5-2011

The Tardy Recognition of J.S. Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo

Di Su
York College

Recommended Citation

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/yc_pubs
Part of the Composition Commons, Music Education Commons, Musicology Commons, and the Music Performance Commons

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the York College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
In This Issue

- Paul Rolland and His Influence
- The Tardy Recognition of J.S. Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas
- Developing Critical Thinking and Assessment in Music Classrooms
- and much more!

PLUS:
ASTA Conference Highlights with National Award Winners

The ASTA String Curriculum is a groundbreaking publication that will help establish string-specific standards and guidelines to further develop and enrich programs. Purchase your copy through ASTA’s publishing partner at Alfred.com.
The Tardy Recognition of

J.S. Bach’s
Sonatas and Partitas
for Violin Solo

by Di Su
Introduction
J. S. Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo (BWV 1001-1006) are among the most important masterpieces in the literature of violin music. They are included in standard repertoire for serious violin students; they are frequently performed in solo recitals; they are recorded by numerous virtuosos; and they are required in major violin competitions. The vast amount of editions also indicates the importance of the works. In Edlund’s catalogue, one finds as many as 77 editions ranging from Simrock (1802) to Henle (1987).

However, the violin solos did not enjoy such a prominent status in Bach’s own time, and even in the rest of the 18th century. They were completed by 1720, though the first complete edition did not appear until 1802. The earliest known public performance took place in 1840 by Ferdinand David; the first partial recording by Joseph Joachim in 1903; and the first complete set recorded in 1933-34 by Yehudi Menuhin. The solos received little attention during the 18th century, according to the history of publication and performance. It is often wondered why the works did not gain recognition for such a long period of time. Despite much research, no conclusion has been reached due to the lack of evidence. In this respect, this one is no exception. The purpose of this article is to help violin students understand the works more fully by familiarizing the solos from the angles other than performing techniques in the light of current knowledge.

Possible purpose of composing the solos
Bach clearly stated his purpose on some of his works from the Cöthen period, during which he wrote the solos. For example, he dedicated Six Concertos with Several Instruments (1721) to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, hence the better-known title Brandenburg Concertos. He wrote Clavier-Buchlein for W. F. Bach (1720) and the first volume of The Well-Tempered Clavier (1722) for his son’s piano study. But Bach gave no indication in any way of the purpose of writing the solos and 300 years later Bach’s motive of composing them still remains an unsolved mystery.

It has been suggested that Bach wrote these pieces for a certain virtuoso, most probably for the violinist Johann Georg Pisendel of Dresden who studied violin with Torelli and Vivaldi. As an established German violinist, Pisendel was used to playing pieces for unaccompanied violin and he wrote a Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin (dated 1716), which bears a typical German tradition. It was probably in 1717 when Pisendel played his own Unaccompanied Sonata for Bach, “who may have written his solos with Pisendel’s performance in mind.” It would not be unusual that Bach wrote the solos for Pisendel because other notable contemporary composers also dedicated works to him, including Tomaso Albinoni, Antonio Vivaldi and Georg Philipp Telemann. One of the supporting comments states that Pisendel owned a hand-written copy of Bach’s solos. Regrettably, Schwarz offers no detailed explanation as well as the original source of the evidence to convince the reader that the solos were indeed written for Pisendel. Other possible candidates of receiving the solos might include Prince Leopold; Volumier of Dresden, a well-known French violinist; and Joseph Spiess, the court Konzertmeister of the Cöthen orchestra. However, these are no more than assumptions that cannot be confirmed due to the lack of original evidence.

Another possibility would be that the solos were written for pedagogical purposes, serving as study pieces, since the title page of the first complete edition indicates so. In fact, the rapid string crossing passages in the Preludio of Partita No. 3 in E Major are a fine example of a perpetual motion exercise. Bach wrote a good number of teaching pieces during Cöthen period, most notably Clavier-Buchlein for W. F. Bach and The Well-Tempered Clavier. He was a teacher “with an urge born of the Lutheran duty to instruct and demonstrate to others.” His goal of teaching, as stated on the title page of the Inventions, is to make a musician who possesses not only good inventions [ideas] but also the ability to “develop” them. His teaching method, therefore, involves a systematic training with all the possibilities imaginable. The material in the solos is actually “sufficient for a whole course of musical education.” Williams summarizes, “The solo works can serve two purposes: (a) to stretch the player, that is to train the performer and (b) to provide compositional models, that is to train the composer.”

In his early days in Cöthen, Bach was not impressed by the orchestra players. As Apps described, “with only a nucleus of capable performers, the rest being the wretched ‘town musicians’ of whose incompetence he is known to have complained.” He might try to improve the quality of his orchestra by providing advanced study pieces to the players. We also know that Bach taught violin in Cöthen. One of his violin pupils, Johann Schneider, later joined Bach’s Cöthen orchestra.

Senzà Basso Accompanato on the title page of the manuscript indicates that the solos should be performed “without bass accompaniment.” It was certainly not a popular way of performing in the Baroque period, but it was a common form of practice for violin pupils. As Forkel observes: “For a long series of years, the violin solos [of J. S. Bach] were universally considered by the greatest performers on the violin as the best means to make an ambitious student a perfect master of his instrument.”

It seems that Bach might have written the solos with a chief focus on advanced violin studies, while giving little consideration for public performance, as the history of the solos performance reveals. In a letter to Forkel in 1774, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach represents a popular view on the solos: “One of the greatest violinists told me once that he had seen nothing more perfect for learning to be a good violinist, and could suggest nothing better to anyone eager to learn, than the said violin solos without bass.” Comments as such were so influential that the pieces had long been regarded as advanced studies, which were more suitable for teaching than for performing. This belief is evident in several early editions. For example, the solos were titled “Studies” in the very first complete edition of 1802. Also, David’s edition of 1843 kept “Studies” in the subtitle and added direction Zum Gebrauch bei dem Conservatorium de Musik zu Leipzig [For the Use by the Conservatory of Music in Leipzig].

Writing style of the solos
In the 18th century, violin repertoire was dominated by the Italian school led by Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) and Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770). Music style became more melodic and soloistic as we see in Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Bach was certainly influenced by the Italians as reflected in his violin concertos (BWV 1041, 1042, 1043). But Bach’s music originality came from the German school, which is famed for polyphonic playing.

The polyphonic style of playing the violin was well developed in Germany by the end of the 17th century as the continuation of
the German violin tradition. The German school of violin playing achieved the technique of making a single violin self-sufficient, i.e. without an accompaniment by other instruments. In the early 18th century, when the Italian school became dominant, this polyphonic style not only continued in Germany but also expanded its influence to France and even Italy. Bach kept this tradition alive by reaching the culmination with the creation of the solo works.

The genre of unaccompanied violin solos can be traced back to the late 17th century. Heinrich Biber (1644-1704) published his Passacaglia for unaccompanied violin solo in 1681. Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705), a violinist at the Weimar Court when Bach was first appointed there in 1703, published *Sauts base continue* [The Suite for Unaccompanied Violin] in 1682 and Six Suites for Violin Solo in 1696. Thomas Baltzer (1630-1663) composed Two Preludes and an Allemande, which was included in *The Division Violin* by John Playford in 1685, the year Bach was born. In terms of performance, virtuosi Johann Jakob Walther (1650-c1717), Westhoff and Pisendel, among others, were well known for the fashion of violin solo without accompaniment. Bach would certainly have known some, if not all, of these works, and might have become interested in writing the same type of music himself. At the end, Bach's solos far surpassed the rest of them in both technique and musical interest.

It is often wondered how Bach, whose principal instrument was the organ, could have written compositions for the violin in a most complex way as shown in his solos. When we think of Bach as a performer, we usually regard him as a master of keyboard instruments. But in fact, Bach was also an accomplished string player. His status as a violinist was overshadowed by his own fame as an organist. Violin playing was part of Bach's family heritage. Both his father and grandfather were successful violinists. Bach's first musical impressions were cultivated by his father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, who taught him how to play the violin and other stringed instruments. Bach's first professional post was court violinist in the chamber orchestra of Duke Johann Ernst of Weimar. In 1714, Bach became Konzertmeister in Duke's orchestra. In a letter to Forkel in 1774, C.P.E. Bach describes his father's abilities as a string player:

In his youth, and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly, and thus kept the orchestra in better order than he could have done with the harpsichord. He understood to perfection the possibilities of all stringed instruments. This is evidenced by his solos for the violin and for the violoncello without [accompanying] bass.

Bach was known as an expert in organ construction. But he was also knowledgeable in stringed instruments. He even made changes in their shapes and built them to suit his needs. His invention of *viola pomposa* shows his deep understanding of stringed instruments. Although little is known about Bach as a violinist, it is reasonable to assume that he must have thoroughly studied the technique of the instrument, or he would not have written the pieces in the way he did. As Lester points out, “Only a composer who knew intimately how violin technique works—who could think compositionally as a violinist—could have crafted such perfect solo-violin music.” The comprehensiveness and encyclopedic nature earned the solos the place as the Bible of the violin music literature.

In Bach’s organ music writing, we see the heavy use of contrapuntal texture, the prolonged pedal suspensions, and the large schemes of harmony. He applied all of these to the solos with unprecedented violin technicalities. He displayed, especially in fuge movements, his magic skill of writing “melodic polyphony.” That is, where several voices are implied in one melodic line. As Forkel observes: “So remarkable is Bach's skill that the solo instrument actually produces all the notes required for complete harmony, rendering a second part unnecessary and even impossible.” Schweitzer has a similar impression. He writes: “We hardly know what to admire most - the richness of the invention, or the daring of the polyphony that is given to the violin. The more we read, hear and play them, the greater our astonishment becomes.”

An important aspect of Bach's compositional procedure in the solos is its encyclopedic scope. For example, the gigantic 64 interconnected variations, a total of 256 measures in a minor-major-minor tripartite structure, in the famous Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D Minor are developed from a mere four-measure bass progression pattern. Bach aims at not only following, developing and exhausting specific principles of composition, but also breaking through the technical limitations of the instrument. At the end, his imagination triumphs over reality. The solos “represent the victory of the spirit over material limitations.” concludes Leopold, one of the greatest violin pedagogues in modern time. Of Bach’s mastery in composition, Johann Mattheson comments:

One often finds the most excellent workings-out upon the fewest notes, or shortest fugue subjects; almost as the best sermons can be made on three or four words of text. Who would believe that these eight short notes would be so fruitful as to bring forth a counterpoint of more than a whole sheet of music paper, without unusual extension, and quite naturally.

Performing and teaching the solos

The unconventional writing style makes the solo works difficult to play. They present the player some of the greatest challenges to deal with in the whole range of violin technique. It is not uncommon for a performer to produce some unpleasant tone in chords or poor realization of polyphonic lines. “No one ever conquers them,” declared John Holloway, one of the world’s leading Baroque violinists. The highly challenging technique for performing the solos has brought a viewpoint which states “either the art of violin playing of his time must have been extraordinarily perfected, or Bach thought far in advance of his time in this as in all other pieces.”

Interestingly enough, despite advances made in the technique of violin playing since the Baroque period, the music of the solos appears to become even more difficult to play for the modern violinist than the one in the 18th century. This might be the consequence of the birth of the concave *Tourte* bow at the end of the 18th century and various types of modern bows thereafter, as well as the higher and more curved modern bridges. Together, these modifications make the bowing of multiple stops harder to manage. With this background, J.B. depicts with his imagination:

The German violinist of Bach's day could thus stretch the hairs tighter or relax them as he liked. Chords that the virtuosi of today can only play with difficulty and without any beauty of effect by throwing the bow back on the lower strings, gave him no trouble at all; he simply loosened the hairs a little, so that they curved over the strings.

The difficulty of playing the solos on a modern violin led to
the invention of a so-called Bach bow, or Vega (arched) bow in
the 20th century. The Bach bow is a bow with a very high arch - about four or five inches separating the bow stick and the hair at the highest point. With a mechanical lever controlled by the thumb, the player can tighten the hair at will to play on individual strings; or he can loosen the hair to encompass all the strings, thus sustaining multiple stops continuously. The Bach bow was created to play the solos as precisely as written. That means the multiple voices are to be fully realized and sustained, as polyphonic lines require. Consequently, the Bach bow produces sound more like an organ and less like a violin because of the increasing phonic lines require. Consequently, the Bach bow produces sound more like an organ and less like a violin because of the increasing number of overtones during the course of playing. Although
the conception that the multiple voices in the solos ought to be sustained as precisely as written is arguable, the invention of the Bach bow reflects a fact that the modern violin is less capable of mastering the solos than the Baroque one due to the historical features of the instrument. Some modern violinists seem to confirm this perception.

In teaching the solos, there are various opinions among teachers, most notably on whether they should be played in the historical style of Bach’s day (thus no spiccato, for example), or whether they should be reformed to fit the modern taste, technique and the instrument. It remains a controversial issue that may never have a conclusive answer.

It seems to be wise to ask the following questions before assigning the pieces to a student:

1) Is this student technically and musically ready for the challenge? This includes a total technical control of both hands, as well as a thorough understanding of polyphonic music. Due to the complex nature of the solos, it is difficult for some grading systems to determine in which level they should be placed. For example, they are not listed in Graded Music Examination Syllabuses (eight grades in total) by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in United Kingdom. But some guidelines do exist. The ASTA String Syllabus (six grades in total) suggests students begin to study the solos in the fifth grade. 2) What is the purpose of studying the pieces? Is it for technical training, music style study, audition, competition or recital? A different purpose will result in a different focus of study. For example, Carl Flesch’s edition with a reprint of the original score is suitable for style study, while Maxim Jacobson’s study edition might be more practical for training purpose.

Conclusion

From the historical background we see that Bach’s official duty in Cöthen and personal friendship with Prince Leopold granted him more freedom in writing music than he had been given in Weimar. His creative attempt was focused on secular, instrumental music. His music seems to be in free spirit, serving the purposes of both private thoughts and universal potential without being confined to the musical life of the local community.

The neglect of the solos was probably caused by the complex writing style, particularly “the anti-violinistic polyphonic texture,” which was uncommon in violin music writing. Geiringer connects Bach’s polyphonic writing for the violin with the artistic conceptions of the Baroque era:

At that time the walls of houses were occasionally decorated with paintings simulating vistas of wide colonnades and formal gardens. Such embellishments require the working of the inner eye, just as the implied polyphony and rich harmonic texture in Bach’s compositions require the cooperation of the inner ear.

The solos, therefore, are “difficult to understand. It may be hard to receive into the soul.” “Bach never can nor shall become truly popular;” the reviewer of Ressel’s 1845 edition of the solos with piano accompaniment said, “but he always will win that part of the public to whom the conception of art stands higher than bare sense-stimuli (Sinnenreiz), and this public is truly cultured.” The neglect could be also attributed to the unpopular performing form, a fact that might explain the creations of various piano accompaniments, as well as several transcriptions for other instruments or a group of instruments, that are naturally more capable than the solo violin in managing polyphonic lines. Indeed, early performances of the solos were usually accompanied by a piano. A concert review on Ferdinand David’s performance of the solos expresses such necessity for the audience:

We must remark at this point that Dr. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy accompanied both pieces [the Chaconne and the Prelude in E major from the third Partita] on the pianoforte through a free realization of the harmony, contrapuntal in design. These Bachian solo pieces are just that, originally written for violin alone, without figured bass, and so printed. Now, this is fine for musicians, who as such are in the position to perceive and to judge the harmonic direction and artistic workmanship for themselves, attaining complete understanding; only the public requires an additional help, a commentary, so to speak, that clarifies the whole and facilitates understanding.

The solos had been far from popular in Bach’s own time, and then remained a hidden treasure during the 18th century. They represent music for music’s sake with much more profound expressions than the public needed or was accustomed to listening to. The appreciation of the solos, therefore, requires not only a high level of technical proficiency from the performer, but also more than average receptivity from the audience. The solos simply might have been too highbrow to be popular in Bach’s own time.

Notes

1 In his autograph score, Bach uses ‘Solos’ on the title page. The term ‘Solos’ will be borrowed for this article.
4 Berta Schwarz, Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin (Germany: Deutsche Grammophon, 1975), CD liner notes, 13.
5 Although, the later discovered manuscript in early twentieth century shows that actually Bach himself did not use the word ‘studies’ on the title page. We do not know whether it was the publisher’s misunderstanding of the nature of the compositions, or it was a reflection of a popular public view to the Solos at that time.
6 Peter Williams, J. S. Bach: A Life in Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 140.
9 Williams, J. S. Bach, 140.
11 Jeffrey Pulver, ‘Johann Sebastian Bach As Violinist’, The Monthly Musical Record (February 1, 1926), 36.
12 David and Mendel, 346.
13 Ibid., 277.
[Image 36x91 to 558x309]

Di Su studied violin at The Shanghai Conservatory of Music and held a faculty position at the Conservatory. He earned a master’s degree in violin from The University of Connecticut and a master’s degree from West Virginia University. His main interests and fields of research in music include violin repertory and string pedagogy. Currently, he is associate professor in Library Science at York College of The City University of New York. His biographical essays on several American musicians including Billy Vaughn, Erich Leinsdorf, William Schwann, John Cage, Nadine Conner, and Sarah Caldwell, have appeared in The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives.