

Bach to the Future: Recontextualising the Solo Violin Canon in 2014

PIERS HELLAWELL

In 2013 I was fortunate to be asked by the British violinist Fenella Humphreys to be one of six composers commissioned to supply works that she would then perform along with Bach's *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001–1006). The other composers were Cheryl Frances-Hoad and Gordon Crosse (who, like me, fulfilled their projects in 2014), while Adrian Sutton, Sally Beamish and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies are to complete theirs in 2015. In a tour-de-force of fund-raising and entrepreneurial courage, Fenella has seen this project through from its first stirrings in a little over two years, despite an artistic climate as discouraging as ever in the UK; having premiered the pieces, she is already out on her concert circuit performing the first three works, and she has even recorded them for CD since their premiere in September 2014. But what do they have to do with Bach?

The answer about the Bachian context varies with each piece. Fenella was careful not to specify an artificial connection to the six works, since she felt it must constrain the direction of the project; she merely associated one of the six with each composer, leaving the response up to the composers. As a result, Gordon Crosse's work uses explicit thematic quotations; Cheryl Frances-Hoad echoes Bach's graceful phraseology and string textures in her work; my own process, meanwhile, made no explicit contact at all, at least until a very late stage. The phrase 'to be performed with' (or 'to go with') leaves the association wide open—and at this half-way stage we cannot know what connective resonances will emerge with the other three works.

For me, this freedom eased slightly the pressing sense of superfluity in undertaking such a project: while my brain reasoned that new work must always be enabled, my heart screamed that Bach's contributions are less in need of companions than any area of the repertoire! They stand alone. I therefore planned to keep my distance from even the base of the edifice – although as time went on, fate played a hand in drawing me closer.

By coincidence a similar, although not identical, project was undertaken in 2014 in Ireland: the Irish-Romanian violinist Ioana Petcu-Colan asked four composers in Dublin to write pieces. However, her project was agreeably different, since each composer provided one of a set of pieces for interpolation within the 'page-turns' of the D-minor Partita (BWV 1004); the performative

result was thus a sequence of old and new, the new being in the accents of four separate composers. I was lucky enough to hear Ioana's Belfast performance of the result in the spring of 2014, and I was radically affected by what I heard. By this point I was perhaps three-quarters of the way through my piece, so nothing changed in its language or layout—but I began to think how Fenella's project might embrace the notion of 'interpolation', something surely more commonplace in pre-classical performance, when concerts were less rigidly formatted than now.

My work *Balcony Scenes* is a set of four pieces whose titles (Fantasia I – Bicinium I – Bicinium II – Fantasia II) reflect their material and behaviour rather than any special link to early forms. Even my initial 'suite' design was less a reflection on Bach than a strategy for contrasting musical explorations. But after hearing Ioana's interpolated version of the D-minor Partita, I at once saw that my pieces might have the potential to interact with Bach's in performance. The practice of interpolation is not without risks for composer and performer: the listener to both works (even heard in succession) will differentiate between the familiar language and the unfamiliar, so a rapid alternation between portions of the sublime/known and chunks of the unknown music risks irritating the listener in the adjustment it demands—Baroque modes continually giving way to contemporary. The corollary, of course, is that the same juxtaposition may release unimagined resonances and delights for the open-eared listener. As I finished my work, therefore, I was suddenly alive to its corners—how beginnings and endings of the four pieces could work in proximity to those of the D-minor Partita: in particular, I fashioned the end of my last piece not only as a normal conclusion but with one ear cocked to its other function, of upbeat to the great 'Chaconne' (BWV 1004/5). Similarly, my fiendishly difficult *Bicinium II*, already taking the 'scherzo' position in this quasi-sonata layout, now presented itself also as a companion to Bach's 'Gigue' (BWV 1004/4).

Fenella and I resolved to explore this route in performance, and our first actual 'sequence' was performed, also in Belfast, in December 2014. Meanwhile her concert performances in other cities have presented the new pieces in the way she had envisaged, as separate companions heard before the Bach—although the impact of the sequential form of *Balcony Scenes/Bach D Minor* at that Belfast recital surely opens the way for more explorations. In my verbal introduction to the sequence I had little to tell the audience about the background to our juxtaposed performance, since it was such a recent idea, but I did draw on a few live illustrations: in particular I highlighted the 'chorale' material that pervades much of my suite and thus aligns it in one way with the final chaconne. This material—as we illustrated for the audience—also originated far from Bach, in a 1992 work of mine for strings, *Memorial Cairns*, after I felt the need for a harmonic skeleton and was drawn back to this 20-year-old string material (heard originally on viola). It is a ground—a circular chord sequence (a forerunner of the 'escalator series' developed in many of my works since 2004) whose sense of a recurrent harmonic journey explicitly links it to Bach's chaconne form. This is the only context, I think, in which I really was conscious of the god-parentage of the D-minor Partita from the outset.

The impact of the interpolated performance on colleagues was considerable: their valued comments gave the only objective sense that I have of the result. 'I was very moved by last night's performance of your piece intertwined with the D-minor Partita' wrote one colleague; another commented about the D-minor Partita:

The Chaconne expressed my feelings perfectly—the almost perfection redemption in D major that was then thwarted by a return to the minor. The devastation of this emotional turn around was complemented by Fenella's anguished playing with intonation on the B flat, bringing the sense of the *pathetique* to a level I'd not heard done before. I thought Bach's refusal to include a major third at the end was like the hammer blow. It was an anvil.

The same colleague commented to me verbally that my piece sounded not like new music but like a repertoire item—something already established in its own right.

Numerous 'experiments' over the last century have shown Bach's endless resilience when subjected to versions, arrangements and re-clothings. Meanwhile a project such as this new, contextual approach maybe offers a less intrusive reframing of Bach's core repertoire; the evidence suggests that his greatness can truly give a benign framework to the hearing and appreciation of new work that nestles in his shadow.