in the upper register is answered by a tune in the lower register, thus setting in motion a dialogue of voices. We will hear an

example of this tonight in the third movement of Bach's First Sonata.

Music from Bach's era is renowned for the use of melodic sequences. To give an example: a violinist will play a motive. We then hear the same motive repeated at a higher pitch level. After that, the motive may be repeated a second time at a higher pitch level. The final result is the same motive moving up by step. This is known as an ascending sequence.

In Bach's solo violin works, the composer projects implied harmony by writing a single line using a sequence of ascending or descending motives. We will hear a highly developed example tonight in the final movement of the Bach composition. In that movement, we shall also hear sequences of arpeggios — a highly effective way of implying more than one voice.

There is no doubt that the use of chords contributes significantly to implied harmony.

While the violin can produce chords of up to four notes, it is not possible to attack the notes in a chord at the same time unless it is a two-note chord comprising notes on adjacent strings. The larger chords can be executed only by moving the bow across the strings.

I have already mentioned that the second movement of each of Bach's solo sonatas consists of a fugue. How is it remotely possible to write a fugue for a single stringed instrument?

Many of us have heard choral fugues written by Bach comprising free flowing polyphony at a fast tempo. A magnificent example from the Mass in B Minor is the last chorus of the Gloria, titled: *Cum sancto spiritu in gloria Dei patris* ("With the Holy Ghost in the glory of God the father.") Great

genius though he was, Bach knew that he could never write for a single violin like this.

To begin with, the fugues of the solo violin sonatas each suggest a medium or medium/fast tempo, never a very fast one. Bach uses chords to punctuate, or sound against, a single melodic line. If this technique sounds simple, each specific application requires a first-rate musical mind to bring it off.

Bach's fugues for solo violin are remarkable feats of technique in their own right. They are so startling as to require many hearings in order to absorb the magnitude of his accomplishment. The word "startling" is apposite since it reflects perhaps the most admirable trait of his solo violin works — namely, that despite being precisely three hundred years old, they have aged not one iota — on the contrary, in the hands of a skilled player they sound as if they could have been written only yesterday.

*Live performance: J.S. Bach Solo Violin
Sonata No. 1 in G minor BWV 1001*



https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYFFwCGj2FIZzj5vtzVO-rEV_69FGwqJq

Niccolò Paganini was born in Genoa in 1782. He was a virtuoso violinist of great renown. His 24 Caprices for Solo Violin were written between 1802 and 1817. They take the form of études, with each individual piece calling for a specific skill. Without a doubt, a formidable technique is required to play these pieces convincingly. The general consensus among musicians is that Paganini did not

absorb the lesson of implied harmony from the solo violin works of Bach. Earlier on, I drew a comparison between Paganini and Liszt. As it happened, Liszt made arrangements of no fewer than five of Paganini's caprices for the piano.

Henryk Wieniawski was born in Lublin in 1835 and died in 1880. Since he was born five years before Paganini died, the two composers cannot be said to belong to the same generation. However, there is no doubt that the younger composer followed in Paganini's wake. His principal contribution to the realm of solo violin writing is a work called *L'École Moderne (The Modern School): Ten Études-Caprices*. As is the case with Paganini's caprices, each individual piece poses a formidable challenge to the violinist's skill. On listening to the whole collection I do not have a sense of a profound use of implied harmony. The main exception appears to be the sixth caprice, titled "Prelude." Here one has a definite sense of polyphony in the first section, along with the written-out reprise of that section.

Henri Vieuxtemps was born in Belgium in 1820. In being only fifteen years older than Wieniawski, he belonged to the same generation. An early work, *Six Concert Etudes*, Opus 16, written when the composer was twenty-five, follows in the romantic wake of Paganini. Just another composer writing in the romantic tradition? Well, not quite. A much later work, *Six Morceaux or Six Pieces*, Opus 55, was published posthumously. These very special pieces are much closer to the Bach tradition than to the romantic generation to which Vieuxtemps belonged. The final piece is called *Introduction and Fugue*, and is arguably the most transparently Bach-like, as the title may suggest.

The Belgian violinist and composer Eugène Ysaÿe was born in Liège in 1858. His principal creative legacy is a set of six wonderful sonatas for solo violin, written in 1923. Each sonata is dedicated to a different violinist whom the composer knew personally.

The solo sonatas of Ysaÿe are redolent of the Bach tradition from beginning to end. As surely as the solo pieces of Paganini are primarily monophonic, the sonatas by Ysaÿe are intrinsically polyphonic. His second sonata even goes so far as to open with a direct quotation from the Prelude of Bach's Third Partita in E Major. However, it should be stressed that in Ysaÿe's solo works, direct quotations are the exception rather than the rule.

If we were to sum up Ysaÿe's life achievement in just a few words, it might be that he succeeded in absorbing Bach into a more modern sounding harmonic idiom. On the one hand, his sonatas are traditionally tonal since they are written in a specific key. On the other hand, in certain places they reflect the influence of Debussy and the French school. For example, the third movement of Sonata No. 1 has a delightful passage consisting of perfect 4ths alternating with perfect 5ths. This would have been strictly forbidden by Bach.

When we come to the solo violin pieces of Bartók and Hindemith, it is not surprising that their sound is even more modern. While both composers are "tonal" in so far as they employ pitch centres, there is a tendency to access more notes of the chromatic scale.

While Hindemith was younger than Bartók, his works for solo violin precede Bartók's own sonata. Paul Hindemith was born in 1895 in Hanau, a small town in Germany. He died in 1963. Hindemith wrote

three sonatas for solo violin. His first sonata is in G minor and was completed in 1918.

Six years later, in 1924, he wrote two sonatas that comprise his Opus 31. A mere glance at the score of his Second Sonata tells us that Hindemith had undergone a big change. To begin with, there is an absence of a key signature in each of the five movements. Moreover, while the first movement starts on the note A-natural, the final movement ends on the note A-flat. Maybe the composer was making a statement here, to the effect of: "If you are looking for a piece that begins and ends in the same key, you won't find it here!" There is no doubt that Hindemith was a learned musician who absorbed Bach's practice of implied harmony into the template of his considerably modified harmonic idiom.

Bartók wrote his Sonata for Solo Violin in North Carolina in 1944 at the behest of Yehudi Menuhin. It is his only contribution to the idiom. The Bartók sonata is steeped in the Bach tradition. To begin with, the four-movement pattern of tempos (slow, fast, slow, fast) consciously recalls the same pattern to be heard in Bach's solo sonatas. The first movement of the Bartók is marked with the tempo of a chaconne, and opens with a conscious pastiche of Bach's harmonic world. The second movement is a fugue bearing some of the characteristics of the fugues in Bach's solo sonatas. Strictly speaking, the Bartók second movement is more of a fugal fantasy than a fugue proper.

There is no doubt that the Bartók sonata is the best known of solo violin works from the last century, in part due to Menuhin's tireless championing and recording of the piece. Not all musicians, however, seem to be in agreement regarding how innate the writing is from a violinistic point of view. On the one hand, the piece is playable; on the other hand, the conductor Antal Doráti,

who knew both Bartók and Menuhin personally, has called it “a fiendishly difficult work” (Yatsugafu, 2011, p. 19). Menuhin himself was convinced that the piece was almost unplayable after looking over the manuscript for the first time.

It is worth recalling that every composer referred to so far except Bartók was a violinist. While Bach is remembered primarily as an organist, he was also a highly skilled practitioner of the viola in addition to the violin.

Looking at the solo violin world today, my impression is one of unqualified diversity, with each composer doing his or her own thing, which in many respects is refreshing. An example of a very captivating piece written by a living composer is the *Cadenza for solo violin* by the Polish composer Penderecki.² It was written in 1984. You will find more than one live performance of the piece on YouTube.

My own Partita for Solo Violin was commissioned especially for this event tonight by the Royal Society of New South Wales. More by coincidence than by design, the piece is written in the same key as the Bach sonata: G minor. This is a wonderful key for the violin, for it draws on open strings. An open string is the name of the string which sounds when it is not stopped to produce a particular note.

While the attraction of a single-movement piece resides in its capacity to say a great deal in a short space of time, what I like about the genre of the Partita is its capacity to encompass a wide spectrum of emotions and moods.

The new piece could be regarded as a prism which refracts different aspects of East European music, with a leaning towards the Jewish. It comprises four movements. Unlike Bach’s solo partitas, the work I have written does not comprise a succession of dance-movements. Instead, I have chosen the term Partita as a generic title for a multi-movement composition spanning a wide spectrum of emotions and moods.

We will now hear Anna Da Silva Chen play my piece. This will be its first performance.

Live performance: Hush Partita for Solo Violin



<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYFFwCGj2FIZ6a2tGQzJOorw7mD9JZNvo>

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² Penderecki died on 29 March 2020. [Ed.]

