

Text of Tasmin's Audio Introduction (Print Version)

INTRODUCTION

Hello, and thanks for visiting my website to hear my new recording, The Naked Violin! It's a bit different from a CD that you'd buy in the shop – not just because I've recorded this for people to download at no expense (!), but also because I'm presenting a programme of pieces to be enjoyed as if you'd come to listen to me playing in concert. One of the main differences between this download and a commercial recording is that it comprises pieces which are completely different from each other and the only thing that they really have in common is that they are all for solo violin. I'm hoping that even if these works are new to you, there's a chance that you'll find something you really like.

So, if you start to listen to the Bach and decide early on that it's not for you, please don't go away – try another movement, or give the Patterson or Ysaye a go and come back to the Bach later. Sometimes you can listen to a work for the first time and not enjoy it, but find on a second hearing that it becomes more accessible and enjoyable. I've played all these pieces many times in concerts where both music lovers and people who know very little about classic music have really enjoyed them.

My idea for The Naked Violin is to present the violin in its most pure and unadorned form, which some people believe is when it is at its most eloquent. I would like you to enjoy this CD exactly the way you want to, so if you only like a couple of tracks, feel free to download what you do like and leave the rest. But I hope you'll take a bit of time to listen with an open mind and hear the amazing versatility that the solo violin is capable of.

If you already know the works that I'm about to play and know that you like them, why not get to it by downloading the CD for your personal enjoyment?

However, if these pieces are new to you and you'd like to hear a bit about each work, please carry on listening and, at any time, feel free to head for the music by clicking on the link.

At the end of each section, I've put together a few classroom suggestions so that if you are a teacher, you can download these ideas and use them in whatever way you wish as a basis for your lessons.

Most of all, I really hope that you enjoy my latest recording and that it gives you many happy hours of listening!

Which violin?

When I was deciding which pieces to play for this recording, I also thought it would be a great opportunity for people to be able to compare two very different but equally wonderful old Italian violins. There aren't many times when you can hear two violins side by side, and my friends and colleagues who know both instruments well have strong ideas as to which one they prefer and what kind of sound they respond to. It is the player who creates the sound

but it is the violin that dictates the range of possibilities that can be produced. If this all sounds a bit technical, let me make an analogy with, for instance, cooking. Chicken is always chicken, but can be made to taste entirely different according to how it is cooked and what other ingredients are used. So it is with the violin, the player is an individual who will bring his or her own particular personality and distinctive sound to each different violin.

Let me tell you a bit about both instruments and then while you're listening to the music, you can see how different they are and perhaps decide for yourself which one you like better.

My own violin is a Giovanni Batista Guadagnini which was made in Milan in 1757. I also have on loan from the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Regent Stradivarius which was crafted in 1708, a mere 50 years earlier. Let's put that into some sort of historical perspective: if we imagine that Bach was only 23 when the Regent was made and Mozart was a mere one-year-old when Guadagnini put the finishing touches to the vibrant red varnish, you can begin to see how amazing it is that these instruments are still sounding and looking so fabulous!

Comparing instruments is a bit like talking about the taste of food or comparing fine wine. It's hard to put the feelings into words and you really have to experience it so I won't waffle on too much about how they sound, but instead I'll play the same things on each instrument so that you can hear the difference for yourself.

Here are some boring scales to give you an idea how both violins sound and to hear each of the four strings in succession. See what you think and whether any differences leap out at you. You may well find that you do not distinguish easily between the two violins, and if you don't then I'm doing my job better than I thought!

--- INSTRUMENTAL DEMONSTRATION ---

So what did you think? Here's an example of what some violinists have to say on the subject.

Some people like to play Stradivarius's because they are exciting instruments and can take you by surprise - a bit like a wild racehorse! The upper timbres of the instrument are more prominent and that's what tends to give the violins their carrying power in a large concert hall. This is why solo violinists have often preferred to play a Strad, assuming they got the chance to! Curiously though, they are not always as beautiful to listen to close up and they can be very tricky to record.

By contrast the Guadagnini is like rich velvet with no harsh edges at all. It's a great instrument for chamber music and it records really well, but because there's so little edge and grit, that it doesn't always make the sound easy to project in a big hall.

BACH

The first piece that I'd like to play is one of the six incredible and varied works that Bach wrote for solo violin. They are ranked as among the most challenging but rewarding in the repertoire and they can be challenging for the listener too, but I think it's fair to say that the one that I'm about to play is the most upbeat of them all. I remember vividly playing a couple of movements of this work while I was in Zimbabwe some years ago at a festival. One of the concerts involved me playing on a boat on the river near (but not too near) the Victoria falls, with the audience sitting on the riverbank. A passing hippopotamus stopped to listen to me for a whole seven minutes while I played the Loure and the Gavotte, so if you want to find out what wild animals in Zimbabwe like to relax to, just click on those two tracks.

Bach composed the 6 sonatas and partitas in 1720, while he was working at the court in Cöthen. The manuscript of these works was nearly destroyed but luckily for us, someone saved it from being lost forever and used as butcher's paper!

Some of you may be wondering what a partita is? Well, it's very simply a collection of dances - and all the movements in this E major partita are indeed dances, with the exception of the first one. I think it's interesting that in this final work for solo violin, Bach didn't want to head immediately for the dance floor, but instead he chose herald the music in with an exhilarating Preludio. Have a listen - I think you'll agree, it's a breathtaking ride and a joyous way to start! With the exception of the first few bars at the beginning and end, the style is a *moto perpetuo*, which means, perpetual motion; so I'm playing rapid-fire semiquavers which are some of the fastest notes in music and You'll see what I mean when it begins - quite exhausting to play, in fact!

After all that hectic activity, it's time for something more relaxing, and the 2nd movement is a very beautiful slow dance called a Loure. This is the one that made the hippo stop to listen. Each section is repeated and it's up to the player to embellish it a little - or a lot - as they choose. It was the custom, at the time that Bach was writing, for players to ornament, or decorate, the music in their own particular style - like a form of improvisation. In fact, many of Bach's works have only a skeletal form of the music written down. In some pieces, for instance, he simply wrote down the melody and the bass line for harmony, and the rest was left up to the performer to provide the ornamentation and layout of the chords.

Following the Loure is one of the most famous of all the pieces that Bach wrote - the Gavotte en Rondeau, which is a sprightly dance in 2/2, i.e. two, rather than four, main beats in the bar, with a feeling of "one and two and...". A rondo is a musical form whose opening idea is brought back at the end of each section, a little bit like the chorus in a song. One of the enjoyable things about a repeated theme is that one can have fun thinking of a variety of ways to play the tune - not just quietly or loudly, but sometimes boldly or more hesitantly...

There are two Minuets in this E major partita, and the minuet is a dance which is traditionally in three, a sort of stately waltz. Again each section is repeated and the first minuet has an extrovert character. The second minuet is softer

and more lyrical. It has a continuous note called a pedal, which is slightly reminiscent of the bagpipes, and this is interspersed with a lighter, more sprightly motif. After the second minuet, it's traditional to repeat the first minuet for one last time.

The penultimate movement is the most peasant-like of all the dances. A rumbustious Bourée which is quite wild in feeling - maybe it was meant to be danced after having consumed a fair amount of alcohol as it certainly reels and gallops about from place to place!

Finally the Partita ends with a joyful Gigue, again a traditional dance in three.

In this particular case, the time signature which denotes the beats is 6/8 which means that there are six beats in the bar, but the overall feeling is of two main beats, each one subdivided into three - a bit like an "oom par par" feeling. I have a particular affection for this Gigue as it was the very first piece of Bach that I ever learned.

I'll be playing the Bach on my 1757 Guadagnini violin

Classroom suggestions

Here are some suggestions for classroom work

What moods do each of the movements conjure up for you?
What about the overall shape of the work? Can you imagine what it would have been like without the Preludio to begin with? Is there another dance that might have worked to begin the piece with?

In the Preludio Can you hear the different rhythms that jump out at you, even though I am playing only a succession semiquavers with an equal rhythm?
Near the end of the Preludio, there is a section where Bach employs a technique called Bariolage, which is a French word. This is when the violinist plays two notes which are the same, only one is open string and the other one stopped note on an adjacent string – even though the notes are the same pitch, when you switch quickly from one string to another, there is a different tone-colour. What effect does that produce on the ear, and do you know what the other word is for Tone colour? (Answer: timbre).

Have a listen to Bach's use of harmony, which is particularly inventive in the Loure. Can you imagine what this piece would sound like if it were accompanied on the piano or harpsichord, with the violin playing the top line? Would that take away some of the character of the piece?

For younger students, can you make up your own dance to the different movements?

In the Gavotte there are four different episodes, can you describe the character of each and find the one which is completely different from the others. Why is it so different? (Answer: the third episode, which is made up entirely of single notes, with no double stopping, and is also more introverted in character.)

Can you find other pieces by different composers with the same dances – compare Bach’s version of a Gigue to another composers idea of the same dance.

For advanced students use of ornamentation is a way to decorate the theme – what other ornaments do they hear? What purpose do they serve? (Answer: decoration and embellishment.)

PATTERSON

Paul Patterson was inspired by Polish folk music when he wrote this terrific and witty piece in 1984. He later amended it for a violin competition, and obviously decided that any violinist who was going to play this, needed to be put through their paces.

I wanted to include this on my recording because I love the way that he uses all the pyrotechnics on the violin to show any listener and music lover the amazing variety of sounds that a single violin can produce. If anyone listening to this knows the orchestral piece “Young person’s guide to the Orchestra” by Benjamin Britten, you’ll be able to see the similarity of idea in the introduction of a new “trick” in each section. It’s also a very clever piece in the way that he develops the theme.

It’s a Theme and Variations, and if you’ll permit me, I’m going to give you a little spoken introduction with the violin, as this is something I love to do in concert.

Here we go:

--- PATTERSON INTRODUCTION WITH VIOLIN ---

In fact, my spoken introduction probably lasts longer than the piece itself! And for this work, I am playing my Stradivarius violin.

Classroom suggestions for Patterson

What adjectives would you use to describe the character of the theme?
(Answer: alternating purposeful and hesitant.)

After the main theme, there is a section with a mixture of bowed notes and pizzicato from the left hand. Saltando is the name given to the technique when a violinist throws the bow on the string and it jumps up and down. Can you hear how many times this happens in the pizzicato section – and can you hear the particularly long Saltando? Just out of interest, do you think that this section is funny? If so, why? (Answer: The unexpected dynamics and juxtaposition of bowed and pizzicato notes.)

During the Andante Dramatico, there is a short section with artificial harmonics, which produce a high and ethereal sound. Does this sound remind you of another instrument? (Pan pipes? Flute?) For more advanced students, can you spot the rising triad of the theme in the short harmonics section?

Just after that section, I use the mute to change the sound. Do you know how a mute works and what is happening to cause the change in the sound? (Answer: when you put the mute on the bridge of the violin, the weight and pressure inhibit the sound from resonating.)

Paul Patterson chooses to bring back the main theme at the end of the piece – do you know the name given to this type of form in a piece of classical music? (Answer: Cyclic.) Do you know any other works in which a composer also employs this technique? (Answer: Many great composers choose to bring back the theme from the opening section of a piece into the last section or movement. It lends unity to the whole work. One of my most favourite examples of this is in the great orchestral masterpiece by Janacek, entitled Sinfonietta. When the theme is brought back in the final movement, Janacek embellishes it and makes it much more grandiose, which is very exhilarating.)

YSAYE

Like Bach, Ysaye wrote 6 works for unaccompanied violin and one of the reasons why I wanted to record this third sonata is that it couldn't be more stylistically different from the Bach. So, if you didn't like the Bach at all, have a listen to this and see whether it's more up your street!

Eugene Ysaye was a great violinist of his time, born in Belgium in 1858 where he also died in 1931 after contracting diabetes.

His six sonatas were each dedicated to a great violinist of the time, and are both musically and technically challenging for a violinist. The sonata that I'm going to play, entitled "Ballade", is dedicated to the Romanian Georges Enescu who would have been about 43 years old and probably at the height of his prowess when this work was written in 1924.

For those of you who are new to the Ballade, don't be put off by the slow and rather weird-sounding introduction. It lasts approximately 2 and a half minutes and, once you get to know this piece, you'll easily see the idea behind it, and why Ysaye chose to begin his sonata in this mysterious way. To me, it feels like a fiery volcano waiting to erupt, or a roller coaster, slowly and inexorably working its way to the summit, before plunging everyone into the ride of their lives!

Often in classical music, a sonata has three or more movements, but this sonata is conceived in one continuous movement with distinct sections. Also, unlike the Bach, the piece is predominantly in the minor key, rather than the major key. Once we finally get to the main idea, it turns out to be a dance in 3/8 time, but it's a wild dance, full of testosterone, and there's a little kick in the tail at the end of each phrase. Ysaye even tells the violinist to play the Theme "with bravura".

After this passionate statement, there follows a wonderful section full of fleeting demi-semi quavers. If you thought the Bach Preludio was fast and furious, Ysaye takes this to another level entirely, adding double stopping into the bargain! The music sweeps high and low, only pausing briefly to collect itself

in a more restful cascade of gently trickling notes. But this does not last long as Ysaye builds the pace once more, resumes the main theme and the music gets faster and faster before literally dancing itself to death.

I love this piece and its showmanship and I hope you'll find it as riveting as I do. I thought that the Stradivarius would be the perfect instrument for this work.

Classroom suggestions for Ysaye:

Do you know what the word is when a violinist plays more than one note at the same time? (Answer: Double stopping, Triple stopping, Quadruple stopping – depending on how many extra notes. Or, simply: chord). How many different musical lines can you hear at any one time? (Answer: Very frequently there are two main lines going on during this sonata.) What are the maximum notes you can hear in my chords? (Mostly four-note chords, but in the introduction there is a six-note chord!)

This piece is predominantly in the minor key – how does this affect the mood of the dance, compared with the Bach? (Answer: It makes it more dramatic and dark.) How would the way you would dance this piece differ from the way you would dance the Bach? (Answer: Perhaps the dance would be more free and certainly more sinuous and passionate!)

Ysaye uses a lot of chromaticism, which is when there are half notes between each main note of the diatonic scale. Which is the most chromatic section and can you find the quarter tones? (Answer: after the initial theme is heard, there follows the fleeting demi-semi-quaver section which is very fast and chromatic and contains quarter tones.) For those of you who play a string instrument, why not explore some quarter tones on your own instrument?

For advanced students:

A Ballade is a form of lyrical fantasy, which has an element of spontaneity, - which section feels most transient? (Answer as above) Why is that? (Answer: because the harmony changes very frequently.) How does Ysaye create this feeling – is it his use of rhythm, melody or harmony? (Answer: mainly his use of chromatic harmony and, rhythmically, the sheer speed of the section.)

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