

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 31 October 2021 7.30pm

**Ning Feng** violin

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750)

Sonata No. 3 in C for solo violin BWV1005 (1720)

*I. Adagio • II. Fuga • III. Largo • IV. Allegro assai*

Interval

**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*

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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The techniques of playing polyphony on stringed instruments had been fully worked out by the end of the 17th Century, in Germany by composers like Biber and Walther, in England by gamba players like Christopher Simpson. The world awaited **Bach** to show exactly how far this genre could be taken. Bach's unaccompanied string works were composed round about 1720 in Cöthen, where he was enjoying an unaccustomed artistic freedom. As Court Kapellmeister to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Bach had been rather stuck in the organ-loft, but when in 1717 he stepped up from his Duke (who briefly imprisoned him, and never uttered his name again) to a Prince, he had an orchestra, and his violin-playing came into its own.

It has been suggested that Bach may have written his Sonatas and Partitas for the famous violinist Johann Georg Pisendel, whom he knew. Telemann, Albinoni and Vivaldi, with whom Pisendel studied in Venice in 1717, also composed for him. Pisendel himself was one of many virtuosos who composed unaccompanied pieces: Locatelli, Stamitz, Ferdinand David, Vieuxtemps, and of course Paganini among them. Most of these unaccompanied pieces were called Caprices. Bach's pupil, Agricola, provides a scornful definition of the pedagogical purpose of a mere Caprice: pieces designed for learning to master the full resources of an instrument, presenting all possible difficulties, to enable the student to acquire a firm control of them. He goes on to compare Caprices to their disadvantage with Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, which combine technical usefulness with something much more musical. Bach very frequently managed this handy trick, often further blending in an idea of completeness, or at least order: complete liturgies of cantatas, all the possible intervals for a canon, preludes and fugues in every key. The manuscript of his solo violin pieces neatly presents Sonatas and Partitas in alternation, all in different keys, minor keys first and then the major ones. Performance opportunities for six long, difficult works did not exist, of course – the order of the manuscript was purely a matter for Bach's mind. The Sonatas were perhaps intended for performance in church, while the Partitas must have appeared in private salons.

A comparison with the 12 unaccompanied Fantasies by Telemann, the godfather of Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, provides an interesting comparison with Bach's obsession with order. Telemann was a fine and famous composer, even more highly regarded than Bach by many at the time. His Fantasies, as their name implies, are extremely varied, some with three movements, some with more, some beginning with a fast movement, some with a slow. The one hint of order is that every third fantasy is in a minor key, but to set against that, Bach might have tutted that there are two fantasies in D major.

Bach arranged the first movement of his third Sonata for harpsichord. The fugue, 354 bars long, takes as its subject one of Bach's favourite tunes, the Whitsun antiphon *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which also appears in two organ chorale preludes, two cantatas, and one of the motets, but never worked out at such length as here, for a solo violin. The subject is presented at length – seven entries – with a regular countersubject of steady, solemn, descending semitones. A long, sprightly passage takes us to a new key (A minor, the relative minor), and now the fugue subject appears in two-part *stretto*, that is to say in close canon, one voice after the other. Another 'episode', this time starting in E minor, leads to a new vigorous three-part version of the subject, all based on the open D string, leading to a great cadence in G ('the dominant'). Now Bach archly writes *al riverso* in his score, to show us that he's about to turn his subject (and its countersubject) upside-down. This version shows a curious affinity for minor keys, but eventually works its way back to the home key to recapitulate the first 60-odd bars, throwing in a few extra counterpoints here and there. A *tour de force*.

While Bach's three sonatas show a single pattern, his three partitas are more varied – much more varied than the six Suites for unaccompanied cello, which all have a Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, a pair of *Galantieren* (as the lesser dances were called – Menuet, Bourrée or Gavotte), and a Gigue. The third violin Partita follows its *Prelude* with a fine selection of dances, of which only the *Gigue* is a regular member of a suite. Bach arranged the whole partita for harp or lute, and arranged the *Prelude* for organ and orchestra so he could use it as an introduction to two of his cantatas. The *Gavotte en Rondeau*, which presents its catchy tune, with its bold consecutive sevenths, no fewer than five times, is one of Bach's most desirable numbers, stolen away for the piano by Rachmaninov, amongst many others.

The second Partita at first seems the most modest of all the pieces – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless deprived of printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. The medical missionary and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer thought that 'out of a single theme Bach conjures a whole world'. Brahms, whose piano arrangement of the *Chaconne* thoughtfully limits itself to the left hand alone in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin, told Clara Schumann that it was 'one of the most wonderful and incomprehensible pieces of music'.