

Friday, November 15, 2024, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Leonidas Kavakos, *violin*
Bach's Complete Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin (1720)

PROGRAM I

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) Sonata No. 2 in A minor, BWV 1003
Grave
Fuga
Andante
Allegro

Partita No. 3 in E major, BWV 1006
Preludio
Loure
Gavotte en rondeau
Minuet I and II
Bourrée
Gigue

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 3 in C major, BWV 1005
Adagio
Fuga
Largo
Allegro assai

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PROGRAM II

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) Sonata No. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001
Adagio
Fuga: Allegro
Siciliana
Presto

Partita No. 1 in B minor, BWV 1002
Allemanda
Corrente
Sarabande
Bourée

INTERMISSION

Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004
Allemanda
Corrente
Sarabanda
Giga
Ciaccona

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BACH'S COMPLETE SONATAS AND PARTITAS FOR SOLO VIOLIN

Bach's legendary fame as a performer rests on his prowess at keyboard instruments and especially the organ. Less known is his competency, if not virtuosity, as a violinist and violist. Both his grandfather and father had been celebrated violinists, and Bach from early childhood took lessons from his father. When as a young man he became a musician at the court of Weimar, he was appointed concertmaster of the orchestra as well as chief organist in the chapel.

Thus, when he moved from Weimar to become *Kapellmeister* at the court of Cöthen in 1718, Bach brought a thorough understanding of string instruments to his new post. And this served him well for there was little need for his renowned organ playing at this Calvinist court. The organ in the Cöthen chapel had fallen into disrepair since the Reformed Church severely restricted the use of music during services. However, religious austerity did not affect musical life in the court itself, and Prince Leopold maintained an orchestra of the highest quality. So the composer turned his attention to secular instrumental music. We can thank Cöthen's Calvinism for such masterpieces as the *Brandenburg* Concertos, the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the six suites for solo cello, and the six glorious sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin.

Completed in 1720, these touchstones of the violinist's art are an extraordinary blending of Italian and French dance styles, German playing technique, and Bach's own lofty contrapuntal imagination. For who but Bach could conceive of creating elaborate multi-voice counterpoint—even fugues—for this supreme melody instrument, designed primarily to deliver a single line! But in apparently working against the instrument's very nature, the composer could draw on the great skill German Baroque fid-

dlers had developed of double-stopping the strings to play more than one note at a time. Bach made unprecedented demands on this technique: requiring much triple-stopping and occasional quadruple-stopping to produce three- and four-voice chords and counterpoint. Indeed, for more than a century after they were written, these pieces were considered works for study only, but far too difficult to perform in public. Finally, the great 19th-century violinist Joseph Joachim championed them—as he had earlier done with the “unplayable” Beethoven Violin Concerto—and brought them triumphantly into the concert hall.

Interestingly, playing multiple stops was considerably easier for a player in Bach's day than it is for virtuosos today. The invention of the concave Tourte bow at the end of the 18th century, along with the development of a raised and more curved bridge, have enhanced violin playing in many ways, but has made bowing of multiple stops more difficult.

Far more ingenious than the use of multiple stops to voice chords or to add another contrapuntal line was Bach's ability to write “polyphonic melody”: single-voice melodies that implied multiple voices and rich harmonies. For him, the violin's essential nature was not a limitation to his contrapuntal skills but a challenge to find new methods. And listening to these pieces also challenges our own imaginations. Just as traditional Chinese and Japanese paintings only lightly sketch a landscape, leaving our mind's eye to fill in the details, so Bach's brief indications of additional voices and harmonies spurs us to unconsciously complete them in our minds. Such active listening adds greatly to our involvement and pleasure in this music.

Leonidas Kavakos has spread the six sonatas and partitas over two evenings. The commentary on each work is given below in the order it appears on these concerts.

CONCERT OF NOVEMBER 15, 2024

Sonata No. 2 in A minor, BWV 1003

The Second Sonata in A minor opens with a noble, emotionally eloquent Grave that serves as a prelude to the following fugue. Launched by an imposing chord and sensitively ornamented throughout, it possesses an extraordinary harmonic richness, with stunning dissonances adding color and poignancy. It closes in a beautiful succession of trills, leaving us harmonically on the fugue's doorstep.

The second-movement Fuga is lengthier and more elaborate than the one we'll hear later in the First Sonata, though its fugue subject is quite lyrical and charming. Bach masterfully alternates his textures between full chordal writing, cleverly conceived duetting passages with double-stopping providing the accompaniment, and luminous single-note lines that still imply polyphony. All the fugal devices are on display with the fugue subject even presented in inversion.

Double-stopping is used to create a pulsing accompaniment to the third-movement Andante, a lovely, songlike slow movement that is the only one of the four to move away to a new key, C major.

The use of echo effects establishes the impression that the final Allegro is a duet between two violins rather than music for one; Bach also conveys this feeling by the contrapuntal imitations built into the melodic lines. Though light in spirit, this music is a supreme demonstration of his art of counterpoint re-conceived for a single, non-keyboard instrument.

Partita No. 3 in E major, BWV 1006

"Partita" is another term for the Baroque dance suite, based on stylizations of traditional dance forms from many European countries. This third of the Violin Partitas is the lightest and most playful and, unlike the first two, is in a major key—bright E major.

Thoroughly French in style, it drops the standard Baroque dances, replacing them with a series of French dances that were known as *galanterien* and were typically inserted as optional "sorbet" courses between the suite's "main dishes." So, in effect, we have here a suite of desserts!

The Preludio must have been a piece Bach himself liked very much for he later rearranged it for organ and orchestra to open his Cantatas No. 29 and 121a. It is a sparkling perpetual-motion movement of continuous sixteenth notes. Next comes the Loure, a rarely encountered French dance of stately and solemn character with strong rhythmic accents, given additional stress by the double and triple-stopped chords.

The Gavotte en Rondeau has a memorable, very forthright refrain tune that appears five times, with harmonically freer episodes in between. Then we hear a pair of minuets: the first very grand and full-toned thanks to the extensive double-stopping, the second gentler with charmingly rustic drone effects. After a quick, flowing Bourrée, the Third Partita closes with a limpid Gigue in buoyant 6/8 time.

Sonata No. 3 in C major, BWV 1005

Bach's three sonatas for unaccompanied violin follow the form of the *sonata da chiesa* ("church sonata") developed by the Italian Baroque composer Arcangelo Corelli: four movements of slow-fast-slow-fast. The musical weight falls on the first two movements—crowned by the second-movement fugue—while the final two movements are lighter in spirit and less aurally (but not technically) demanding.

And weighty indeed are the opening movements of the Third Sonata. The Adagio first movement forms a majestic portal. Out of a simple rocking figure, Bach opens an extraordinary vista of contrapuntal grandeur and harmonic adventure. Second, third, and fourth voices enter, and the texture remains predominantly in three or four parts



throughout, with the rocking figure a constant brooding presence. The key is C major, but Bach touches on many other keys in this drama of motivic expansion.

Next we hear the longest and most complex of the fugues Bach created for his violin sonatas, spanning some 12 minutes in length. Its fugue subject is based on the chorale tune “Komm, heiliger Geist, Herre Gott” (“Come, Holy Spirit, Lord God”); Bach performed a chorale fugue on this same melody at an organ concert he gave in 1720 in Hamburg. And he must have been thinking in terms of the keyboard in creating this formidably difficult solo for violin, which asks the player to virtually transcend the limitations of the instrument. However, the violin cannot in fact produce all the notes we would hear in a three or four-part fugue on the keyboard: we must use our imaginations to fill in the picture from Bach’s polyphonic sketches. Midway through, listen for Bach’s clever presentation of the fugal theme in inversion or upside-down.

After these two very challenging movements, the final two provide relaxation. The Largo, in the key of F major, is a deeply expressive lyrical song with beautiful harmonic shadings. And the final Allegro assai is a whirling perpetual motion, with the violin in joyous, unimpeded flight.

CONCERT OF NOVEMBER 16, 2024

Sonata No. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001

The majestic First Sonata in G minor opens Bach’s cycle. Like all three of the sonatas, it follows the form of the *sonata da chiesa* (“church sonata”) developed by Corelli: four movements of slow–fast–slow–fast. The musical weight falls on the first two movements—crowned by the second movement fugue—while the final two movements are lighter in spirit and less aurally demanding. Italianate, too, is the highly ornamented melodic writing Bach uses throughout.

We hear this florid embellishment in the opening Adagio, which serves as an imposing entry point to the entire cycle, ushering us on an epic journey. It is one of Bach’s grandest preludes in an improvisatory or fantasia style. Opening with a quadruple-stopped chord of G minor, it is punctuated throughout by full chords etching its rich and unpredictable harmonic movement.

A pungently rhythmic subject featuring *staccato* repeated notes provides built-in drama for the Fugue, the work’s meaty center. Bach uses ingenious sleight of hand to fool us into believing we are hearing three and sometimes four-part counterpoint. By just slipping in bits of the imitative lines, he encourages us to use our imaginations to fill in the rest. And the single-note passages use another device: polyphonic melody in which one line implies a multi-voice dialogue. A skilled artist like Leonidas Kavakos is able to articulate these different voices clearly.

After such musical intensity, the third movement brings relaxation, though still using three-part counterpoint. It is a Siciliana in flowing 12/8 time and the key of B-flat major: an idyllic pastoral style born in Italy and very popular in the late Baroque. Its buoyant melody begins in the lower voice, while the two upper voices provide a graceful response. Bach closes with a Presto of cascading melody in perpetual motion. An exhilarating display of polyphonic melody, it expresses the sheer joy of (seemingly!) effortless virtuosity.

Partita No. 1 in B minor, BWV 1002

Unlike the sonatas, the partitas are more freely constructed, following the general template of the Baroque dance suite. The First Partita uses just four dances—Allemanda, Corrente, Sarabanda, and Borea—but pairs each one with a *double* or variation on its music.

The Allemanda has a very grand and stately character enhanced by the prominent use of dotted rhythms and lushly har-

monized chords punctuating its texture. Its variation is much looser and lighter, with the dotted rhythms smoothed away into flowing eighth notes and no double-stopping.

Next we hear a Corrente, an animated dance in triple time originating in Italy. Its restless, nonstop melodic line covers an extensive range and implies considerable harmonic movement. At a *presto* tempo, the *double* is even faster: a whirling exhibition of fluid virtuosity.

Coming from Spain, the Sarabanda is also a three-beat dance but of a slower and more solemn character. This one is formidable indeed: bold in its harmonies and heavily accented by multiple-stopped chords. In the variation, Bach again adopts a lighter approach: removing the chords and smoothing the flow while retaining the harmonic interest.

The standard Baroque suite closes with a gigue, but since this dance did not lend itself very well to variation, Bach chose instead a Borea or Bourrée, a lively dance in duple meter from France. Mostly presented in double and triple stops, it exudes a sturdy, rustic personality. Its variation again smooths the rhythms and aerates the texture by eliminating most of the double-stopping, yet is even more harmonically adventurous than its predecessor.

Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004

The Second Partita follows the standard formula of the Baroque suite, using its four core dances. In its serene and stately flow, the Allemanda shows how the alternation of the violin's higher and lower registers can give the illusion of two-voice counterpoint. This is followed by a much livelier Corrente in which the extensive use of triplet rhythms

squares the power of the 3/4 meter.

The Sarabanda is also in 3/4 time, but the feeling is now grave and reflective. Whether implied in single notes or actually spelled out in chords, the harmonies in this beautiful dance are daring and expressive. The Giga is in bouncing 12/8 meter and rarely stops beating its wings.

However, these movements are a mere prelude to the mighty Chaconne (Chaconne) with which the Second Partita concludes. It is surely one of the greatest pieces Bach ever created and is often played on its own. The *chaconne* is a dance form in which a melodic/harmonic pattern is reiterated over and over while a series of variations are built upon it. Bach's uses an eight-measure chordal theme that stands like a massive pillar supporting his grand structure; we hear it at the beginning, in somewhat altered form in the middle, and at the close. Over this theme—which is subtly altered throughout its course—the composer created 64 variations, usually presented in pairs. This profound work is divided into three large sections: opening in D minor, moving to D major after the reiteration of the theme, then closing in D minor. Brahms loved this movement, which he would play with his left hand at the piano. In his words, “The Chaconne to me is one of the most wonderful, incomprehensible works of music. On one staff, for one small instrument, this man has written a whole world of profoundest thought and deepest feelings.”

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

Leonidas Kavakos is recognized worldwide as a violinist and artist of rare quality, acclaimed for his matchless technique, captivating artistry, superb musicianship, and the integrity of his playing. He works regularly with the world's greatest orchestras and conductors and appears in recital at the premier concert halls and festivals. In recent years, Kavakos has also built a strong profile as a conductor, working with such orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, Houston Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Vienna Symphony, Israel Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunk, and Filarmonica della Scala.

Highlights of the 2024–25 season in North America include his current recital tour performing Bach's complete Sonatas and Partitas, and recitals with Daniil Trifonov. Kavakos makes his debut in Mexico with the Orquesta Filarmonica de la UNAM; and appears as guest soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Palm Beach Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, and Dallas Symphony, as well as play-conducts with the New World Symphony. Elsewhere, he takes his Apollon Ensemble on tour to Asia with concerts in Macau, Daegu, Tokyo, and Taipei. Kavakos returns to the Filarmonica della Scala, Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunk, NDR Hamburg, DSO Berlin, Munich Philharmonic, Vienna Symphony, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Danish National Symphony, Swedish Radio Symphony, and conducts the Israel Philharmonic. He continues his partnership with Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma in trio concerts at major European venues, as well as performs in recital across Spain and Italy, as well as in London. In 2025, Kavakos will become the new Artistic Director of the classical music festival of the Lotte Concert Hall in Seoul, Korea.

Kavakos is an exclusive recording artist with Sony Classics. Releases have included *Bach: Sei Solo*; the Beethoven Violin Concerto, which he conducted and played with the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunk; and the re-release of his 2007 recording of the complete Beethoven Sonatas with Enrico Pace, for which he was named ECHO Klassik Instrumentalist of the Year. In 2022, Kavakos released *Beethoven for Three: Symphonies Nos. 2 and 5* arranged for trio, with Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma. The second album from this series included Symphony No. 6 (*Pastoral*) and was released in November 2022, with further recordings planned in the coming years. With his chamber group the Apollon Ensemble, Kavakos recently released *Bach: Violin Concertos* to critical acclaim. In 2014, Kavakos was named *Gramophone* Artist of the Year.

Born and raised in a musical family in Athens, Greece, Leonidas Kavakos curates an annual violin and chamber music master class in that city, which attracts violinists and ensembles from all over the world. In 2022, he was elected by the Academy of Athens as a member of the Chair of Music in the Second Class of Letters and Fine Arts for his services to music.

Kavakos plays the "Willemotte" Stradivarius violin of 1734.

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