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## INTRODUCTION

### Preludio from Partita III for Solo Violin in E-major, BWV 1006

In 1977, an excerpt from the Third Partita by Johann Sebastian Bach - from which we just heard George playing the Preludio - was sent into outer space, on board the American space probes Voyager 1 and Voyager 2. Their mission was to explore the universe beyond our solar system and indeed, they are still travelling today, more than 16 billion km from here, in search of other suns and other planets that may perhaps be inhabited. An excerpt of this *Third Partita* and two other pieces by J.S. Bach (from the *Second Brandenburg Concerto* and from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*) were engraved on the Voyager Golden Record. This videophonograph record, constructed of gold-plated copper, contained sounds, music and images, amongst others, supposed to give an account of the diversity of life and culture on Earth and aimed at potential other galactic civilizations. Three works by Bach (and only two by Beethoven and one by Mozart) out of the 27 musical pieces chosen for the Golden Record... Would Bach then be the most representative of terrestrial music, or the most likely to appeal to extra-terrestrials?

To extra-terrestrials maybe, but Bach did not always appeal to earthlings: the man whom today we consider to be an absolute and universal musical genius was hardly known outside of the Germany of his lifetime - the first half of the 18th century - where he was born and always lived. And although his contemporaries were full of praise of his extraordinary gifts of composition, improvisation, and virtuosity, they did not always understand his music, which some judged 'gothic', i.e. old-fashioned.

A critic of the time writes: *'This great man would be admired by all nations if he had more charm and if he would not remove the Natural from his pieces by adding pompousness and something muddled, and if he would not overshadow Beauty by excessive artistry... This pompousness has caused him to fall from being natural, to being artificial, something sublime in the dark... One admires an overwhelming amount of work, enormous trouble alas employed in vain, since it struggles against Reason.'*

Judged as being 'unconscionable' and even 'irrational', Bach was more or less forgotten in the 19th century, or romanticized following the tastes of the time. It was only gradually during the 20th century, in parallel to the rising of contemporary music, that the desire to compose and to listen to something other than classical music made people curious about music from before - 'ancient', 'baroque' - and restored Bach's œuvre to favour, sometimes to a cult status, as in the famous formula by philosopher Emil Cioran from 1952: 'If there is anyone who owes everything to Bach, it is God.'

We won't be going quite that far, but we still have a weak spot for Bach, and tonight we would like to send a small space probe into the universe of his music, and to explore one unique star with you - a small but very magnificently shiny one - that has continued to

sparkle since its apparition in 1720; this *Second Partita*, or *Partia Secunda*, as Bach wrote in his manuscript, is a piece of just 30 minutes, composed of a Suite of five dance movements - Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, Gigue, Chaconne - for one instrument with four strings, the violin.

We have chosen this star because it occupies a unique place in the musical cosmos: Bach uses all possible resources of the violin here, in an unbelievably elaborated and intense composition that culminates in the last movement: a Chaconne, the longest in the history of music, in which one musical motif unfolds in an architecture of unheard-of and uninterrupted variations for almost fifteen minutes..

This Chaconne has had such an impact that it inspired several transcriptions for other instruments - and even for a whole orchestra! - of which a very delicate transcription by Brahms for the left hand of a pianist. This is what Brahms wrote about the Chaconne:

*'On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined 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.'*

## **PARTITA II**

The Second Partita is part of a whole of six pieces, the three Sonatas and three Partitas composed by Bach in 1720. He was 36 years old then and worked in favourable professional circumstances at the court of Köthen. The duke of Anhalt-Köthen, was a musician himself and patron of the arts who engaged an ensemble of excellent musicians. In this context Bach composed the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the six *Brandenburg Concertos* and the six *Cello Suites*, with the six *Sonatas and Partitas* as counterpart.

The violin appeared in Italy two centuries earlier. Due to its radiant sound the violin was initially used in popular music, but soon became the favourite in court-music - to the point of replacing the viola da gamba - and to become the 'king of instruments', specially due to the unbelievable resonance of instruments constructed in Italy by Stradivari and others at the time of Bach. Even so, the violin was rarely used as a solo instrument; composing entire pieces for a single melodic instrument was still a challenge.

But in the 18th century a violin school emerged in Germany, influenced by travelling Italian virtuoso violinist-composers, such as Vivaldi, Corelli, Geminiani, or Locatelli. Perhaps this trend inspired Bach to compose for the instrument...or the fact that he was a violinist himself, as was his father - descendant of five generations of musicians mostly active in Thüringen in central Germany.

As a matter of fact, when a musician was needed in the region, they used to say: 'We need a Bach' as there were so many of them! Johann Sebastian himself started his career at the age of 18 as a violinist '*and until late in his years, he played the violin with refinement and great precision*' according to his son Carl Philip Emmanuel, the most well-known of his musician sons. However, in all probability he did not perform his virtuosic Six Sonatas and Partitas himself.

The six pieces are organized in pairs alternating the Italian style (with its four-movement *Sonata da chiesa* structure) and the French style (a suite of dance movements). It shows Bach equally at home in the French and Italian styles, then the vogue in Europe and in the spirit of « *les goûts réunis* » - a synthesis of styles encouraged by François Couperin in France and by Georg Philipp Telemann in Germany.

Moreover, Bach corresponded with Couperin in his youth and was well familiar with the French style through his contact with a student of Lully's. He also knew the Italian style very well, for example Vivaldi's music, whose *Estro armonico* (a collection of 12 violin concertos) he transcribed for other instruments.

The second Partita comprises five movements inspired by dance forms, although by that time they were no longer intended as music to be danced to. Only the underlying rhythmical structure still shows traces of dance music.

The **Allemande (allemande)** is characterized by a short upbeat and a moderate 4/4 tempo. It was typically used as the opening movement of an instrumental Suite.

The **Courante (corrente)** originally was a French courtly dance, in a fast tempo, alternating binary and ternary rhythmical patterns.

The **Sarabande (sarabanda)**, of Latin-American origin, was introduced in Spain in the 16th century and subsequently banned for its 'lewd' manner. In France and England it became a slower and more noble dance in 3, often with a stressed second beat.

The **Gigue (giga)** is a fast dance from the British Isles (jig), still in use today and often found as the last movement of a suite.

The **Chaconne (ciaccona)** is a Spanish dance of Latin-American or Basque origin, in slow and solemn three, often with a dotted second beat.

The Italian term *Partita*, or *Partia* as Bach wrote, originally simply meant 'variation' within a piece. Later, the word was used to designate the whole of a group of (dance) movements of a Suite.

The procedure of variation is fundamental in baroque music. In his personal library (and often used by him for teaching) was the famous treatise by Niedt, the *Handleitung* (Manual) published in 1706: '*Treatise on Variations, or how to use the Basso Continuo to create variations; how to manufacture easily, even from a bad bass line, preludes, chaconnes, allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, menuets, giges; as well as other instructions.*'

Concretely, it means that for composing, one uses the bass line (i.e. the lowest notes) as a starting point and from which the melodic variations will emerge.

At the time, there were some very well-known bass lines in circulation that were extensively used by travelling musicians from all horizons to improvise together - somewhat like the blues structure today that all jazz musicians know. For example, the one called *La Folia*, which you've certainly heard already as it generated hundreds of variations - from Lully and Corelli to Rachmaninov - and often used in film music and video games of today.

Our Partita is also built up on a basic motif in the bass: insinuated already in the first movement, the Allemande, it will

'haunt' each subsequent movement up to the Chaconne, where it is fully revealed and developed.

### THE CHACONNE

In the Chaconne, that we will probe in detail, the bass-line is developed as an *ostinato* pattern, i.e. repeated many times as a loop. Here the bass-line is a short motif of four notes, within the interval of a fourth (D to A) and therefore called a tetrachord. Mostly the motif appears in descending form, though at two places also in ascending form (D to A upwards).

At the beginning of the Chaconne, the bass-line is cast into two phrases of four bars each, the second as a reply to the first. However, since the violin is a melodic instrument, not a harmonic instrument such as the harpsichord for example, the bass-line is often merely suggested as it blends in among the other notes.

These eight bars are followed by 15 minutes of variations, before returning to the beginning phrase as epilogue (coda). In total, the 32 variations (of each 2x4 bars) are organized in three blocks. This is the global form of the Chaconne:

- d-minor (132 bars)
- D-major (76 bars)
- d-minor (48 bars)

Within each of the three blocks, a similar procedure of rhythmic acceleration and return to the original key (d-minor or D-major) will be employed.

Based on these extremely limited means of composition – a single bass-line as motif, a procedure repeated almost identically three times without great contrast in tonality – Bach manages to create a monumental continuous movement.

A movement in constant metamorphosis, in which inventive figuration abounds, multiplies, yet the overall form remains coherent over the entire duration, unified by this great tonal arch in D.

### Technique

In terms of composition, it is an amazing feat that he accomplishes here, combining a horizontal, vertical and diagonal approach to the music.

The horizontal approach is the melody, i.e. the notes are organized in an interesting melodic shape. The vertical thought is the harmonic shape, organizing chords providing colour and intensity to a broader structure, in combination with the horizontal lines. Added to this is the diagonal approach, connected to Bach's polyphonic idiom: the superposing, connecting, and dialoguing of melodic material.

For this one needs to be conscious of the voices that reply to each other, sometimes at the same time, sometimes after each other, sometimes with more, or with fewer voices ... hence, one has to anticipate what will follow. This is the diagonal approach, called the technique of counterpoint.

Through this triple approach, Bach clearly shows a certain taste for complexity and above all, an organizational genius worthy of

a chess master, exploring all the possible solutions for creating an alloy of polyphony and complex harmony, at times chromatic and dissonant...This is what inspired Arnold Schoenberg at the beginning of the 20th century, when he started exploring other tonal systems through his twelve-tone technique.

Even with a violin, a rather supremely monophonic instrument, Bach manages to develop a very advanced harmonic and polyphonic style. This reflects an extraordinary knowledge of the instrument, verging on the technical limitations of the time (and still today). The choice of composing this Partita in d-minor is not related to the mourning character traditionally attributed to this key (several Requiems were written in d-minor) nor to the 'devotion, grandeur and delight of the soul' that was generally associated with the key of d-minor in the 18th century. The reason is simply that he could not have written the Partita and specially this chaconne in another key, or it would have been unplayable technically: because of the way the violin is tuned, the 'open' strings G-D-A-E already contain two fundamental notes (D and A) that make up the tonic chord in d-minor, which simplifies the fingering of some more difficult chords – of which there are plenty!

At the beginning, there are only chords, it is very vertical. Then the melody develops (the horizontal element), unfolding in one, then two, three voices ... and polyphony emerges. With the violin, Bach also creates a 'virtual polyphony' at times: the ear can reconstruct the latent melodies, not only by prolonging the actual sounds, but by mentally recreating the lines, voices, or notes that are just suggested or implied.

### Rhetoric

All these technical means are not merely a clever demonstration of know-how, they are at the service of an extremely lively musical discourse that is laden with meaning and that appeals to the senses and sensitivity of the listener.

In instrumental music, rhetorics are ubiquitous, amongst others in the form of 'figures', some of which were strongly coded: pastoral tranquility in the use of the oboe, the clanging of swords in the pizzicati of the strings, or chiasmic motifs evoking the cross of Christ. But, each composer developed his own form of eloquence.

As a result, in the Chaconne one could hear conversations, yes, even a debate between two voices, then three – as if several violinists were playing together.

The procedures of acceleration, melodic extension, cyclic repetition, elongation of the motifs, insistence on certain figures bring about an emotional tension on this basso ostinato in d-minor that is released when passing into D-major and returns in a more condensed way when returning to d-minor.

This tension is also audible in the way the chords are played in the Chaconne: there are broken chords, arpeggiated chords in which each note is played separately; but at three distinct moments, Bach uses the technique of bariolage, exploiting the colour of the open strings to amplify the resonance and a very effective means of using the chord: it creates the impression of acceleration and insistence, all the more because he lets the sequence last for almost two minutes in the first part of the Chaconne and one minute in the second and the third part, in a sort of climax that wants to leave its traces just before concluding.

The emotional rhetorics at work in the Chaconne can perhaps be linked to a sorrowful event in Bach's life from the period in which he composed the Six Sonatas and Partitas: the decease of his first wife, Maria Barbara, which he discovers upon his return from a voyage and that leaves him alone with four young children. But the way this Chaconne is perceived is as varied as there are variations, since rhetorics draw on experience, i.e. from what the music *says* to what it *results* in with the listener. This is what we have come to realize in the small video project that we are working on in parallel to this live exposition: making several people of different horizons hear the Chaconne and filming their impressions just after listening. For one person it's just about getting goose-flesh, for another it is an allegory of life with its ups and downs, for yet another, it is an adventure in the bushes where barbarity goes hand in hand with grace..

The musical discourse in the Chaconne also expresses a specific *tempus*. This is neither the divine time of Gregorian plainchant - the unwavering, motionless *cantus planus* - nor the human time of 'galant' melodies that develop during Bach's lifetime, with its multiple themes and tonalities. No, it rather is time that unfurls indefinitely, constantly modifying the elements that crystallize upon it, regularly restoring itself to its original tonality.

Is it the temporality of the artist that is reflected here? That of a man, simultaneously an heir of the medieval world that created him and growing into the modernness that surrounds him? While this past contains a vision of a stable world in which the earth is at the centre of the universe, where everything was created according to a divine order (with its secret analogies between all things), the future is about a mutating world - now the earth rotates around the sun - a world in which religious wars have destabilized belief and in which the individual, shaken by his passions, expresses himself.. At the crossing of time past and time evolving into the future, in the bizarre epoch that we have named 'baroque', Bach combines order and disorder in an unquenchable flow, which is that of life itself. It is perhaps not a coincidence that 'Bach' signifies 'stream' in German.

### Symbolism

Into this complex and organic combinatory, Bach integrates symbols that originate both from a common tradition and from a mythology of his own making. It is as if he wished to reaffirm his attachment to a divine reality full of sense but simultaneously marking it with his own, creative, unique and innovative signature. As a result, there is a theological and esoteric dimension in his *œuvre*. It was, however, quite common with artists from the time to resort to numerical proportions and codes representing spiritual order.

In this way, the number 3 represents the Holy Trinity; 4 the creation, the earth; 7 is the sum of 3 and 4, where the human and the divine supplement each other, but the number 7 also refers to the 7 days of the week, the 7 planets that were known at the time, the 7 days of the creation, etc.

3 and 4 also reminds one of the way (in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages) in which the sciences were divided in *trivium* (the sciences of the divine word: grammar, dialectics, rhetorics) and *quadrivium* (the earthly sciences of arithmetics, geometry, astronomy, music). The latter clearly shows the historic connection between music and the science of numbers, for instance in calculating the proportions

between pitches (the division of the octave into a scale).

In the 32 variations of the Chaconne, the musicologist Joël Lester has highlighted numeric proportions in which the well-known golden ratio 1, 61803398875 would seem to appear. It has become a craze to find this golden ratio everywhere, whether in nature or in art, and particularly in Bach's music. Nevertheless Bach was very keen on numerology and riddles of all kinds; he even played with the numbers and letters of his own name.

The letters B-A-C-H in the German notation system correspond to B- A-C-B , an interesting musical motif: since it is not related to any particular tonality, it can function in many different harmonic contexts and, thanks to its symmetry (a descending half-tone between B -A, idem between C-B , separated by a minor third) in manifold melodic conjugations: in a potentially endless sequential repetition, in mirror or in inversion (Krebs/crab) Bach wrote a fugue on this theme and used it as a signature in The Art of Fugue.

He also plays with the number 14, the sum of the letters in his name (B being the second letter of the alphabet + A the first + C the third + H the eighth:  $2+1+3+8=14$ ). He also uses the number 41, which corresponds to J.S. Bach and the mirror-image of 14, or the number 158 which corresponds to Johann Sebastian Bach and of which the sum of the numbers is again 14!

Moreover, Bach was a member of a scientific society founded by one of his students. Although his colleagues Handel and Telemann were already members, he waited to be the 14th member before joining. The society focused on numerical relations in music and Bach submitted, amongst others, the Goldberg Variations to the society as a 'scientific contribution'.

It was even surmised that he was a member of the Rosicrucian fraternity, a hermetical philosophical circle related to freemasonry... Although there is no certainty about this, I can hardly not mention it in our current venue, the previous masonic temple of the *Droit Humain* (in use from 1935 to 1976) whose motto was 'ordo ab chao' - order out of chaos.

Symbols abound here, for instance in the round glass windows containing the masonic triangle - triangle of transcendence, of geometric perfection and the eye of consciousness -in the small pentagon at the back that represents the profane man, whereas the five-pointed star represents the initiated. The claustra contains the motif of the six-pointed star, named Solomon's Seal or the Shield of David, and refers to the two great musical figures from the Old Testament.

You probably will also have noticed the well-known masonic symbols of the Square and Compasses in the tiling of the entry hall that refer to righteousness and wisdom, and the geometrical illustration of the theorem of Pythagoras (the rectangular triangle).

It is a homage from the freemasons to the great mathematician and philosopher from Antiquity who believed the universe to be organized according to harmonic numerical relations and that the distances between the planets correspond to musical intervals...Which brings us back to the brilliant second *Partita* that we will hear now after such a detailed voyage in outer space.

**Partita II in d-minor, BWV 1004: Allemanda-Corrente-Sarabanda-Giga-Ciaconna**

violin by Filip Kuijken, Tokyo 2004

baroque bow by Jérôme Gastaldo, Brussels 2015

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