

An Introduction

John Holloway

The idea of a “universal Canon” of “cultural masterworks” is, of course, looked upon as a rather dubious concept, especially in critical and academic circles. Nevertheless, some sort of musical “Canon” does exist, at least as defined by listeners and performers. There are two 18th-century composers who appear on every violinist’s list, and who have a special and enduring presence in the violinist’s life: Mozart and Bach. I know of no serious classical violinist in the world who believes that one can become such, without an in-depth knowledge and experience of the two great sets of 18th-century masterworks: Mozart’s Violin Concertos (especially the last three), and the six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin alone by Bach. Together, they present an unmatched combination of technical and interpretative challenges, guaranteed to bring out the best in any really good player, and to expose every frailty. It is for that reason that they appear in the obligatory repertoire of every serious international violin competition worldwide, and, while the Mozart concertos have long been basic requirements for orchestral auditions, the Bach solos are increasingly appearing there as well.

The Bach Project is devoted to the solo Sonatas and Partitas. By taking advantage of the variety and flexibility offered by the internet format, this website offers an unusually wide range of texts and talks, a set of filmed masterclasses, a demonstration and discussion of the Baroque dances most featured in the Partitas, and, importantly, the potential for updating and feedback.

Background

One good place to start is to consider what music might have influenced the composition of the solos, or might help to explain why Bach wrote them. In fact, the list of surviving significant works for unaccompanied violin before Bach is rather short. Three composers especially come to mind, all within the “German” tradition: Heinrich Biber, Johann Paul von Westhoff, and Johann Georg Pisendel. There are few non-German works of interest. Torelli’s Solo Sonata is of course Italian, but it seems to have been composed in Germany (and the manuscript is still in Dresden). So the search for relevant works for solo violin is naturally focused on Germany.

Biber’s famous unaccompanied Passacaglia is the final piece in his “Mystery” cycle of Rosary Sonatas (dating from the 1670s). It is a set of variations in G minor over the descending tetrachord—the same bass which Bach uses in a decorated form in his much more famous Chaconne in D minor. While it is tempting to link Biber’s great work to Bach’s, there is no evidence that Bach knew the Rosary Passacaglia, and it was only first printed in the 20th century.

Westhoff is of greater historical interest in this context. His Suite for Violin “sans basse” was published in the *Mercure Galant* in January 1683. Even more significant are his six Partitas for Solo Violin published in Dresden in 1696. These short four-movement works include much imaginative polyphonic writing. Westhoff, who died in 1705, was a senior member of the Weimar court Capelle

with which Bach was associated in January 1703. Given that Bach's earliest duties in Weimar may well have included violin-playing, he can hardly have failed to be in contact with his distinguished older colleague, or at least with his music.

As for Johann Georg Pisendel, he was a leading member of the great Hofkapelle in Dresden, rising in due course to the rank of Konzertmeister. Pisendel was one of the leading performers and teachers in that musically highly endowed court. He played a significant role in the creation and development of a music library for the court music, a major collection which continues to form the core of the magnificent music library in Dresden. Pisendel visited Weimar in 1709, shortly after Bach's appointment there as court organist, and, apparently, together with musicians from the court Capelle, they performed Telemann's Concerto in G for Two Violins and Orchestra. His one Sonata for Solo Violin is thought to date from 1716. It has been claimed [eg by Robin Stowell (*Cambridge Companion to the Violin*)] that Bach heard it in 1717, presumably during his visit to Dresden in September/October of that year for the famous keyboard contest with the French organist Louis Marchand. However, this cannot be proved. Nevertheless, Bach and Pisendel certainly knew each other, and Bach could have heard Pisendel's Solo Sonata on other occasions. Since the autograph of Bach's Solos is dated 1720, the 1717 date has been used to suggest a possible influence of Pisendel's Sonata on Bach. However, the compositional history of the Bach works (see the website's translation of Dominik Sackmann's essay (translated by Jeremy Coleman): "A Triumph of Spirit Over Matter": Conjectures about Johann Sebastian Bach's *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato* (BWV 1001-1006) makes it just as possible that the influence was the other way round.

What is without doubt is that, whatever Bach knew of these few earlier German works, his Violin Solos far surpass them all in their musical and violinistic ambition and achievement. They include dances in French and Italian styles, "improvisatory" preludes which offer a compendium of Italianate ornamentation, arias with accompaniment, moto perpetuo-style fast movements, three fugues (including the longest fugue he composed for any instrument), and a mighty set of variations on a bass, a work that has become so famous that it is simply known to violinists as "The Chaconne". Furthermore, Bach presents an almost complete exploration of contemporary violin technique. Most aspects of bowing technique are fully tested, as are the widest imaginable range of left-hand skills. The choice of keys offers a wide range of sound colours because of the changing resonances, as well as a searching test of intonation in many keys and positions. Few of Bach's successors in writing for violin alone have even attempted anything so all-embracing.

Thus with Bach's Violin Solos one is faced with an extraordinary, unprecedented level of musical quality, technical challenge, and intellectual range. Indeed, I believe that it is in these works, together with the "cello" Suites (in the absence of Bach's autograph a lively debate is ongoing over which instrument is intended), the Sonatas and Solo Partita for transverse flute, the lost works for oboe, and the Sonatas for obbligato harpsichord with flute, with violin, and with viola da gamba, that Bach shows a most important aspect of his genius in one of its most original and creative forms: his ability, indeed his urgent need, to teach himself-- and others.

Geige-Übung

The thoroughness with which Bach approached his (auto)-didactic task on keyboard instruments is well documented. He visited those great organists he could reach, and copied vast amounts of music by those he couldn't reach. Through his own playing and teaching he developed an ever-greater certainty in his compositions for keyboards, which in turn reflect a powerful pedagogical urge. In this, as in other areas of his life, Bach was omnivorous, nourishing himself from a wide range of varied sources. However, his digestive process, as it were, was personal. As his second son, C.P.E. Bach wrote to Bach's first biographer, Forkel, in January 1773, "Through his own study and reflection alone he became even in his youth a pure and strong fugue writer". I think we can safely assume that something comparable happened over the years that he worked on the Violin Solos.

The first sequence of works in his great pedagogical project for keyboard was clearly inspired by the desire to give his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann and his many other students the best possible start at the keyboard. Bach begins during his Weimar years, 1708-1717, with the *Orgel-Büchlein*, then the so-called "English" Suites (which are actually models of the French style). The *Clavierbüchlein* for W.F. Bach (1720) has an explicitly pedagogical function, as do the two-part Inventions and three-part Symphonies (also 1720), and the small French Suites (of c.1715-1722). We know from Bach's pupil Heinrich Nikolaus Gerber (1702-1775) that Bach viewed these works as being component parts of a greater pedagogical cycle for the keyboard, culminating in the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (also dating from 1722).

Bach also conceived a second, quite different, great sequence of more exalted keyboard works, whose pedagogical function is made even clearer by their title: *Clavier-Übung*, that is, keyboard