

# Solo Violin, Solo Cello

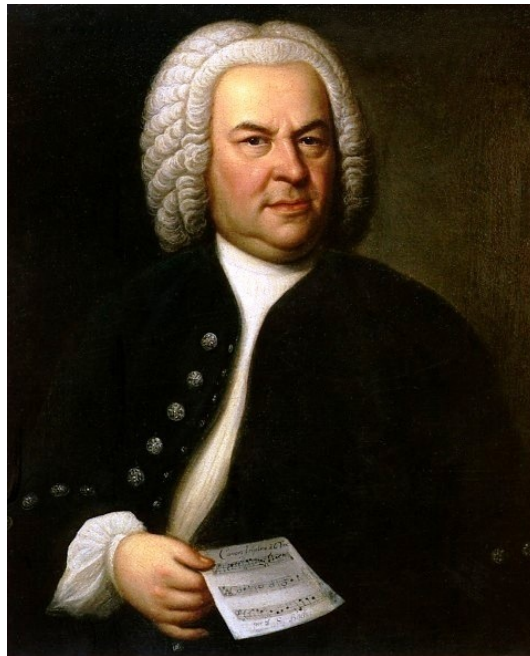
Emilio Castro, violin · Alonso Restrepo, cello

## Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

It was during the six years from 1717 to 1723 which **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** spent as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen that the emerging German master composed much of his chamber and orchestral music. Among these works are the sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin, listed as BWV 1001-1006, as well as the six suites for unaccompanied cello, BWV 1007-1012. The autograph of the violin sonatas and partitas is well-preserved, beautifully handwritten in a manuscript dating from 1720. On the contrary, Bach's autograph of the cello suites has been lost, although copies do survive from the composer's lifetime, including one version in the handwriting of his second wife Anna Magdalena which has been dated to either 1727 or 1728.

Musicologist David Ewen has remarked of these twelve ingenious compositions that "the instrument acquires an independence and variety of speech it had not known before." Bach writes contrapuntally for these melody instruments, imagining what a fugue might sound like through the use of double, triple, and occasionally quadruple stops where multiple strings are played at once. Bach was an adept violinist: he knew the technical capacities of the violin, and might have even been able to play his own demanding works for this instrument. Less evidence survives regarding Bach's abilities as a cellist, but he likely learned cello as a boy and, if nothing else, would have known the instrument's technical intricacies.

The *Chaconne* from the Second Partita in D minor, BWV 1004 is the first work heard on tonight's concert. The term "partita" means the same as "suite," so these compositions, like the cello suites, consist primarily of stylized dance movements. The chaconne genre had also begun as a dance, but by Bach's day had evolved into a theme and variations over a repeated harmonic progression. In Bach's *Chaconne*, the composer subjects the initial theme to an amazing sixty-four variations! This uninterrupted, fifteen-minute work serves as the finale to Bach's Second Partita. Arguably the most difficult movement in the set of sonatas and partitas, it is also the most famous, as successive generations of violinists have attempted to master its challenges and perform them for an awestruck audience.



Johann Sebastian Bach

The sonatas and partitas faced little of the obscurity so many of Bach's works did in the first hundred years after the composer's death as violinists were constantly drawn to technical challenges like those on display in the *Chaconne*. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, the listening public also became aware of Bach's solo violin works when Felix Mendelssohn and others began presenting these works in recital. Mendelssohn, however, judging the *Chaconne* too difficult in its original form for his audiences to comprehend, composed his own piano accompaniment which he performed when his friend the violinist Ferdinand David introduced the *Chaconne* at the "Third Evening of Musical Entertainment" held in Leipzig on February 8, 1840. By 1843, David had proceeded to publish each of the sonatas and partitas with added fingerings, bowings, and other edits. The violinist Joseph Joachim would learn from Mendelssohn and David's editions, but his long career would allow him to better comprehend Bach's original material and share this understanding with the listening public.

Unlike the solo violin works, the cello suites did not receive acceptance until the early years of the twentieth century when cellist Pablo Casals began introducing them to the public. Casals had discovered the then unknown works in a music shop around 1890 and rehearsed them privately for a dozen years before ever playing them publicly. Today, the six cello suites have become as much a staple of the professional cellist's repertoire as the solo violin works form a core ingredient of the violinist's repertoire.

The Cello Suite No. 6 in D major, BWV 1012 closes tonight's program. The Sixth Suite begins with a *Prelude* rich in emotional contrast, as the basic material goes through moments of great confidence and others full of uncertainty. The *Allemande* which follows answers with a lyricism so tender as to almost be remorseful; the allemande was a stately dance originating from Germany, set in common time and paced at a moderate tempo. Afterwards comes a joyous *Courante*; this livelier dance in triple meter took its name from the French word for "running." The fourth movement is a declamatory *Sarabande*; this slower dance genre was

associated with Spain but today is suspected to have originated in Spain's American colonies. Two *Gavottes* follow with the first repeated after the second; this French dance form in duple meter often had a moderate tempo and fell into clear-cut four-bar phrases. A lively *Gigue* concludes



Eugène Ysaÿe

the Suite; this fast, galloping dance genre originated with the common folk of England, and was often employed as the final movement in Baroque suites.

Between these two masterpieces by Johann Sebastian Bach, we hear a sonata by the Belgian violinist-composer **Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)**, who was regarded as one of the foremost virtuosi of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. Ysaÿe greatly admired the sonatas and partitas of Bach and wished to create his own works for solo violin in their image. This goal was finally realized with the composition of his Six Sonatas for solo violin, Op. 27, written from 1923 to 1924 soon after his friend the violinist Joseph Szigeti had given a recital of several of Bach's pieces. As Norbert Gertsch has commented, the Sonatas "were conceived as a modern-day response to Bach's music... but they are also a response to everything that had changed in music and violin playing in the meantime." Ysaÿe's Sonatas occasionally quote Bach's music, but more significantly they imitate the technical and musical demands Bach's music asks of its players.

So often virtuoso-composers create their works as showpieces for themselves. Ysaÿe, however, was fully aware that his own career as a virtuoso was coming to a close due to his declining health. For that reason, he created these Sonatas for several younger violinists whose playing he admired. Aside from Szigeti who inspired the set and received the dedication of the First Sonata, the others are dedicated to violinists Fritz Kreisler, George Enescu, Jacques Thibaud, Manuel Quiroga, and Ysaÿe's pupil and second violinist in his string quartet, Mathieu Crickboom. Each Sonata in some way depicts its

dedicatee, often describing their personality, emulating their playing style, or alluding to repertoire they enjoyed performing.

The Sonata No. 3 in D minor which we hear tonight is dedicated to the Romanian violinist George Enescu who would go on to mentor Yehudi Menuhin. This one-movement sonata, subtitled *Ballade*, is free and rhapsodic in character. Opening in the manner of an operatic recitative, the piece changes mood and tempo frequently throughout its seven-minute duration. Multiple stopping and various passing figures will remind listeners of Bach's works for solo violin, although the angular melody that comes to predominate also has an eastern European color, perhaps evoking Enescu's Romanian heritage. In sum, this contrast between the contrapuntal writing of Bach and the showmanship of Ysaÿe's own era gives the Third Sonata an undeniable identity all its own.

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Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College located in Natchitoches, Louisiana in May 2013 after completing his undergraduate thesis "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." As series director of the successful Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series from May 2014 to April 2016, Jackson played a vital role in the renewal of interest in chamber music across Central Louisiana. This interest has encouraged the creation of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival and the new series Nachtmusik von BrainSurge, both of which Jackson remains active in as concert annotator and creative consultant. He also blogs at MusicCentral where he shares concert experiences, gives listening recommendations, posts interviews with contemporary composers, and offers insights into his own compositions. As a composer, he has worked to integrate a modern vocabulary into established classical forms in ways that are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. In fall 2016, Jackson began graduate studies in musicology at the University of Louisville where he also sings with the University Chorus and participates in the School of Music Composition Seminar.



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