

**PROGRAM NOTES BY RACHEL PODGER | MICHAËL NIEUWENHUIS |  
TIMOTHY JONES | ERIC BROMBERGER**

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

*b. March 21, 1685; Eisenach, Germany*

*d. July 28, 1750; Leipzig, Germany*

**Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007**

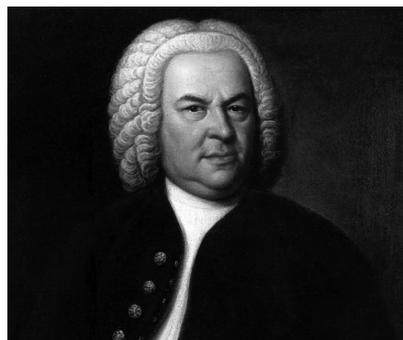
(transcribed by Rachel Podger, in D Major)

**Composed**

ca. 1720

**Performance Time**

18 minutes



**Cello Suite No. 3 in C Major, BWV 1009**

(transcribed by Rachel Podger, in G Major)

**Composed**

ca. 1720

**Performance Time**

22 minutes

I was lucky enough to grow up with Bach's music around me, and so the Cello Suites became part of my regular listening diet as the "other" Bach solo pieces "not written for the violin." I secretly coveted these works quite early on, not least because I found many established cello performances – however celebrated the players – to be performed in a style and tempo which reduced the dance character to being something almost incidental. Later, at music college, I heard a suite played on a baroque cello, and the music suddenly made sense to me; it came to life with the help of the lightness and bounce of the baroque bow playing on gut strings. It really was a revelation.

Since then, I have spent a fair bit of time coaching cellists, both modern and baroque alike, and found myself playing along to demonstrate various points. Gradually, I could feel these pieces joining the violin partitas and sonatas as another kind of "daily bread"; I started catching myself playing some of the movements I particularly loved while warming up, and realizing that it was actually possible to play them on the violin, and to find a special expressive vocabulary at the higher pitch. How could one possibly justify it, especially with works that have peppered the recording catalog with some of the most iconic and adored string performances of all time – the Casals, Fourniers, Torteliers, or Starkers? But what I was doing also seemed very much in keeping with Bach's own habit of recycling his own compositions for different instruments and different uses. The examples are endless, but I immediately think of the concertos appearing as sinfonias in cantatas, or concertos for violins turned into harpsichord concertos. The more I reflect, the less I feel the need to be defensive, because Bach did far more outrageous things!

Playing these suites on the violin is, of course, quite a different proposition. I play these suites tuned a fifth and an octave above the original pitch; with its smaller resonating body, the violin speaks more quickly, and the immediacy of sound enables it to be more flexible, flighty, and agile than the more circumspect and gravitational cello. The dances therefore feel especially idiomatic for the violin when

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they're played a little faster than you might be accustomed to on the cello. At first, I missed the resonance in the slower movements – for instance, in the sarabandes – but then I started to relish delving into the gut strings to cajole as much resonance as I could from the chords of those slow dances.

Discovering the preludes on the violin was, perhaps, the purest of the joys. It felt like a luxury to have the chance to reconstitute them for the violin. The first prelude has the same recognizability as the first prelude from Book One of *The Well Tempered Clavier*, with an irresistibly approachable flow; the third starts bright and breezy and turns complex and knotty in extended arpeggios before a rhetorical ending has us arriving at an expected destination.

— *Rachel Podger*

Between the years 1717 and 1723, Johann Sebastian Bach worked as kapellmeister in Köthen in the service of the German Prince Leopold von Anhalt-Köthen. During his tenure there, Bach was concerned chiefly with secular instrumental music. Among the works composed in this period are the six *Brandenburg* Concertos, the first book of *The Well Tempered Clavier*, and the first four French Suites. Leopold was an enthusiastic music lover who played himself and maintained what was, for a time, an extraordinarily large court orchestra comprising the very best musicians of the day. The gambist and cellist Ferdinand Christian Abel must have been an exceptional player, as Bach composed six cello suites for him in 1720, the first important compositions for solo violoncello in the repertoire.

The suite gradually evolved as an instrumental genre through the combination of various dance forms into a cycle; this development took place predominantly in Germany in the seventeenth century. By 1720, a Spanish dance, the saraband; the English gigue; the German allemande; and the French courante had become fully stylized dances within the suite: only the form of the original pieces remained, while their character as dances had disappeared. Bach's suites all have the same basic structure: prelude, allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue. The only digression from this is the transition from the slow Sarabande to the fast Gigue: in order to lessen the abruptness of this tempo change, Bach added a menuet to suites BWV 1007 and 1008, a bourée to suites BWV 1009 and 1010, and a gavotte to BWV 1011 and 1012. The menuet, bourée, and gavotte were traditionally played in a moderate tempo.

Bach's cello suites were, without a doubt, the most monumental examples of polyphonic composition for a solo string instrument that had appeared in music up to that time. In his pursuit to create polyphonic music at all costs, Bach broke through the technical frontiers of the cello. The enormous technical difficulties they represent are not examples of virtuosity, but rather the natural result of both the complexity of his musical ideas and his extensive knowledge of the idiom and performance techniques. In the music of these suites, which is in principle made up of a single voice, the musical impression created is that of several melodic lines which develop freely and simultaneously. Although composers such as Gaultier and Schenk had experimented before Bach with "quasipolyphony" in their music for lute and viola da gamba, respectively, it was the cello suites of Bach which, more than any other pieces, introduced this compositional approach. This new manner of writing was introduced in ingenious fashion and represented a new apogee in music.

— *Michaël Nieuwenhuis*

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### Passacaglia in G Minor for Solo Violin (Guardian Angel)

HEINRICH IGNAZ FRANZ VON BIBER

b. ca. 1644; Wartenberg, Bohemia

d. May 3, 1704; Salzburg, Austria

#### Composed

ca. 1676

#### Performance Time

9 minutes



Towering masterpieces though they undoubtedly are, Bach's six sonatas and partitas for solo violin are not isolated peaks. Music for violin *senza basso* had a distinguished history before Bach and was widely cultivated by his contemporaries. A large repertoire of very high quality developed over the course of the later seventeenth century, driven by the speculative virtuosity of performers, the pragmatic self-sufficiency of the medium, and by the spread of a new taste in music which prized the ability of instrumental music to imitate the ideal of vocal expression. It continued well into the next century, proving itself adaptable to significant stylistic changes over the course of the century. This phenomenon was Europe-wide, with successive waves of Italian expats taking new, vigorous playing styles to Germany, France, and England, as well as traffic in the other direction with young virtuosi travelling to Italy to learn with revered masters like Tartini.

The connection between this repertoire and virtuoso performance has many implications for the music itself and for the way in which it has been transmitted to us. Violinistic virtuosity was extraordinarily experimental in the late seventeenth century, with novelties in the tuning of the strings (*scordatura*), bowing techniques, chordal playing and contrapuntal textures (with the development of sophisticated double-, triple- and quadruple-stopping techniques), and playing in high positions. But this performative dimension of the music was not merely acrobatic; rather, these new techniques were put at the service of the widest possible range of expressive and rhetorical possibilities. The power to move listeners was the trump card of the virtuoso, and their ability to harness their impressive techniques was a valuable commodity. So it was not in their interest fully to notate their own music, nor to allow it to circulate widely, either in manuscript or in engraved editions. For this reason, much of the surviving repertoire is in unique manuscript sources, and most of these pieces are notated without lavish ornamentation or expressive instructions.

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644–1704) was one of the most celebrated violinist-composers of the seventeenth century. His collection of sonatas published in 1681 contained unprecedented formal complexity and technical challenges for the performer, including three- and four-part writing, *scordatura*, and the flamboyant demands of the *stylus phantasticus*. In 1670, Biber had entered the service of the archbishop of Salzburg. The prelate was a strong supporter of Salzburg's Confraternity of the Rosary which held devotional services each October, and it is possible that Biber's *Mystery* sonatas – which remained unpublished in his lifetime – were written for these services in 1676. The collection of 15 sonatas is for solo violin and continuo, but it concludes with an unaccompanied Passacaglia which, in the surviving manuscript, contains an engraving of a child and an angel. It may therefore have been associated with the Feast of the Guardian Angel (October 2). The remarkable range, expressive

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intensity, and monumental architecture of this celebrated movement have been seen as prefiguring the Chaconne of Bach's Partita in D Minor, but there is no evidence that Bach had access to a copy of the score or ever heard the work.

—Timothy Jones

## Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004

J.S. BACH

### Composed

ca. 1720

### Performance Time

30 minutes

Bach's six sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin date from about 1720, when Bach was kapellmeister at the court of Anhalt-Köthen. The three sonatas are in *sonata di chiesa* form, employing a slow-fast-slow-fast sequence of movements, but the structure of the three partitas is more complex. The term *partita* – which suggests a collection of parts – refers to a suite of dances, and Bach wrote his three partitas for unaccompanied violin as sets of dance movements. While each of the sonatas has four movements, of which the second is always a fugue, the partitas have more movements (five to seven) and are somewhat freer in form, as Bach adapted a number of old dance forms to the capabilities of the solo violin.

The Partita No. 2 in D Minor has become the most famous of Bach's six works for unaccompanied violin, for it concludes with the Chaconne, one of the pinnacles of the violin literature. Before this overpowering conclusion, Bach offers the four basic movements of *partita* form, all in binary form. The opening Allemande is marked by a steady flow of sixteenth-notes occasionally broken by dotted rhythms, triplets, and the sudden inclusion of thirty-second notes. The Courante alternates a steady flow of triplets within dotted duple meters. The Sarabande proceeds along double and triple stops and a florid embellishment of the melodic line, while the Gigue races along cascades of sixteenth-notes in 12/8 time; the theme of the second part is a variation of the opening section.

While the first four movements present the expected *partita* sequence, Bach then springs a surprise by closing with a chaconne longer than the first four movements combined. The Chaconne offers some of the most intense music Bach ever wrote, and it has worked its spell on musicians everywhere for the last two and a half centuries: beyond the countless recordings for violin, it is currently available in performances by guitar, cello, lute, and viola, as well as in piano transcriptions by Brahms, Busoni, and Raff.

A chaconne is one of the most disciplined forms in music: it is built on a ground bass in triple meter over which a melodic line is repeated and varied. A chaconne demands great skill from a performer under any circumstances, but it becomes unbelievably complex on the unaccompanied violin, which must

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simultaneously suggest the ground bass *and* project the melodic variations above it. Even with the flatter bridge and more flexible bow of Bach's day, some of this music borders on the unplayable, and it is more difficult still on the modern violin, with its more rounded bridge and concave bow.

This makes Bach's Chaconne sound like supremely cerebral music – and it is – but the wonder is that this music manages to be so expressive at the same time. The four-bar ground bass repeats 64 times during the quarter-hour span of the Chaconne, and over it Bach spins out gloriously varied music, all the while keeping these variations firmly anchored on the ground bass. At the center section, Bach moves into D major, and here the music relaxes a little, content to sing happily for awhile; after the calm nobility of this interlude, the quiet return to D minor sounds almost disconsolate. Bach drives the Chaconne to a great climax and concludes on a restatement of the ground melody.

— *Eric Bromberger*

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