

YORK
EARLY MUSIC
FESTIVAL

Rachel Podger *violin*

The Violinist Speaks

**Online Premiere
17 July 2021 7.30 pm**



Rachel Podger violin

The Violinist Speaks

Cello Suite no. 1 in G major, BWV 1007
(transposed into D major for violin)

Prélude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Menuet 1 & 2

Gigue

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685–1750)

Sonata in B minor

Andante

Allegro Assai

Allegro affettuoso

Giuseppe Tartini
(1692–1770)

Passacaglia in G minor for solo violin

'The Guardian Angel'

(from The Mystery Sonatas)

Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber
(1644–1704)

Partita no. 2 in D minor for solo violin, BWV 1004

Allemanda

Corrente

Sarabanda

Giga

Ciaccona

Bach

The familiar image of Bach the performer is that of a keyboard-player, but right from the start of his life as a musician he was also a violinist; his son Carl Philipp Emanuel later recalled that 'in his youth, and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly'. Whether or not he performed, or was capable of performing, the fearsomely difficult three Sonatas and three Partitas (or suites) for solo violin – completed in 1720 while he was working at the Cöthen court – is not known, but certainly in his hands the technique of using multiple-stopping (playing on more than one string) and skilfully written 'broken-chord' melodies to provide harmony and counterpoint both real and implied reached a technical and artistic level that has never been surpassed.

While clearly pre-eminent, Bach was neither the first nor the last baroque composer to write works for solo violin. There were fine existing models by German-speaking composers such as Westhoff, Pisendel and Biber, and examples came later in the century from Locatelli, Nardini and Telemann. The advantages for any travelling virtuoso of being able to play without accompaniment are obvious, and indeed we can speculate that the only reason we do not know more solo violin music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is that so much of it was either improvised or adapted from other works.

Around the same time as the sonatas and partitas, Bach produced a lower-voiced counterpart in the form of six superb – and today no less iconic – suites for solo cello. The differences in the instruments naturally led to differences in the music; the cello suites make far less use of multiple-stops, with the result that the music embraces melody more warmly, and perhaps makes greater demands on the listener to 'hear' the absent harmonies. They are in that sense 'purer' than the violin works. Yet Bach was a composer always ready to move his music from one instrument to another; he certainly did so with some of the violin music, and in recent years Rachel Podger has, she says, found herself drawn more and more towards performing the Cello Suites on the violin 'as another kind of daily bread'.

The First Suite opens with a suave Prélude fashioned from a constant stream of notes in broken chords. Then follows a series of binary-form dance movements, drawing on what was then the conventional sequence of Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue. As in all the cello suites, however, Bach inserts before the Gigue a pair of *Galantarién*, his term for the more fashionable dance forms of the day; in this case he opts for a pair of tripping Menuets.

Giuseppe Tartini was a major eighteenth-century musician, a violinist-composer who from his base in Padua became one of Europe's most admired players and teachers. The English musicologist Charles Burney, travelling through Padua in 1770, regretted that he was only able to visit Tartini's grave (though that 'with the zeal of a Muslim in Mecca'), the great man having died just a few months earlier. 'He was', wrote Burney, 'one of the few original geniuses of our century, in the sense that all his ideas were his own'. Tartini's most famous work is the posthumously published and fearsomely difficult 'Devil's Trill' Sonata, but he wrote many more, including 30 contained in a mid-century manuscript collection he described in a letter to a friend as *picole sonate*, adding that they 'have a bass part for convention's sake. I play them without bass and this is my true intention.' There is, however, no particular reason to regard the sonatas as small; although very different from Bach, they are often delicate lyrical poems of febrile, sometimes even Romantic expressiveness. The Sonata in tonight's programme even carries a poetic inscription, quoting from an opera libretto by Metastasio: 'How happy you are, innocent shepherdess'.

The Bohemian-born Heinrich Biber was one of the great violin figures of the seventeenth century, a virtuoso who after joining the retinue of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg as a player in 1670, rose to become his Kapellmeister and eventually Chief Steward as well. Although responsible for some of the baroque period's most challenging violin music, he was capable of turning his virtuosity to profoundly inward-looking devotional use. In the manuscript for the fifteen extraordinary pieces known today as the 'Rosary' or 'Mystery' Sonatas for violin and continuo, each is preceded by an engraving of an episode from the life of the Virgin, and it is possible that they were played at the meetings of a confraternity that met to celebrate Rosary devotions in the lecture hall of Salzburg University. Nowhere does Biber claim that the sonatas are directly illustrative – they are primarily contemplative, it seems – but there are numerous passages which certainly appear pictorial, leaving one to ponder the illustrative significance of the beautiful solo Passacaglia added at the end of the set with an accompanying illustration of a Guardian Angel leading a child by the hand. Does the four-note descending 'bass' consciously quote from the hymn 'Einen Engel Gott mir geben'; and does its steady repetition 65 times evoke (as has been suggested) 'constant watchfulness'?

Bach's Second Partita conforms for the most part to the established suite pattern, but with one shattering exception. The Allemanda and the Corrente are exercises

in ingenious writing for a single line of running melody whose wide leaps create the suggestion of more than one part at play. The Sarabanda brings a richer texture, and the Giga rounds things off in a sprightly lilt expressed in mostly unbroken semiquavers brilliantly shot through with subtly implied cross-rhythms. Normally a Bach suite would end here, but the Second Partita has a surprise in store in the form of a giant Ciaccona almost as long as the previous four dances put together. But it is not just the size of it that makes it so extraordinary. In other hands, 64 variations over a circular four-bar theme, employing a stunning array of baroque violin-playing techniques, might have sprawled uncontrollably. But Bach gives it formal coherence and expressive breadth by marshalling it into three principal sections – two in the minor enclosing one in the major – and by running each variation into the next with the perfect naturalness of genius.

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Rachel Podger, ‘the unsurpassed British glory of the baroque violin’ (*The Times*), has established herself as a leading interpreter of the Baroque and Classical music periods. She was the first woman to be awarded the prestigious Royal Academy of Music/Kohn Foundation Bach Prize in October 2015, *Gramophone* Artist of the Year 2018, and Ambassador for REMA’s Early Music Day 2020. A creative programmer, she is the founder and Artistic Director of Brecon Baroque Festival and her ensemble Brecon Baroque. Rachel is Patron for the Continuo Foundation.

Following an exciting and innovative new collaboration, *A Guardian Angel*, with the vocal ensemble VOCES8, Rachel was thrilled to be one of the Artists in Residence at the Wigmore Hall throughout the 2019/2020 season. The series featured Rachel in all-Bach performances as a soloist and with Brecon Baroque. Alongside this, Rachel and Christopher Glynn recorded the world premiere of three previously unfinished Mozart sonatas which were completed by Royal Academy of Music’s Professor Timothy Jones and released in March 2021.

Rachel featured in The VOCES8 Foundation’s LIVE From London festival in a new version for Advent of *A Guardian Angel*. She performed solo Bach for *Gramophone Magazine*’s Winners’ Digital Gala, appeared in Bitesize Proms, BOZAR at Home, Living Room Live, Baroque at the Edge, and a collaborative disc by Musicians For Musicians *Many Voices on a Theme of Isolation*. Rachel presented BBC Radio 3’s *Inside Music* and directed a new arrangement by Chad Kelly, *The Goldberg Variations Reimagined*. Upcoming engagements include recording a selection of Beethoven

sonatas and performances of Mozart and Beethoven with Christopher Glynn, a return to the Philharmonia Baroque and San Francisco Early Music, a *Four Seasons* collaboration with Academy of Ancient Music, and further performances of Bach's Cello Suites, *The Goldberg Variations Reimagined*, and *A Guardian Angel*.

Rachel is a dedicated educator and holds an honorary position at both the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. She also has a relationship with the Juilliard School in New York.

percious.co.uk/artists/rachel-podger

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