



Johann Sebastian Bach: Sei Solo á Violino senza Basso accompagnato

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 2018.11.01)

GRAMOPHONE Bach for Solo Violin

Rob Cowan goes beyond Hilary Hahn's exceptional solo Bach and listens to some other recent ventures in this repertoire

[...] On the evidence of what we hear, the remaining three violinists are rather more au fait (or should I perhaps say 'connected'?) with current views on Baroque performance practice. Christoph Schickedanz is a seasoned chamber music player and recording artist and offers some imaginative renditions of individual movements, for example the Sarabande from the D minor Partita, where he substantially varies repeated material. In the B minor Partita he takes an emphatically staccato approach to the Corrente, then flies straight into the presto Double. Like Devy Erlih (Doremi) he 'attaches' the Doubles to the dances that precede them. The A minor Sonata's Fugue is thoughtfully played but the poignant Andante that follows it is a little too formal. Here Heifetz (RCA) and Enescu are unrivalled, at least in terms of focused expression. The Chaconne, however, which is pungently played at a good healthy tempo, has an appropriate sense of gravitas about it.



The German-Norwegian violinist and conductor Gottfried von der Goltz is the best known of the group under consideration, principally for his excellent work with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. His approach, though consistent, is drier than either Zsigmondy or Schickedanz, the C major Sonata's Fugue suggesting little in the way of exaltation – it does drag rather – while the D minor Chaconne is for the most part bereft of expressive vibrato, though there's something to be said for keeping the tempo more or less steady and some of von der Goltz's playing at speed is impressive. It's a good set, very well recorded, but hardly the most memorable on the current market.

The least familiar name among those cited here is Mie Kobayashi, who was invited to become a jury member of the violin division of the Marguerite LongJacques Thibaud International Competition. As to her playing, there are times when she bends the line so severely that it threatens to topple over the edge. The first movement of the First Sonata is pretty slow and the Fugue courts some dynamic extremes, though it's often quite delicate. Kobayashi will lean into a chord with a purpose, sometimes toying with subtle ritardandos. The opening Allemande of the First Partita occasionally pushes forwards, a dramatic gesture that, while momentarily effective, I wouldn't want to encounter too often. The Corrente is choppy, like Schickedanz's, but without the tension that he generates; nor is the presto Double as brilliant as Devy Erlih's. [...]

GRAMOPHONE *Collector* BACH FOR SOLO VIOLIN

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Seasoned Bach: Christoph Schickedanz plays with thought and imagination

Many years ago, during an interview, Nigel Kennedy cited the Adagio from Bach's C major Sonata as a prime example of music that in the right hands can move even the uninitiated to tears. Within the context of this current quartet of players, **Dénes Zsigmondy** (remember his eloquent contribution to Ferdinand Leitner's superb *Haffner* Serenade years ago? – DG) draws closest to that laudable ideal, with his expressive tone and masterly phrasing. Then again, the circumstances of the recording couldn't have been more advantageous: this dedicated 73-year-old had locked himself alone in a church and played Bach 'from his tattered copy of the facsimile'. The result was more than 50 hours of completely unsorted material from which the skilled producers Robert Müller and Martin Rummel created the present set.

Don't expect perfection in every bar; but it's fairly obvious from what we hear that Bach's solo violin music meant the world to Zsigmondy and that sense of cherishing comes across in spades. Take the Siciliano from the G minor Sonata,

where the music's dance element is subtly underlined. Zsigmondy keeps the B minor's noble Sarabande on the move and the Chaconne is both uplifting and admirably flexible. I loved this set and while it has much to convey about these elevated perennials, it should be treated more as a love letter to Bach from an elderly master than the playing of a great violinist in his prime, much like Enescu's even more remarkable 1948 set (Philips – nla, or Istituto Discografico Italiano), made when he was just a few years younger than Zsigmondy was when he set down this set.

On the evidence of what we hear, the remaining three violinists are rather more au fait (or should I perhaps say 'connected?') with current views on Baroque performance practice. **Christoph Schickedanz** is a seasoned chamber music player and recording artist and offers some imaginative renditions of individual movements, for example the Sarabande from the D minor Partita, where he substantially varies repeated material. In the B minor Partita he takes an emphatically staccato approach to the

Corrente, then flies straight into the *presto* Double. Like Devy Erlih (Doremi) he 'attaches' the Doubles to the dances that precede them. The A minor Sonata's Fugue is thoughtfully played but the poignant Andante that follows it is a little too formal. Here Heifetz (RCA) and Enescu are unrivalled, at least in terms of focused expression. The Chaconne, however, which is pungently played at a good healthy tempo, has an appropriate sense of gravitas about it.

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Then there's the slowly yawning Sarabande, with its prominently elasticated chords, and the opening Grave from Sonata No 2, broadly drawn though there are moments when it glides ethereally. The transition into the fugue is laboured, the fugue itself too effortful by half. The slowly pulsing Andante has next to no vibrato but because the playing lacks any sort of targeted

expressive inflection, the effect is dreary. The 'echo' finale, though, is excellent, while Kobayashi should have redone the opening chord of the D minor Chaconne, which gets proceedings off to an ugly start. It's a big performance with an exaggerated pause after 7'40" and another odd hiatus at 11'47". Not a set to challenge the current list of top recommendations, then.

In fact the only one of these worthy recordings I would want to hang on to is Zsigmondy's, occasionally flawed though it is, and for one good reason: he and he alone performs the music as if his life depends on it. I'm not saying that the other players couldn't, just that on these occasions they didn't. Others who do include Yehudi Menuhin (preferably the recordings from his teenage years – Warner Classics), Arthur Grumiaux (Philips/Decca), Joseph Szigeti (Vanguard), Heifetz, Nathan Milstein (either on Warner Classics or DG) or, among players currently performing, Alina Ibragimova (Hyperion, 11/09), Ning Feng (Channel Classics, 3/18) and Julia Fischer (Pentatone, A/05), though neither quite matches Heifetz, Grumiaux and Milstein for sustained intensity. And please do try and track down that wonderful Enescu recording: the sound might be compromised – and by 1948 Enescu was somewhere past his prime – but sampling even the opening bars of the First Sonata should be enough to convince you that here was an artist whose comprehensive grasp of Bach's inspiring muse hovered way above the norm, even when that norm was already loftily placed. Enescu's recordings are also available via Spotify. 🎧

THE RECORDINGS

-  **JS Bach Solo Violin Sonatas & Partitas**
Dénes Zsigmondy
Paladino 🎧 🎧 PMR0093
-  **JS Bach Solo Violin Sonatas & Partitas**
Christoph Schickedanz
Audite 🎧 🎧 AUDITE23 434
-  **JS Bach Solo Violin Sonatas & Partitas**
Gottfried von der Goltz
Aparté 🎧 🎧 APT76
-  **JS Bach Solo Violin Sonatas & Partitas**
Mie Kobayashi
Extón 🎧 🎧 453818 2765470