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Samantha Grelen
Cedarville University

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The Violin's Solo Voice: J.S. Bach's Contribution to the Violin's Development

The solo violin sonatas and partitas of Bach are a staple of any classical violinist's repertoire. The high technical and artistic ability required to perform these works reflects the growing emphasis placed on instrumental performance during their time of composition. This increased interest was due in large part to the strides made in the violin's development, ushering in with it a completely new method of playing, and therefore a new method of composing for the instrument (Mellers, 17). Bach composed his solo violin works while serving as the kapellmeister in the court of Prince Leopold at Cöthen, which, due to his extraordinary employment circumstances, was one of the happiest professional periods of his life (Headington, 8). The further development of the violin and therefore the growing social acceptance of instrumental music, along with Bach's experience in the court of Prince Leopold in Cöthen, all provided influential contributions to the creation of his violin works--compositions whose influence is still acting on violin works today.

The entrance into the Baroque era was a time of great transition. Coming out of the Renaissance, a point at which the emphasis was strongly on humanism, the Baroque ideals introduced a completely new philosophy in approach of the arts. The importance once placed on quality of communication now became an emphasis on quality of expression. This transition in cultural ideals easily reached the musical level; the former manifesting itself musically through the technique of text declamation, providing for greater clarity and strength of text communication; the latter seeking to present clear musical expression, oftentimes in the absence of text.

As a result of the transition occurring in cultural influences, so there occurred a transition within the instrumental sphere. Leading into the Baroque era, stringed instruments were mostly used as chordal accompaniment, helping to expand the musical potential of vocal works. As this evolution of ideals reached the musical realm, however, one of the areas most strongly affected was instrumental development, particularly the violin (Stowell, 10). Scholars have traced the emergence of the violin as an “expressive and virtuoso solo instrument” to the beginning of the seventeenth century (New Groves, 713). The bow of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries featured a highly curved stick, providing for more agility in sounding multiple strings at the same time. Although not a specifically German design, this specific structure is now referred to in some circles as “the Bach bow.” The technical abilities of this bow ushered in the improvisatory style for solo violin, found in the preludes and adagios of Bach’s sonatas and partitas (Pritchett). This emphasizes a point of musical ornamentation developed at this time, partially as a result of the newest changes to the structure of the bow. Bach approached ornamentation as simply an extension of sustained notes or chords, allowing the sustained notes to continue to sound throughout the entirety of its duration (Schröder, 157). The bow’s structure, while providing for strong and accurate attack at the initial sounding of notes, did not allow for the continuity of sound required in notes over a half note in duration, an incapacity that created expressive difficulties in the slower movements of his unaccompanied works. Bach’s masterful writing, however, not only made allowances for this limitation of the instrument, but also manipulated it in such a way that created an entirely new exploration of the violin’s developing voice. Musicologist Karl Geiringer expressed his opinion of Bach’s newly discovered compositional horizons:

Bach, a born fighter who exulted in overcoming apparently unsurmountable difficulties, succeeded in doing the nearly

impossible: to write four-part and polyphonic variations for an instrument whose very nature seems to exclude such devices. The sonatas and partitas are...typical not only of Bach's personality but of the artistic conceptions of the Baroque era. At that time the walls of houses were occasionally decorated with paintings simulating vistas of wide colonnades and formal gardens. Such embellishments require the working of the inner eye, just as the implied polyphony and rich harmonic texture in Bach's compositions require the co-operations of the inner ear (Geiringer, 353).

Because of this goal, Bach was very particular in regard to the performance of his music, not leaving ornamentation decisions up to the performer. Instead, breaking away from the composition methods of his time, Bach's transcriptions were written in full completion, all embellishments written out by the composer in their entirety (Schröder, 160). This only leaves the performer to make dynamic and rubato decisions in regard to their musical expressivity. The emphasis on Baroque individualism is clearly demonstrated in this new level of musical expression required in the performance of these works. With the provision of fully notated ornamentations, the Baroque performer is free to express personal emotion through their performance. Because the changes in instrumental composition and performance correlated to the changes in society, it is no surprise that these musical evolutions were met with "increased social esteem and artistic credibility" (Stowell, 28). And as the acceptance level increased, so did the musical demand. More positions began opening for composers and music directors, particularly in the royal courts. And this is where Bach's contribution to the solo instrumental world assumed its strongest form.

Bach's bold pioneering musical spirit changed the path of music's development in dramatic ways, and to this day the music we create reflects many of the ideas Bach both conceived and developed. One of his professed ideas on the development of music during his time was that "the musical style and taste have changed for the better." This brings with it "the

obvious implication that Bach associates himself with the latest developments” (Marshall, 25). Living and working in a musical age where the name J.S. Bach is revered as one of the fathers of our current musical tradition, it is difficult to comprehend the strikingly low level of recognition and appreciation Bach’s work received during his life and the time immediately following it. However, those who worked closely with him, observing and studying his methods, understood the genius of their mentor. His son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his student Johann Friedrich Agricola were two such advocates of the importance of Bach’s work. Bach’s obituary, written by Emanuel and Agricola, demonstrated their enthusiasm and vision in regard to his work.

If ever a composer showed polyphony in its greatest strength, it was certainly our late lamented Bach. If ever a musician employed the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry, it was certainly our Bach. No one ever showed so many ingenious and unusual ideas as he in elaborate pieces such as ordinarily seem dry exercises in craftsmanship. (Wolff, 4)

Bach was hired as kapellmeister by Prince Leopold in 1717 and thus began his residence in Cöthen. Cöthen, as Bach later reflected, proved to be one of his most happy and fulfilling periods of employment. “There I had a gracious prince, who both loved and knew music, and in his service I intended to spend the rest of my life” (Headington, 33). Prince Leopold and Bach were of a similar mindset in regard to music and its importance. Prior to Bach’s employment in his court, the Prince established his own court kapelle in 1715. Merely a year later in 1716, this chamber orchestra had grown to a total of eighteen musicians playing strings, winds, and keyboard (Headington, 31). Bach’s arrival in the court in 1717 only served to increase the Prince’s passion for music, and the two men became quite close during Bach’s time in Leopold’s employment. This relationship between Prince and music director created an even stronger musical environment within the court. Because of the emphasis and importance Leopold placed on music in his court, it created the ideal situation for Bach to continue composing. Cöthen

provided Bach with the highest possible environment for which to work, and the highest caliber of musicians to perform his pieces. Therefore, his writing was completely uninhibited by the condition of his musical surroundings (Geck, 114). The affluent atmosphere of the court, the companionship Bach found in the Prince, and his happy family situation (after the death of his first wife, he married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, yet another musician who shared and encouraged his passion) also provided ample inspiration for Bach's instrumental writing (Headington, 36).

Cöthen offers an important example of how [Bach] not only responded to the circumstances in which he found himself at a given time but also pursued step by step his philosophy of musical order. Against this intellectual horizon, we can make an educated guess at the significance of the later years in Cöthen: as conscientiously as Bach fulfilled his duties as kapellemeister, he also gave his creative impulses free rein. (Geck, 112)

In addition to the sonatas and partitas for violin, many of his solo works for other instruments were written while at Cöthen: the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the *French Suites*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and his solo cello suites (Wolff, 196). The support Bach received as *Kapellmeister* was perhaps one of the highest salaries received by any musician at the time. Answering to no one but the Prince, enjoying the luxuries of court life, and serving as the top-ranking musician in the court, Bach's situation was one of comfort.

Though Bach's musical and professional circumstances were highly enviable, they were a result of much work in the broader cultural arena. Bach was born in the midst of Germany's recovery from the Thirty Years War, a recovery effort that spanned the entirety of his life. The effects of this civil war manifested themselves as repercussions in the evolving cultural arena. Attempting to establish a strong, thriving community, firmly grounded in the latest explorations into the art world, the fragile German culture reached for the influence of French art, music, and dance. At the time, the French culture, followed closely by the Italian, led the way in artistic

development. The goal was to create large, extravagant cultural centers that would stand out above all other cities (Little, 3).

One of the results of this absorption of French culture is a French influence on the dance music of Bach. Essentially, Bach's dance music, including his three partitas for solo violin, is most likely sourced in the French dance tradition. Because of his history of court employment, it is highly probable that Bach not only participated in many dances, but also that he received formal dance training. Scholars have learned that he sustained close friendships with several leading French dance masters, and as a result became quite familiar with their work. Pantaleon Hebenstreit, best known for his virtuosic violin ability, was one of these men. In addition to playing the violin at court dances, he eventually became the dance master at the court of Weissenfels, and later the court of Eisenach. Another of Bach's good friends was violinist, dance master, composer, and conductor Jean-Baptiste Volumier (Little, 14). While the influence of these men on Bach's solo violin works has not been officially documented, it seems impossible that Bach was completely unaffected by his observance of their work, both on the violin and on the dance floor. His three partitas are heavily steeped in the dance tradition, exhibiting the proper form of each of the dance styles he chose to include. Specifically, he remained true to the rhythmic meter of each style of dance, in addition to including nuances related to each, such as syncopation in the bourée (41), counter-rhythms and additional ornamentation in the gavotte (48), and rhythm's tendency to cross the barlines in the courante (115).

Another reason for Bach's focus on secular instrumental works while employed at the court of Prince Leopold was the religious climate of the court at the time. The Prince was Calvinist, therefore the court operated on the principles and traditions of the Calvinist Church. At the time, only Calvinist metrical psalms were considered acceptable music for the Reformed

Church, therefore Bach's duties as kapellmeister did not include composition of music for the church (Terry, 8). This was the first time in Bach's professional career that he was not bound to the composition of sacred works in the service of a church. This freed him to focus on composing secular instrumental music, which explains the large quantity of these pieces that emerged from this time.

As the violin became the standard chamber instrument in upper class and court musical settings, its versatility in style and sound opened the door for composers to write more solo literature. Until this time, the primary medium of chamber music appeared as some type of solo instrument or ensemble, but always completed by an accompaniment in the form of basso continuo. Although this in itself is not polyphonic writing, the sound it produced provided the listeners with an awareness of a full chordal sound. This established the standard expectation for chamber music of the Baroque period. Bach, one of the first to explore unaccompanied solo instrumental works, reestablished the common perception of solo instruments' capabilities, creating a sound much fuller than formerly expected from a solo instrument. This is one of the distinguishing features of Bach's unaccompanied writing. These works were most likely modeled after popular keyboard polyphony at the time, given the social acceptance with which it was met. His ability to create a multi-voiced polyphony from a single-voice instrument is astounding. A prime example is the fuga from his first sonata in G minor (see Ex. 1). It follows the standard fugue form, opening with the subject stated in a single voice, and in the dominant. Immediately, the subject appears again, in a second voice, and in the tonic, while the original voice continues with a supportive but distinctly different rhythm over the subject. In the next measure, yet another voice is introduced, again in the tonic, but an octave higher. At this point, three voices are present, all emitted by the single solo instrument.

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TIFF (LZW) decompressor
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Ex. 1. Bach, Johann Sebastian. Sonata No.1 in G minor.

Another technique Bach helped to create was the idea of implied polyphony (Davis, 423). While some movements of his unaccompanied solo works, such as the fuga, are obviously polyphonic, others, while following the same aural direction, prove much more difficult to polyphonically identify. The presto from the sonata in G minor is just such a movement, written entirely with a single voice, excepting the cadences that close each section with a chord. However, aurally, this movement provides a sense of polyphony (see Ex. 2). With this use of implied polyphony, Bach creates the feeling of a multi-voiced work. His primary method is the utilization of multiple octaves, with two separate melodies occurring in the different octaves. Rapidly and frequently oscillating between the two melodies and ranges creates the sense of polyphony, as the listener's ear registers the two melodies occurring simultaneously. In the example below, the first note of each group of sixteenths moves up by step, while the following five notes of the group continue the sequence of broken thirds, also moving up the scale. The created aural image is that of a climbing baseline underneath a sequence of broken thirds, occurring simultaneously.

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Ex. 2. Bach, Johann Sebastian. Sonata No.1 in G minor.

Chords were another method of implied polyphony Bach utilized. As the chords sounded, a new texture emerged in the music, supporting the voiced melody line contained

within the chordal structure. This writing was yet another venture in Bach's exploration of the violin's potential, and also employing its versatility in mimicking other, multi-voiced instruments. The opening adagio, also from Sonata No. 1, is almost completely chordal, filled in with running passages serving to elongate the chords and point to the appearance of the next melody note, within the sounding of the next chord. This enables the listener to aurally follow the melodic line (see Ex. 3).

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Ex. 3. Bach, Johann Sebastian. Sonata No.1 in G minor.

Because of the violin's limited voicing, the results Bach achieved in his unaccompanied solos are an even greater testament to his genius.

In choosing to write for an unaccompanied violin...Bach severely limited his ability to use many [features of textural variation]. Although his chosen instruments were capable of performing actual chords through the use of multiple stops, those passages that contain instances of implied polyphony must necessarily be monophonic. This means that the listener would constantly be presented with only a single string of notes, which removes the potential for any significant textural variety (Davis, 429).

In spite of the instrument's limitations, Bach's work in furthering the violin's voice was highly successful, and in many ways revolutionary. His exploration of the multiple voices of the violin established a compositional technique that remains in place today, hundreds of years later. One of the most obvious places his voicing ideas surface in the current solo violin repertoire is within the cadenza. This extended virtuosic passage, common to most any violin concerto, features many striking similarities in structure and content to the work of Bach. First, the

cadenza is unaccompanied; on the one hand requiring the violin to fill the void created by the absence of the orchestra, and also allowing the violin the freedom of wholly unhindered expression. Looking more directly at content, cadenzas are rife with a finely developed polyphony—building on the polyphonic foundations Bach established, but moving far beyond the bounds limiting his initial efforts to realize the multiple voices sourced in this single-voice instrument. An excellent example is the Glazunov Violin Concerto, written in the early twentieth century, but still strongly exuding the influence of Bach. Two main themes presented throughout the concerto appear in the cadenza as one consolidated part, yet with two complete, distinct voices (see Ex. 4).

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Ex. 4. Glazunov, Alexander. *Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 82*.

This is but one of many examples showing that although he was appreciated during his life, Bach's influence has grown to incalculable proportions since his death. His fingerprints are present to some degree in practically every piece in the modern violin repertoire.

It is difficult to name a composer whose influence equals that of Johann Sebastian Bach. Because of his strong musical heritage, his respectable career, and his unprecedented talent, his contributions to the changes and developments of solo instrumental music produced a ripple effect that musicians continue to experience to this day. More specifically, the methods he devised through the composition of his solo violin sonatas and partitas serve as a foundation for much of the standard solo violin repertoire performed today. These works derived their life from the emergence of the violin, and therefore its higher level of social acceptance, an acceptance that continues today as evidenced by the firm place his pieces occupy in the performance

repertoire of today's top violinists such as Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell, and Hilary Hahn. The techniques the works employ appeared as a result of the novelty of the instrument's extreme versatility, while in light of its unique limitations. This new voice, discovered through the violin's further development, was subsequently realized by the work of Bach. The works' inspiration and order are due, at least in part, to the supportive conditions, both musically and personally, Bach experienced during his time as kapellmeister at Cöthen. Under the employ of an affluent, supportive patron, free to compose in the style of his choosing, Bach produced some of his most adventuresome pieces. His pioneering efforts were not in vain. They serve as the foundation upon which much of the classical violinist's repertoire is built.

It often happens in the history of the arts that a genius far in advance of his time is accorded recognition only after his death. In Bach's case the picture is somewhat different. In his own time his music was frequently considered antiquated. Yet to later generations it has proved to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration, a vital force within Western man's musical heritage. (Geiringer, 353)

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