

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 13 November 2024
7.30pm

Gil Shaham violin

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Sonata No. 2 in A minor for solo violin BWV1003 (1720)
I. Grave • II. Fuga • III. Andante • IV. Allegro

Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)
*I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande •
IV. Gigue • V. Chaconne*

Interval

Scott Wheeler (b.1952)

Isolation Rag (2020)

Max Raimi (b.1956)

Violin Etude: Anger Management (2015)

Reena Esmail (b.1983)

When the Violin (2020)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Partita No. 3 in E for solo violin BWV1006 (1720)
*I. Preludio • II. Loure • III. Gavotte en Rondeau •
IV. Menuett I • V. Menuett II • VI. Bourrée •
VII. Gigue*

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Johann Sebastian Bach may still have been fresh from school, and in his first job, as a violinist at the ducal court in Weimar, when he set about writing a set of six solo pieces for violin, possibly for himself to perform. He was at Weimar only a few months, during which he turned 18, before he took himself off to a better position, but the stay was long enough for him to learn from a senior musician, Johann Paul von Westhoff, who had published a dozen partitas for solo violin twenty years before.

No doubt Bach fiddled over the years with what he had written, before making a fair copy in 1720, when he was at Cöthen. This manuscript survives, complete with its title page, on which we can read his inscription: 'Sei Solo', then 'Violino senza Basso accompagnato', then, with the tantalizing suggestion that there could have been more, 'Libro Primo', followed by a signature and date.

Unlike the six solo pieces for cello, which Bach almost certainly also brought to final form during his time at Cöthen, the violin solos include sonatas in alternation with partitas, the former having the slow-fast-slow-fast pattern of the old *sonata da chiesa*, or church sonata. Each sonata has a fugue in second place, to which the first movement serves as prelude. By contrast, and again unlike the cello suites, the partitas are all different in form.

The way in to the A minor Sonata is a chord with a low tonic plus a triad an octave above it, a chord opening a complex harmonic path that, constantly readjusting the same figures, eventually settles on the dominant, E. This is then the starting point for the fugue, where a brief idea generates a lengthy movement, in which episodes of free flow offer respite from density while implicitly maintaining the counterpoint. The down-up flick that starts the subject (or its up-down inversion) is everywhere until, at the end, the ur-chord reappears, in A major.

Next, in the *Andante*, comes elevated melody supported by pulsation. Most violinists will repeat the first part here (but not the second), as also in the perpetual-motion finale, initiated by echo effects and coursing towards the low A – now without the triad above it, single and resolute.

The first two dances of the D minor Partita start with a hiccup: the same note off the beat and on. Virtually monophonic, a wandering line, the *Allemande* comes at the close of its first part to the ur-chord of the A minor Sonata, but in the major. The movement's scale patterns are reinterpreted in triple time in the *Courante*.

They are reinterpreted again in the grave *Sarabande*, and again in the *Gigue*, which is lively, but seems to know there is more to come, as indeed there is.

The rhythm now heaving into view is once more that of the sarabande: slow, heavy, triple. But this is a dance also of another kind, on a repeating four-bar theme that descends from D to A, ready to make a rising cadence back to D: the inexorably circling, purposefully driving bass of the *Chaconne*. Sixty-four times it comes, on

through a middle section in the major (variations 34-52), supporting counterpoint that implies up to seven simultaneous lines, until finally the voices spiral into the keynote. Brahms (one of several composers to adapt the work, in his case for piano left hand) had this to say: 'If I were to imagine that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind'. Playing for around a quarter of an hour, the movement provides a momentous finale, to the work and to this first half.

Moving on 300 years, Gil Shaham brings us three pieces by US composers. **Scott Wheeler** wrote *Isolation Rag* during the first weeks of the 2020 lockdown. 'While stuck at home working on other commissions', he has said, 'a wistful little ragtime tune came into my head, probably inspired by William Bolcom's *Graceful Ghost*', remembered from the last concert he had attended, when Shaham played it. The tune eventually turns into other reminiscences, to complete 'a bittersweet portrait of a solo violinist playing for himself in his apartment, missing his orchestra'.

The title of **Max Raimi's** *Anger Management* says it all: a violent gesture is, through three minutes of virtuoso therapy, moderated. Himself a viola player, notably with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Raimi adapted this piece for Shaham in 2017 from one of his concert études for his own instrument.

Reena Esmail was born in Los Angeles into a family having roots in India – roots she strengthened as a student by working under masters of North Indian music, both in California and in India, enabling her to adapt aspects of Indian music to Western performing practice and vice versa. Like the Scott Wheeler piece, her *When the Violin was a lockdown enterprise*. A larger work of 2018 had a choir singing a Hafez poem – 'When / The Violin / Can forgive the past / It starts singing' – alongside a violin. In 2020, Esmail extracted this obbligato part to make a three-minute solo for her husband Vijay Gupta. The piece is, she writes, 'about the first moment of trust, of softening' and is based on the *rāga charukesi*.

Bright E major, in the almost wholly monophonic *Preludio* of the last and shortest of Bach's solos, is celebrated with fanfaring brilliance, swivels around a pedal, and irrepressible arpeggiation. The stately yet graceful slow dance that follows, a *Loure*, takes us elsewhere, but everything afterwards is again livelier. The *Gavotte* is 'en rondeau', i.e. repeated with interleaving variations on an episode. Then comes a pair of minuets. The second opens with a delicate modal phrase under a drone, a phrase smartened up to the major mode at the end, after which the first minuet is repeated. A dashing *Bourrée* and the neat curves of the *Gigue* complete the work.

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