WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 5 January 2023
7.30pm

Liza Ferschtman violin

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Partita No. 1 in B minor for solo violin BWV1002 (1720)
I. Allemande • II. Double • III. Courante • IV. Double • V. Sarabande • VI. Double • VII. Tempo di Borea • VIII. Double

Sonata No. 1 in G minor for solo violin BWV1001 (1720)
I. Adagio • II. Fuga. Allegro • III. Siciliana • IV. Presto

Interval

Sonata No. 3 in C for solo violin BWV1005 (1720)
I. Adagio • II. Fuga • III. Largo • IV. Allegro assai

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Though an unaccompanied violin is not a common sight in concert halls, it certainly has its place in the wider world of music. Admiral Edward Boscawen, writing home to his wife from the Caribbean to tell her that if he could just capture a few more French ships he'd be able to finish off their new house properly, mentioned that through the stern-lights he could hear the sailors dancing to the sound of a violin. (That house, Hatchlands, is now the home of Alec Cobbe's wonderful collection of composer-related keyboard instruments – Haydn, Mozart, JC Bach, Chopin, Mahler, Elgar….) No less a composer than Franz Schubert wrote folksy *Ländler* for unaccompanied violin, perhaps to play himself, as his taller, more confident friends trod the measure – the technical difficulties are not too great for one who was primarily a pianist. At about the same time, the poet John Clare, who learned to play the fiddle from the local Roma community, kept a manuscript violin tune-book, as did the poet Thomas Hardy. The traditions of such folk-fiddling are proudly maintained and developed today. The violin is such a splendidly portable instrument. My uncle used to play his violin to lead the hymns in the annual church service permitted in the lost village of Imber, on Salisbury Plain.

But that sort of violin-playing is mainly melodic, perhaps with an open string added from time to time to form a drone, like a bagpipe. In the concert hall, an unaccompanied violin plays harmony and counterpoint. Dr Johnson would perhaps have been 'surprised to find it done at all', though he was not a great admirer of music: 'a method of employing the mind without the labour of thinking', he once remarked to Boswell.

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. 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.

His son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, wrote of his father's string-playing: 'As the greatest expert and judge of harmony, he liked best to play the viola, but from his youth and right into old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly, keeping the orchestra in better order than he could have done with the harpsichord. He understood to perfection the possibilities of all stringed instruments. This is evidenced by his solos for the violin and for the violoncello, without bass. One of the greatest violinists told me once 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'.

Bach shared his preference for the viola with Mozart – both composers enjoyed being in the midst of the harmony, as it were, playing neither the tune nor the bass, but the easily neglected other-notes, upon whose tuning so much depends. Clearly, his 'penetrating' violin had more of a solo nature! (Possibly reflecting the necessities of choir-mastering in large buildings, 'penetrating' was also the word Emanuel selected to describe his father's singing voice.)In the autograph manuscript of the violin solos, Sonatas alternate with Partitas. The sonatas are all in the shape of the Sonata da chiesa ('Church Sonata') – slow-fast-slow-fast, with the second movement a fugue, and the third movement in a different key from the rest. The Partitas show more variety. The first Partita consists of four dances, each followed by a variation, or 'double'.

Bach was so pleased with the fugue of the first Sonata that he arranged it for the organ and for the lute. Writing about the violin solos, his pupil Agricola tells us: 'Their composer often played them on the clavichord, adding as much in the matter of harmony as he found necessary. In so doing, he recognised the necessity of a sounding harmony, such as in compositions of this sort he could not more fully achieve.' There might be two views about the necessity of (extra) sounding harmony, but it's worth noting that Mendelssohn, the great reviver of Bach's music, wrote a piano accompaniment for the Chaconne, while Schumann wrote accompaniments to the whole lot, Sonatas and Partitas. The musicologist Karl Geiringer has an interesting take on this, comparing Bach's implied polyphony to the *trompe l'œil* wall paintings fashionable in Baroque times. Just as they require the working of the inner eye, so Bach requires the cooperation of the inner ear.

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*.

We can hear the Second Sonata and the other two Partitas tomorrow. The great *Chaconne* is saved for the final climax.

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