

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 April 2022 1.00pm

Leila Josefowicz violin



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Matthias Pintscher (b.1971)

La Linea Evocativa: A Drawing for Violin Solo (2020)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)

I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande • IV. Gigue • V. Chaconne

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Epidemics flared up during Bach's lifetime: around the Baltic when he was in his 20s; later at spots in the Mediterranean. This was all some way from anywhere he was living, but perhaps we could imagine him scanning a newspaper in some coffeehouse.

'Scientists Fret as White House Rushes Vaccine' was one of the headlines on the front page of *The New York Times* on August 3 2020, the day when one of the city's residents, **Matthias Pintscher**, completed the solo piece he had been writing for Leila Josefowicz: *La Linea Evocativa*. There was no immediate prospect of a concert performance; Josefowicz had not played in public for almost five months. During that time she had fallen back on herself and on Bach, on music she could perform alone. Inevitably, as a great friend of composers, she had the idea of commissioning a new piece for these circumstances. Hence the invitation to Pintscher.

But there was a third artist in the mix: Josefowicz's partner George Condo. The experience of lockdown isolation was leading him to drawings of what he called 'Distanced Figures', including one of Josefowicz, from whom he was indeed forcibly separated for a while. A complex of images of her, heterogeneous in posture, detail and style, this work gave Pintscher a starting point, and he took its title, *A Drawing for Violin*, as subtitle for his own. Josefowicz's violin would traverse a line taking it through different corners, expanses and atmospheres – an evocative line.

The line begins as if the bow were a pencil scribbling; *ruvido* is the marking, 'roughly', on the tailpiece. This gesture recurs, as do others, linked – or set apart – by long notes that are always slowly changing in dynamic level or pitch or both. Perhaps these might be the spaces between quick sketches of a standing figure, a profile, an eye, a musical note. However, music being the art of time, this is not a drawing we take in all at once but one we experience being made, always active, on a tense edge between graphic image and abstraction, ferocity and calm. Very gradually the violin reaches upwards, sometimes falling back but nevertheless gaining ground – and gaining material, jettisoning other, that will enable it ultimately to sing. For this is the destination: a slow song in the super-high register, *canto (evocative and soulful)*, that the violin attains to close the 15-minute composition. Dispersion has been integrated, distance closed. Action is no longer distinct from space. Space is being created by consistent action that we are magically made to feel as motionless.

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. (We have the word of his son Carl Phillip Emanuel – though from much later, of course – that he played the instrument 'cleanly and penetratingly'). He was at Weimar for

only a few months, during which he turned 18, before he was off to a better position, but the stay was long enough for him to learn from a senior musician there, 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 Köthen, the violin solos include sonatas in alternation with partitas, and the partitas differ in form. Only the third has a prelude, and only the second – to speak now of the biggest difference – has a closing movement that makes everything else seem preludial.

This D minor partita begins with an *Allemande* (moderately paced duple time) that sets out some ground rules. One is universal for the period: each movement will travel to the dominant, repeat its path thus far, and go on into a second stretch that, looking back to the first, will return to the tonic, after which this too will be repeated. Others are more particular, and consummately exhibited in Bach. The path – the line – will be found by way of short elements that often fit together in pairs, which themselves will invite the next element, all along to the close. Surprise – a leap, triplet motion – will be incorporated.

More dances follow: *Courante* (fast triple time), *Sarabande* (slow triple time) and *Gigue* (lively 12/8), completing the standard pattern – to which Bach adds a postlude as big as all the rest. The rhythm that comes heaving into view at this point 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*. 64 times it arrives, 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.'

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