

**Partita No.3 in E Major for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1006**  
**Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

Three centuries after Bach composed his unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas, they remain the *sine qua non* by which violinists gauge themselves. Technically and musically, they explore the instrument's possibilities with inexhaustible imagination, color, expressiveness, and verve. Although Bach adhered in general terms to the two principal categories of Baroque chamber music – Italian sonata and French suite – he was not constrained by any formal requirements. To the contrary, he achieved remarkable variety. Each sonata and partita has its own personality and distinguishing features.

“Partita” is the Italian word for suite. Bach used Italian terminology for movement titles throughout his autograph manuscript, which has survived; however, the three unaccompanied violin partitas each consists of a series of dance movements associated more closely with France. The Third Partita is unusual in that Bach includes only one of the ‘standard’ dances, the Gigue; there is no Allemande, Courante, or Sarabande.

His splendid opening Preludio is one of the great Baroque showpieces. Bach employs *bariolage* [a special effect that entails rapid alternation between two or more strings], echo effects, and brilliant passage work. Bach obviously valued this movement, for he re-cast the music for organ and orchestra in two cantatas.

The second movement is a rare example of a Bach *Loure*, a sort of slow-motion Gigue in stately 6/4 meter, usually with dotted rhythms and a singular eighth note-quarter note upbeat. Bach's liberal use of double and triple stops give the aural impression of multiple voices. Next is a *Gavotte en rondeau*, which means that Bach interpolates episodes between statements of the basic dance.

He completes the Partita with a pair of minuets, a lively Bourrée, and a surprisingly understated and graceful Gigue that recalls the figuration of the opening Preludio.

**Blue/S Forms (1972)**  
**Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson (1932-2004)**

First, the name: Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson was named not for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic poet, but for the biracial British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), whose father was from Sierra Leone. Born in Winston-Salem, North

Carolina, Perkinson earned his undergraduate and master's degrees in composition from the Manhattan School of Music, continuing study with Earl Kim at Princeton. He also studied conducting at the Berkshire Music Center, the Salzburg Mozarteum, and the Netherlands Radio Union. In this country he found fewer opportunities as a conductor, turning instead to jazz piano as an alternative career. He was the pianist for the legendary drummer Max Roach's quartet for several years in the 1970s. He later served as music director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company.

Perkinson was perhaps most influential in his capacity as Artistic Director of Chicago's Center for Black Music Research, a position he held from 1998 until his death in 2004. He coordinated performance activities there, and spearheaded the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble, which was dedicated to exploring the broad range of music in the African diaspora. Perkinson's diverse experience in contemporary popular music, jazz, and blues – as well as traditional Western classical music – made him versatile. He composed several ballet scores, incidental music for theaters, vocal works, film scores, and music for television.

His music synthesizes traditional counterpoint with elements of blues, spirituals, and American modernism. He dedicated *Blue/S Forms* to the American violinist Sanford Allen, who played the first performance in New York's Carnegie Hall. All three movements are nominally in G major, but Perkinson has a flexible approach to tonality, interpolating blue notes and the occasional unexpected harmonic clash to inflect his writing. The first two movements – *Plain Blue/S* and *Just Blue/S* – are closely related, using bent pitches, abundant double stops, and sometimes grating dissonance in an improvisatory style that masks metric irregularities. The middle movement is somewhat more relaxed in character, and is played with the the violin muted. The ornamentation is subtle and understated. *Jettin' Blue/S* is more up-tempo, highly syncopated, and audibly linked to the world of jazz fiddling. It also presents more technical challenges than the earlier movements, with rapid string crossings and frequent metric changes.

### **Sonata No. 2 for Unaccompanied Violin, Op.27 No.2 Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)**

Imagine hearing a violinist, or any string player, for that matter, performing without vibrato! We consider the resonant shimmer of vibrato to be an essential component of fine string playing. But until Eugène Ysaÿe, violinists did not routinely employ the technique when playing. He was the first major violinist to play with consistent vibrato, even on passing tones and when playing pizzicato. These were considered unusual interpretive embellishments.

Ysaÿe brought the Belgian violin school to its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He studied with Rodolphe Massart, Henry Vieuxtemps and Henryk Wieniawski, soared into a fine solo career of his own, and founded the most important string quartet of his day. Franck and Lekeu both wrote violin sonatas for him; Debussy wrote his string quartet for the Ysaÿe Quartet, and both Fauré and Chausson composed works for the celebrated Belgian. Curiously, Ysaÿe never studied composition, yet like most of the virtuosi of the day, he composed a great deal of music as concert vehicles for himself. These include eight solo concertos and a number of other works for violin and orchestra.

He is best remembered not for those concerted works, but for six sonatas for unaccompanied violin published in 1924 as Op.27. The set was inspired by the famous Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, whose playing impressed Ysaÿe enormously.

When one hears an artist like Szigeti [Ysaÿe wrote], who is able to accommodate his playing to the rectangular lines of the great Classics as easily as he can to the expressive melodies of the Romantics, one is forced to consider how absorbing it would be to compose a work for violin while keeping ever before one the style of one particular violinist.

The first sonata in Op.27 was in fact written for Szigeti. But the idea of writing with a specific player's style in mind had caught Ysaÿe's imagination. By the time he concluded the project, he had composed sonatas for five other fiddlers, all stars in the virtuoso arena.

The sonata on this evening's program was written in 1923 for the French violinist Jacques Thibaud (1880-1953), best remembered today for his trio partnership with pianist Alfred Cortot and cellist Pablo Casals. It is subtitled 'Obsession,' after its first movement Prelude, which quotes from several of Bach's unaccompanied violin pieces, including the Prelude of the E major Partita. Although Ysaÿe's Bach-like figuration frequently underscores his homage to the Sonatas and Partitas, the obsession turns out to be with an even older melody: the Dies irae chant from the Latin Requiem Mass. The titles of the remaining three movements all relate to the mythological underworld.

The chant's dark strain resurfaces in the second movement 'Malinconia,' which unfolds as a stately sarabande. Rendered pizzicato at the beginning of the 'Danse des ombres' [Dance of the Shadows], the Dies irae becomes the theme for

sequential variations, a reference to the concluding Chaconne in Bach's D minor Partita. And the closing 'Les Furies' envelops the chant in figuration reminiscent of *bariolage* bowing - rapid shifts back and forth between two or more strings - that Bach calls for in the Fugue of his G minor unaccompanied sonata, as well as the Preludio to the E major Partita. With its cornucopia of violinistic techniques, including several passages *sul ponticello* [playing near the bridge] Ysaÿe's finale also attests to Jacques Thibaud's splendid artistry.

## **Partita No.2 in D minor, BWV 1005** **Johann Sebastian Bach**

Bach composed six unaccompanied cello suites and six Brandenburg concerti. His solo keyboard works include six English Suites, six French Suites, and six Partitas. Among the violin compositions, there are six Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord, and six unaccompanied works. And there the pattern begins to vary, for he called three of them sonatas and the other three partitas. Sets of six works were common in the early 18th century, but in Bach's case he seemed to exhaust his interest in a particular genre after each of these incomparable groups. He never returned to the concerto grosso after the Brandenburgs, for example. Similarly, there are no additional solo violin sonatas or partitas after the group catalogued as BWV 1001-1006.

Each of Bach's solo violin sonatas is in four movements, following the accepted Baroque church sonata pattern of slow-fast-slow-fast. All three have a fugue as the second movement. The three partitas vary more in their structure, although each is partly based on popular dance movements of the era. Only one, however, has a *Ciaccona*: the second partita. It concludes the partita, and is longer than the previous four movements combined.

The D minor Partita opens with four dances that were core components of a Baroque dance suite, particularly in France and Italy. The *Allemande* is a German dance in duple meter, but evolved in the late Baroque to suit the idiomatic characteristics of a particular instrument, in this case violin. Moderate in tempo, Bach's consists of a steady flow of sixteenth notes with triplets for variety. The *Courante* originated as a French dance in triple meter, often with a contrapuntal texture. *Sarabandes* are slow dances in triple meter, with roots in Spain and France. Normally in two-part form, *Sarabandes* generally feature foursquare phrases that lend themselves to elaborate ornamentation when repeated. It is followed by a *Gigue*, which has origins in Irish and Britain. Generally in 6/8 or 12/8 meter, *Gigues* are fast; Bach's is in 12/8 meter.

The *Chaconne* (to use its more common French spelling) that concludes the D minor Partita is arguably the most celebrated movement in the violin literature. A series of 64 continuous variations, it places extraordinary demands both on the player and the listener. Bach composed his partitas in 1720 (the manuscript, which survives, is dated), but the pieces were not published until 1802. Since then, the list of editors reads like a who's who of violinists, including Ferdinand David (edition published 1843), Joseph Hellmesberger (1865), Arnold Rosé (1901), Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser (1908), Leopold Auer (1917), Jenö Hubay (1921), Carl Flesch (1930), and Ivan Galamian (1971).

Mendelssohn arranged the *Chaconne* as a concerto movement; Schumann wrote a piano accompaniment for it; Ferruccio Busoni arranged it for solo piano. Numerous other chamber and orchestral versions proliferated during the 19th century, but few of them preserved the clarity and intimacy of Bach's original. One noteworthy exception is Johannes Brahms, who arranged the *Chaconne* for Clara Schumann in 1879 as a left hand piece, in order to give her right hand a rest during concerts. In a letter to Clara, Brahms described Bach's piece with reverence.

To me the *Chaconne* is one of the most beautiful, incredible compositions. On one staff, and for a small instrument, this man pours out a world full of the most profound thoughts and most powerful emotions. . . . If one cannot avail oneself of the most outstanding violinist, perhaps the greatest enjoyment of the *Chaconne* is to be achieved in one's mind.

Bach's simple four-bar harmonic progression makes the *Chaconne* comparatively easy to follow from a listening standpoint. We do not realize how emotionally draining his music is until the ineffably tender variations in D major offer temporary respite from the stern atmosphere of the whole.

**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2021**