

Program Notes

"You must practice Bach. It is the music of Gott!" Thus I was regularly instructed by the elderly German ladies at St. Pauls Church in Chicago, the church in which I was raised, during my earliest years as a violinist.

I was fortunate to grow up at St. Pauls, a church with a deep dedication to music. The church has been a spiritual home to opera singers and members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. My relationship with Bach's music began and matured within the St. Pauls sanctuary. A work of Bach was the first piece I played, at the age of four, for a worship service. I regularly shared portions of the Six Sonatas and Partitas for prelude or offertory, sat in an orchestra of professional musicians for full-scale Bach masses, and played obligato lines for Bach's vocal works. A particularly special memory was joining, as an 11-year-old, with fellow church members, Chicago Symphony principal oboist Ray Still and principal bassist Joe Guastafeste, for Bach's Oboe and Violin Concerto.

The beautiful acoustic of the St. Pauls sanctuary, reverberant yet clear, has continued to inform my interpretation of Bach's music. It is my "emotional home" for his music, and no matter where I play Bach, the acoustical qualities of the sanctuary are always in my ear.

Bach created all of his compositions, whether explicitly sacred or not, in service to the Creator from whom his gift came. Each is a celebration of the source of his musical voice. Bach's relationship to his music is a constant reminder of my role and responsibilities as an artist. Every performance serves to honor the composer and the music as I strive to bring the notes on the page to life for the audience. The Sonatas and Partitas are among the greatest human achievements and I have always viewed them with the deepest reverence. However, remembering Bach's essential humility prevents these masterpieces from becoming overwhelming in their significance. Instead, each time I play them, I feel as though I'm conversing with the very best of friends.

The Sonatas and Partitas are full of technical

challenges that must be overcome in order to bring out the harmonies and polyphonies. They require a highly refined technique of both the left and right hand. Clearly Bach was not only a genius composer and master keyboard player, but also a violin virtuoso of the first rank. The violin was most likely the first instrument he studied with his violinist father, Johann Ambrosius. His first professional jobs in Lüneberg and Weimar included significant duties as a violin player and he continued to play the instrument for all of his life. Perhaps his esteem for the violin is reflected in the fact that the longest fugue he ever wrote was not for organ, harpsichord, or ensemble, but for unaccompanied violin (the Fuga of BWV 1005).

Bach's three sonatas are in *sonata da chiesa* (church sonata) form: slow-fast-slow-fast. Each pair of opening movements is an adagio and fugue, joined by an unresolved chord in the A Minor and C Major. The first movements of the G Minor and A Minor are covered in highly elaborate ornaments. The simpler ABA form of the G Minor Adagio gives us a wonderful opportunity to compare the different ornaments of the parallel first and last sections. The C Major Adagio is an entirely different concept, almost not a movement in its own right but rather an extended introduction, with a beginning that opens like a sunrise followed by a gradual unfolding of the music.

The subjects of the G Minor and A Minor Fugas are equally brief, but the G Minor is much more compact in structure. This movement was my first insight into hearing beyond the violin in Bach's solo violin works; to my ears the organ with its variety of stops is often present, particularly in the pedal points of the coda. The more complex A Minor Fuga features a countersubject in a descending chromatic line and both themes in inversion. The C Major Fuga is a stunning masterpiece. The subject is taken from the chorale tune "Komm, Heiliger Geist, HerrGott" (Come, Holy Ghost, Lord and God). Bach's inventive treatment of this theme includes major and minor, double fugue, stretto, inversion, and even burying it in single-voice eighth notes. The density of his polyphony uses as many as four voices, one per string. This is an unparalleled academic achievement, yet the result is a feeling of transcendence and ecstasy.

Each third movement is in a key that contrasts with the rest of the sonata. The lilting Siciliana conjures up a trio sonata, with a melodic bass line and two treble voices in duet. The two voices of the Andante have distinct roles, melody and accompaniment. The delicate Largo includes only the barest addition of a few harmony notes here and there. All of the last movements are singlevoiced and in binary form, though with complex multi-voiced writing buried within, and numerous cross-rhythms. The A Minor Allegro has the most frequent use of written dynamics in Bach's cycle, with various echoes and a subito piano near the end. The brilliance of the C Major Allegro assai seems to suggest the E Major Prelude that follows.

The Partitas are suites of dance movements. Bach follows the standard Italianate sequence of Allemande, Corrente, Sarabande, Gigue in his D Minor Partita, but deviates from it in the last movement of the B Minor, substituting an intriguingly titled Tempo di Borea. (Perhaps this was a nod to Pisen del whose earlier sonata had concluded with a Giga and Variation.) Despite the fact that none of these dances were meant to accompany actual dancing, Bach is often meticulous in his adherence to form, such as the tags at the end of each half of the Allemandes where the dancers would bow to each other.

Across the Partitas, Bach uses different spellings of the same movement titles to suggest stylistic differences. The B Minor has the feel of an older aesthetic. 17th Century influences include a Sarabande which is flowing rather than lingering, and a variation of each movement in "division" style. Particularly in the outer movements, the affect is theatrical, evoking an orchestra accompanying dancers onstage rather than chamber music.

In contrast, the D Minor Partita has the more intimate feel of a single fiddler, or a few of them. The first four movements could form a suite of their own, but it turns out that they are leading up to one of the pinnacles of all music. Much has been written about the Ciaccona as a monumental showpiece, or a journey through the deepest of emotions. The theory that Bach wrote it as a memorial to his first wife has been convincingly debunked, but we still continue to hope that perhaps it has some hidden, poignant extra-musical

meaning such as the crucifixion. Yet the music need not justify itself beyond its notes and the emotions they portray. These thirty-four imaginative variations in three sections are grand, playful, peaceful, uncertain, triumphant, tragic. Yet, somehow, Bach never loses the spirit of the dance.

The feeling that I always get from the E Major Partita is one of sheer happiness, capturing the delight of the fashionable French style without the fussiness. The Gavotte, often played as a stand-alone like the Prelude, is a rare instance of a Rondo movement in Bach's output. The elegant Loure and Minuet 1 contrast with the rustic flavor of the Bourée and the musette-like Minuet 2. Having lived and breathed the written-out ornaments of Couperin and Marais for many years, it felt natural to sprinkle some of these characteristic decorations onto Bach's pseudo-French dances. How wonderful that he concludes his entire cycle not with an emphatic statement but with a cute little Gigue that smiles and waves as it makes its lighthearted exit.

A note about the instrument: I began playing these works with a baroque bow at age 14, and since age 18, I have never played them with anything else. Because the vast majority of my performances of unaccompanied Bach have been on my primary concert violin in modern set-up, I chose to play my modernized 1742 Guarneri delGesú for this album rather than an instrument in baroque set-up as for most of my recordings of baroque music. Therefore, you are hearing Bach's music the way I most often play it, with a modernized violin and a baroque bow.

This performance is a testament to my lifelong relationship with one of the cornerstones of the violin repertoire. It is also a testament to all who have inspired me and supported me: my family, my musical family, and my church family. I offer it to you in the spirit of Bach: Soli Deo Gloria.