



## Infinite Angles

Gil Shaham's invaluable insight into J S Bach's solo sonatas and partitas, captured in discussion with Ariane Todes.

As works of art, Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin represent a pinnacle of musical achievement; arguably even of human accomplishment. For players they offer a supreme challenge on multiple levels: musical, technical, physical, emotional and spiritual. This puts no small pressure on violinists when it comes to committing their performances to disc for posterity, and many delay the feat or put it off altogether. For many years, Gil Shaham avoided performing the works: 'Knowing how strongly people feel about them, and how strongly I feel about them, I wasn't comfortable presenting them for an audience.'

About ten years ago, though, he decided to introduce them into his programmes: 'I made a concerted effort. If I didn't start performing them they would never feel more comfortable, or improve.' The decision reaped rewards: 'Many musicians have understood what I learnt then – there is no greater joy than playing Bach. Even today, when I go to my practice room and I've set aside an hour to practise Bach I find myself still going at it two hours later, working at it and loving it.'

He found it rewarding to explore these works more fully, in their many different dimensions, and starting with the fundamentals: 'During this time I've learnt so much about violin technique. My basic technique changed three times because of this music – the way I hold my bow, the way I hold my violin, the way I put my fingers down. I've found myself questioning everything.'

This included experimenting with a Baroque-style bow and bridge, and gut strings, in order to get closer to the way that Bach's own violin would have sounded. Although Shaham began these recording



sessions with a more modern set-up, after comparing a few takes using both approaches he decided to go with the more Baroque set-up. You can hear the difference in the sound, with the raw timbre of the gut strings and the lighter articulation that the Baroque bow inspires, compared with the brighter sound of modern synthetic strings and the more sustained sonority of the modern Tourte-designed bow.

What appeals to Shaham about this sound? He refers to a seminal pedagogical treatise written by Leopold Mozart, father of Wolfgang Amadeus, in 1756: 'Leopold Mozart describes the round bow as having a "small softness" at the beginning of each stroke. I'd like to think I understand his meaning. I love that sound, that gentle attack. I want to play everything with a Baroque bow now, even Bartók and beyond!' What effect does this set-up have on his interpretation? 'It changes every stroke, but it doesn't really change general ideas of interpretation. You can do everything with both sets of bow and bridge, although some things are easier with the modern bow, some with the Baroque one. The "small softness" is easier with the Baroque bow.' There is much debate about the use of vibrato in Baroque music, with some extreme interpreters going as far as banning it altogether, although sources from the time, including Leopold Mozart, reference it as one of the tools available to violinists. Shaham finds a compromise: 'I use some vibrato, but I try to err on the side of not using too much. Vibrato can be very beautiful as an embellishment. When there's a repeat in one of the dance movements you can change

your vibrato as if using ornamentation, and this can achieve a subtle effect, which makes sense within the music.'

How does his choice of set-up affect the tempos?

'I was surprised when playing with the Baroque bow that because it was lighter it was easier to play faster. A lot of passagework in Vivaldi, for example, suddenly seemed to work much more freely and fast with the Baroque bow.' However his tempos relate more to his understanding of the music and contextual comparisons with other works by Bach. He explains: 'I grew up playing this music slower and hearing performances that were slower. But at some point I realised that if the Menuetts of the French Suites or the very famous Minuets from Anna Magdalena's Notebook fall at a certain clip, then why don't I play the Menuets of the Third Partita in the same tempo? If you think of how fast the fugue from the Overture of the Orchestral Suite No.1 in C major is performed, why was I playing the Fuga of the G minor Sonata so slowly? The same held for the pulses of the famous Sarabandas of Corelli and Ciacconas by Monteverdi or Lully, or Bach's other Ciaccona, in Cantata 150. Moreover, I believe composers often think of violin writing as rapid and brilliant, and in my experience it is rare that a living composer requests that we play slower. So my feeling for the general tempos of this music is faster. It swings better.'

'This might be the best time ever to be studying, hearing and performing Bach, because we have so much scholarly work available, so much information about the music itself. I've learnt so much from the research that has emerged in the last 40 years. When talking to students I always encourage them to be as thorough as they possibly can: to look at all the manuscripts, to learn from all the recordings, to read all the books and articles that are out there. With great masterpieces like this it's like looking at a statue from an infinite number of angles. We can learn something different from each one.'

Historic research does not necessarily lead to one correct musical conclusion, as he explains: 'I try to learn from it, but I don't think of my performance as being "authentic" in any sense. This music transcends time and culture, and even specific performances or instruments. At the time it was written people were experimenting with everything: the shape of the violin, the shape of the bow, the tuning of the strings – they were inventing new instruments. So I think we have the freedom to experiment. For example, I love hearing these pieces on the marimba, even though it's not "authentic".'

There is a complicated relationship between Bach's secular and sacred music, as Shaham explains:

'Most of his output was in church music. Some works – the "Coffee Cantata" ['Schweigt stille, plaudert nicht', BWV 211] for example – were decidedly non-religious. Bach himself would often use, by means of parody, the very same material used in secular works in religious contexts, and vice versa. Some people make the case that the solo violin pieces are secular, especially as they were likely written when he lived in Calvinist Cöthen and was writing for musicians rather than for the Church. A case can also be made, as has been done with the Solo Cello Suites, The Well-Tempered Clavier or The Art of Fugue, that the solo violin pieces, when taken as a whole, are a retelling of the scriptures, presenting the three major Christian festivals: the birth of Jesus Christ, his Crucifixion and Resurrection.'

Indeed, it's possible to regard Bach as a supreme story-teller, and the interchange between sonatas with partitas here as an inventive way of presenting a musical narrative: 'This alternation of sonata da chiesa with a suite of dances, although unique in our catalogue of Bach's works, was not without precedent. It's interesting to compare these pieces' structure with another 'multi-national' work, Couperin's Les Nations. My reading is that the Fugas are possibly central as they contain the musical message as a "narrative" on which the arias and lighter closing movements reflect. The following Partitas then mirror the message of the preceding Sonatas, both motivically and in their emotional Affect. I imagine to myself Bach as an improviser thinking extemporaneously, "Here's the message. Shall I deliver it in Corrente now? Would you like to hear it in Gavotte? Or Bourrée?"'

What might this message be? 'Again I think it's important to be careful about speculating, but as a starting point it's interesting to look at texts where Bach repurposed some of this music. Many people have written about the similarity between the C major Fuga theme and the chorale based on the Lutheran hymn 'Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herr Gott' ('Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord'). The Preludio of the E major Partita is used in Cantata BWV 29, 'Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken' ('We thank you, God').

Bach also uses a Baroque motif that his listeners would have understood: 'The Second Sonata contains the traditional lament of a descending chromatic fourth (A-G sharp-G-F sharp-F natural-E). This is a well-known Baroque formula that represents grief. It's the same phrase that Purcell uses as a lament in Dido and Aeneas. The piece ends with the same chromatic phrase, which is later mirrored (as D-C sharp-C-B-B flat-A) in the D minor Partita, which has five movements, the last of which is the Ciaccona. This might be significant in that the number

five often refers to the wounds of Christ. It's interesting to note that the E minor English Suite No.5 also contains five dances, the last of which prominently features a lament. Perhaps this is a depiction of the Crucifixion.'

There are further clues in the piece that follows directly after the Ciaccona in the sequence, according to Shaham: 'The Adagio of the C major Sonata begins with a rising line. Every note is pulled downward by dissonance and yet despite the gravity of those dissonant suspensions the overall line climbs. This reminds me of the opening of the St Matthew Passion, which represents the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Overall the rising fifth (C-D-E-F-G) becomes an important motif for the piece. The triple metre of this Adagio could represent the Holy Trinity, as it often does in the Cantatas and elsewhere, and it leads us straight to the Chorale theme "Komm, Heiliger Geist" presented in fugue.' He continues, 'What is fascinating to me is that the counterpoint to this Fuga's theme is the lament, the very same pitches (D-C sharp-C-B-B flat-A) as in the Ciaccona. Later on in the Fuga, the subject is inverted, and so the descending line of the lament becomes an ascending line. At the conclusion of the "inverted" fugue's exposition Bach signs his name in the bass (B flat-A-C-B), cadences in a joyous C major and proceeds to recap the rising line from the previous movement (C-DE-F-G). This passage goes from the bottom of the violin to the very top, and maybe, again, this represents the Ascension. This is an incredibly moving moment for me. What does it signify for a man who was orphaned as a boy of only nine? What does it mean for the grown child to have mastered music to express his faith and to believe in the Resurrection?'

Understanding the social mores of the time also adds fascinating context, since the structure of the Baroque Suite may have reflected the societal hierarchy of the time. Shaham says: 'I remember reading an article about the traditional Baroque Suite. The author explained that the king and queen, or the couple with the highest rank, would dance first: an allemande, courante, or loure, maybe – a stately dance with movement focused on the arms and legs. Then more of the nobility would join in for a corrente, a less formal running dance. By the time you get to the sarabande, a sensual dance where one would use facial expressions and other parts of their body, or a gallant dance, formality relaxes. Finally everyone dances a gigue. After reading this article I found I heard this music differently.'

Apart from the moving image of the nine-year-old orphan who grew up to write such profound music,

what sense does Shaham get of Bach as a person through the composer's work? 'He must have had incredible industry. At the end of his life he said: "I was made to work; if you are equally industrious you will be equally successful." I'm not sure that's true, but I find his humility and his hard work very inspiring.

He had such a sense of purpose. He articulated his mission as being to write well-organised church music. He felt he was part of something much bigger than himself. I'd like to think that as musicians we do this to serve others: the music, the audience, some greater purpose.

These works push the technical possibilities of the instrument to their limits, while still suiting its capacities. Shaham explains: 'I believe it's clear that Bach must have been a virtuoso violinist. All you have to do is look at the violin part of the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto to realise the violin writing is brilliant and perfect, and everything lies so well. I remember reading that it was Bach's father who taught him the violin when he was just a small child. I would like to think these works held a special significance for him.'

There's an improvisatory feel to Shaham's performance, and this is no accident. 'We know that when Bach composed he wasn't necessarily at the keyboard or violin: he often just sat down and wrote, but I believe for him this was a similar process to improvisation. These days we have a very clear line between composition, improvisation and performance – we have different people to do each of those things. But I think they're all very close – they should be very close, at least for the listener, whom we serve. Composers should think like performers; performers should try to think like composers as much as we can, or like improvisers.'

So, what is it like performing these works to an audience? 'I'm always amazed at people's reactions to Bach. They always get involved in it. There's a power to this music that draws listeners in. But it's lonely up there; I'm used to going on stage with friends. I tell myself that I'm going on stage with the best material anyone could have. I imagine this is what pianists feel. What if I need to itch? Or sneeze? That hasn't happened yet, thankfully!'