

Towards a Performance History of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin: Preliminary Investigations

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Nowadays Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin (BWV 1001-1006) are regarded as touchstones of any violinist's technical and musical maturity. This has not always been the case. In this paper I sketch the performance and reception history of these compositions reporting on initial observations of written documents, various editions and sound recordings. The material at hand is large (see number of editions and sound recordings available in Appendices 1-2). Therefore the present discussion is limited to mapping out major trends and highlighting significant issues.¹

Origin, Reception, Editions

Apart from surviving manuscript sources, among which Bach's autograph dated 1720 is the most precious, our first record of the pieces comes from the middle of the eighteenth century.² C.P.E. Bach mentions them in his obituary of his father, published in the last volume of Lorenz Christoph Mizler's *Musikalische Bibliothek* in 1754. He stresses that the works demonstrate how well Johann Sebastian understood the possibilities of string instruments and states that a "great violinist" once told him "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".³ Whether because of CPE Bach's authority or because the pieces are so different from Italian baroque violin music, the notion of regarding Bach's Solos as indispensable for perfecting the violinist's polyphonic technique — rather than as supreme compositions in their own right —

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Selected short audio examples of discussed recordings can be accessed

² For a list of sources consult *Kritischer Bericht* (ed. Günter Hausswald), *Neue Bach-Ausgabe VI/i* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1958).

remained strong for a long time. This is evidenced in the subtitle of Ferdinand David's 1842-3 edition which reads: "For use at the Leipzig Conservatoire ...".⁴

Since about the middle of the twentieth century, however, the opinion has been strengthened which holds that the Solo designation in the title indicates concert pieces.⁵ Bach researchers have also been pointing to contemporary virtuoso violinists active in Dresden and Weimar, such as Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705), Johann Georg Pisendel (1687-1755), and Jean Baptiste Volumier (ca. 1670-1728), and to similarly polyphonic compositions for violin by Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644-1704) and the Dresden court violinist, Johann Jacob Walther (ca. 1650-1717) or even Pisendel himself. From Bach's immediate circle, Franz Benda (1709-1786) who worked in the Prussian court of Frederick the Great, should also be mentioned. Benda was fond of playing the pieces and introduced them to his pupils. Among the best of these were Friedrich Wilhem Rust (1739-1796) and Johann Peter Salomon (1745-1815) who "played a major part in keeping the Bach tradition alive".⁶ Contemporary records inform us, for instance, that Salomon performed the pieces on several occasions. He also had a key role in disseminating the works outside Germany, especially in Paris and London at the turn of the 18th century. It is likely that his performances influenced the inclusion of the Fugue movement from the C Major Sonata into Jean Baptiste Cartier's *L'Art du violon* published in 1798. Apparently Cartier obtained a copy of the score from Pierre Gaviniés (1728-1800), who may have acquired a copy from Salomon while the latter was in Paris on his way to London from Berlin in 1780-81.⁷ This publication, together with Simrock's 1801-2 edition of the three sonatas represent the first printed versions of the pieces. The first complete publication was prepared by Ferdinand David (Leipzig: Kistner, 1843); the Bach-Ausgabe of the Bach-Gesellschaft brought out the works in 1879 (ed. Alfred Dörffel).

³ Hans T. David & Arthur Mendel (eds.): *The New Bach Reader* revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 397.

⁴ Cited in Walter Kolneder: *Das Buch der Violine* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1993). Eng. trans. by Reinhard G. Pauly as: *The Amadeus Book of the Violin* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1998), p. 311.

⁵ Eduard Melkus: 'Gedanken zur Interpretationsgeschichte der Chaconne für Violine solo von J. S. Bach' *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 40 (1985) 100-108, esp. p. 103.

⁶ Kolneder: *The Amadeus Book of the Violin* p. 373

⁷ Hubert Unverricht: 'Spieltraditionen von Joh. Seb. Bachs unbegleiteten Sonaten und Partiten für Violine allein' *Bachfest* (55) *der Neuen Bachgesellschaft* (Mainz, 1980) pp. 176-184.

While in the eighteenth-century the general opinion was that it would be impossible to add an accompanying part to the works, during the nineteenth-century this changed. Then it was believed that the public needed an aid to facilitate their understanding of the music and saw the solution in providing accompaniment to the Solos. The result of this was the publication of innumerable transcriptions as well as newly composed piano accompaniment from the 1840s until the turn of the century.⁸ The most famous of these are the accompaniments of Mendelssohn (1840) and Schumann (1854) and the transcriptions for piano alone, especially of the Chaconne from the *D minor Partita*, by Brahms and Busoni. The Chaconne became so popular that there even exists an arrangement for orchestra and violin by August Wilhelmj (1845-1908), the first Bayreuth concertmaster and a pupil of Ferdinand David.⁹ Brahms captured its awe-inspiring power in a letter to Clara Schumann, written in June 1877:

The Chaconne is for me one of the most wonderful, incomprehensible pieces of music. On a single staff, on a small instrument the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and the most powerful feelings. If I were to imagine how *I* might have made, conceived the piece, I know for certain that the overwhelming excitement and awe would have driven me mad.¹⁰

This kind of reverence has since been shared by many generations, elevating the status of the Solos from being studies in mastering polyphonic violin technique to being regarded as the artistic pinnacles of the instrument's repertoire.

The stream of modern editions started with that of Joachim and Moser in 1908. Here, just as in David's 1843 edition, Bach's autograph score is reprinted in modern notation under the edited staff, as an alternative. Violinists writing in the first half of the twentieth century or later all

⁸ For an account of 19th century publications and transcriptions of the Solos see Zay David Sevier: 'Bach's Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas: the First Century and a Half' *Bach (Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute)* 12

/2-3 (1981) pp. 11-19; 21-29. Many individual movements that were recorded during the first half of the twentieth century were also done with piano accompaniment (e.g. Kreisler).

⁹ For an account of the Chaconne transcriptions see Georg Feder: 'Geschichte der Bearbeitungen von Bachs Chaconne' in Martin Geck (ed.): *Bach-Interpretationen – Festschrift Walter Blankenburg zum 65. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), pp. 168-189

¹⁰ Styra Avins (ed.): *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters* (New York: OUP, 1997), p. 515

stress the importance of studying the original markings as well as the editorial suggestions.¹¹ This insistence allowed for such an editorial practice to become expected standard (e.g. Marteau, Busch, Flesch, Havemann, Rostal) whilst Bach's fair copy itself has also been reprinted in various facsimile editions (refer to Appendix 1 for detail).¹²

Close study of the various editions enables one to gain an insight into changing interpretative approaches to the Solos. Apart from editorial slurs and other phrasing or articulation marks, fingering and bowing indications provide further information. Copies of scores used by particular artists, for instance Joseph Szigeti, are especially telling because they reflect a single artist's view of the piece and reactions to editorial suggestions.¹³ Out of the many early 20th century editions, Adolph Busch's (1919) is practically devoid of markings. This might reflect the severe and literalistic approach, which became typical in the 1930s and beyond. This 'objective style' that is often linked to Stravinsky's neo-classical ideology and referred to as *Neue Sachlichkeit* can be observed on many recordings as well, even beyond the 1960s. Carl Flesch's (1930) edition reflects more the late romantic tradition, in spite of providing a reprint of the autograph in modern notation.

¹¹ Leopold Auer: *Violin Playing as I Teach it* (New York: Dover, 1980; first published by Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1921); Carl Flesch: *The Art of Violin Playing* (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1930 English text by F. Martens); Joseph Szigeti: *Szigeti on the Violin* (New York: Dover, 1979; first published by Cassell & Co., 1969).

¹² A good summary of the strengths and weaknesses of available editions is provided by Robin Stowell: 'Building a Library: Bach's Violin Sonatas and Partitas' *Musical Times* 128 (1987), pp. 250-56. See also Joel Lester: *Bach's Works for Solo Violin* (New York – Oxford: OUP, 1999) and Richard Efrati: *Treatise on the Execution and Interpretation of the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin and the Suites for Solo Cello by Johann Sebastian Bach* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1979).

¹³ The research library of the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest has a rich collection of these; a telling set documenting aspects of the Hungarian violin school fostered by Hubay around the beginning of the twentieth-century. In his cited book Szigeti mentions the importance of studying old editions and earlier violinists' markings in them because "[w]e are so poor in documentary evidence about performance traditions ... that scraps of information ... are of great value". Devoting attention to such minutiae reveals "how little one can depend on *Urtext* without oral tradition supplementing it." (*Szigeti on the Violin* pp. 202-203).