



KATI DEBRETZENI

THROUGH THE EYE OF A LENS

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THROUGH THE EYE OF A LENS

Passaggio rotto

Nicola Matteis (c. 1670–1713)

Partita no. 1 in A major

Johann Joseph Vilsmayr (1663–1722)

Prelude Aria – Saraband – Gavott –

Aria – Menuett – Gigue – Final

Assaggio no. 1 in G minor

Johan Helmich Roman (1694–1758)

(No title) – Allegro – (no title) –

Tempo di minuetta. Non troppo Allegro

Partita no. 2 in D minor

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Allemanda – Corrente – Sarabanda –

Giga – Ciaccona

‘Life is like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on.’ (Samuel Butler)

In these travel-deprived times that life has in store for us, I would like to invite you to join me on an imaginary journey across Europe with a highly portable instrument under the arm: one lone violin. As the journey goes on, not unlike an eighteenth-century Grand Tour, new horizons will open about the capabilities of the instrument during the 60 years between 1670 and 1730.

Throughout the seventeenth century the violin’s status rose steadily: from a lowly instrument used in the tavern it graduated to being used in the church and music chamber alike, and it gained a significant sonata repertoire. The process started in Italy, and soon spread to German-speaking lands, France and England. Eventually, with the rise of virtuoso writing exploring the extreme capabilities of the instrument, another experiment began: using the violin as an instrument capable of playing on its own, ‘senza basso’, without the accompaniment of a harmonised bass line. For the fiddle to hold its own, new possibilities were needed. The violin is essentially a melody instrument, extolled as able to imitate the human voice. To keep musical interest, harmony needs to be added – so the technique of playing

multiple notes at once came into being. Because of the physical build of the violin's curved bridge it is not possible to hold more than two notes (on two adjacent strings) together. However, composers begin to write three- and four-part chords, cleverly tricking the listener's ear into hearing a contrapuntal texture where some of the notes continue in our imagination.

We begin our journey in London where, in 1670, a book of 'Other Ayres, Preludes, Allemands, Sarabands, with full stops for the violin' is hot off the press. The composer is the most celebrated violinist on the scene – the Italian **Nicola Matteis**, 'second only to Corelli' according to biographer Roger North. Matteis, a tall man who played the violin very low on his chest ('near his girdle'), 'had a stroak so sweete, made it speaking like the Voice of a man and when he pleased, like a Consort of severall Instruments' in the words of one John Evelyn. The piece that starts today's concert is a short quasi-improvisation from that book entitled *Passaggio rotto* (broken passage). It creates the illusion of many voices without actually resorting to double stops, simply by using different motifs in different registers of the instrument.

From here we proceed to Salzburg, an independent archbishopric at the time, and meet a somewhat enigmatic figure. **Johann Joseph Vilsmayr** was employed by the Hofkapelle and little is known about him apart from a steadily increasing salary and promotions at court. He left behind only one publication: a collection of six partitas (collections of dances) from 1715, titled *Artificiosus Conventus pro Camera [...] à Violino Solo Con Basso bellè imitate*. For a long time the last few words were interpreted as alluding to a missing bass part. However, as my colleague Pauline Nobes demonstrated, they merely mean 'the violin imitating the bass beautifully'. The word 'artificiosus' alludes to the different tunings of the strings in the different works (although the one we hear today does not use this 'scordatura', or mistuning). Each partita comprises a free opening and closing section alluding to the written out improvisation of the prevalent 'Stylus Fantasticus' of the time, framing a series of French court dances 'à la mode' at the Salzburg court.

We continue by travelling north, to the royal court of Stockholm, where **Johan Helmich Roman**, the 'Swedish Handel', is master of the Royal Chapel and leader of the Royal Opera. Still regarded one of the foremost composers Sweden ever had, he was a violinist and oboist who travelled widely, and brought back home his affinity with a variety of styles and genres. Sometime around 1730 he composed six *Assaggi* (essays, or experiments) for violin. They are all in four short movements, reminiscent of Telemann's Fantasias with which he might have been familiar. The

first one, in G minor, is a perfect illustration of Roman's unique blend of the high Baroque idiom (e.g. in the polyphonic opening movement reminiscent of a French Overture) with the more forward-looking and modern 'galant' style: the fast movements have local trills and turns aplenty, and the ornaments in the affecting third movement, a Siciliana, are unmistakably 'galant'.

Our last stop on our journey is the court of Prince Leopold in the small Saxon town of Cöthen. The Kappelmeister is **Johann Sebastian Bach**, and as the court is Calvinist and there is no music performed at church, his duties are to write instrumental music for the highly-able resident musicians. In 1721 Bach assembles six works he wrote for a single violin into a beautifully copied manuscript. There is no dedicatee, nor do we know who he had in mind playing the highly demanding works. We do know however, from the watermarks on the manuscript, that the paper comes from Karlsbad, a Bohemian spa town where the court used to spend three months at a time. We also know that upon arriving home after those months away in the summer of 1720, Bach is faced with horrible news that failed to reach him before crossing the threshold: his beloved wife, Maria Barbara, had passed away and been buried in his absence. Musicologists have raised the possibility that the longest movement in the works for violin, the monumental Ciaccona, had been conceived as a tombeau – a musical epitaph – on her grave, using hidden choral melodies with texts alluding to death and resurrection. Whether or not this is the case, Bach's Ciaccona is undeniably the most complex and compelling work for one violin written in the Baroque era. Preceded by four standard dance movements in the Partita no. 2 in D minor, it is with this work that our journey comes to a close.

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Born in Transylvania, **Kati Debretzeni** studied the violin with Ora Shiran in Israel, and the Baroque violin with Catherine Mackintosh and Walter Reiter at the Royal College of Music in London.

She has led the English Baroque Soloists, under the direction of Sir John Eliot Gardiner, since 2000 and her playing can be heard on their recordings of the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage (SDG). In 2008 she was appointed as one of the leaders of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, with whom she has often appeared as soloist, directing and leading the orchestra in performances in the UK, Europe and the US.

Kati has recorded numerous chamber music CDs with the ensembles Florilegium (Chanel Classics), Ricordo (Linn Records) and most recently Trio Goya (Chandos). Additionally, she features as soloist on two versions of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, one with the European Brandenburg Ensemble under Trevor Pinnock (Avie Records, *Gramophone* Award 2008), and the other with the English Baroque Soloists (SDG).

Over the last few years, Kati has been invited to direct various ensembles in Israel, Canada, Norway, Poland, Iceland and the UK. She currently teaches the Baroque and Classical violin at the Royal Conservatory of Music in The Hague.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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