

**J.S. BACH: SACRED AND SECULAR UNION**

**Questions and reflections on performing Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas**

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## **J.S. BACH: SACRED AND SECULAR UNION**

### **Questions and reflections on performing Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas**

#### **Introduction**

Several years ago, a seed was planted in my mind by a fellow musician and friend. He told me "in Bach's music we are shown the world as it is whole." These words resonated within me, something that has grown over the past years into a powerful conviction – the fruit of which is the foundation this paper. At that time, I had just resolved to abandon my music studies in New York in favour of something more concrete. I could not see how practicing music all day related to improving the problems of the 'real' world. I travelled to West Africa as a volunteer. It was here, in a small fishing village in The Gambia (West Africa), playing on an old beaten-up violin, that I discovered the universality of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Every evening, because it was my only refuge and sense of familiarity in a completely foreign environment, I played some movements of Bach's solo violin sonatas for myself in my little mud and straw thatched hut. One day some curious Gambians asked me if I would show them my "strange singing." I decided to play the Bach Chaconne for them. For these Gambians however, listening to someone play music does not imply sitting quietly and listening without responding physically or vocally to the rhythms and expression of the music. For these people music means to *be moved*, not only emotionally, but also physically --- to dance, to clap, and to sing. Upon hearing the opening chords of the Chaconne, this particular audience immediately responded with singing, clapping and dancing. I was a little shocked. I had never before witnessed such jubilant response to the music of Bach. I continued to play however, and after a short while my *collaborators* slowly settled down. It is impossible for me to articulate what happened next, or how it happened. All I can concretely describe is finishing the Chaconne ten minutes later and looking into the eyes of one of the people for whom I had just played. I experienced a deep sense of connection with him (her?) and with everyone there... It was as if the barriers between us had been momentarily lifted.

I have played the Bach Chaconne for many years. I have played it in very remote places and under unusual circumstances --- for fishermen on the docks of a fishing village in Greece, at the party of one of Portugal's most important investment bankers, at train stations in Italy, and in the barn of a dairy farm in Ontario. Every time I play this piece, I feel that it draws its listeners inward to touch something deep within us which can transcend all limitations of physical space and time. It is as if this music speaks a

language that is universally understood. The great French organist Charles-Marie Widor expresses the mystery of Bach's music in the following way:

“Bach is on the whole the most universal of artists. What speaks to us through his work is pure religious emotion; and this is one and same in all men (human beings), in spite of the national and religious partitions in which we are born and bred. It is the emotion of the infinite and the exalted, for which words (alone) are always an inadequate expression, and that can find proper utterance only in artistic expression. For me, Bach is the greatest of preachers. His music tunes the soul to a state in which we can grasp the truth and oneness of things, and rise above everything that is paltry, everything that divides us. By thus conquering artistic and religious mankind, Bach fulfills a mission to our time, which will never rise above the barriers that the past has erected unless the great souls of the past come to its aid. We are made one by what we admire in common, by what we revere in common, by what we comprehend in common” (CM Widor, 1907).

The premise of this paper is that Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas possess this ability to transcend all barriers. They touch something that is common in all of us—a sense of the sacred in every human heart.

### **Bach's Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas**

Bach wrote his Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas almost 300 years ago. They remain today quintessential works for solo violin. The Bach Chaconne is considered by many to be the apex of these works and is often referred to as the “Holy Grail” of the solo violin repertoire. How is it that these pieces, like the works of Shakespeare, continue to touch and move us today? What is the universal message within Bach's music that continues to speak to people across centuries of time? How can a violinist today approach the communication of this message in performance?

Through an exploration of Bach's life and the historical context of his work, this essay seeks to uncover the underlying roots which guided Bach in the composition of solo violin sonatas and partitas. My aim is in providing the musician with a path to uncovering the *universal essence* of these works.

In my own research I have found that all discussions on Bach eventually lead to the relationship between religion and art, or rather, the *sacred* and the *secular*. Bach spent much of his life writing music for the church. If he is to be understood from any standpoint at all, it is that for him “art was holy.” For Bach, creating music (whether composing or playing), was ultimately a spiritual act of *prayer*. The opening of my inquiry into Bach's solo violin works therefore, presents the *sacred* roots of Bach's art in

terms of *prayer*. However, Bach's solo violin *sonatas* also contain three *partitas* – meaning a set of dances. Written at the court in Kothen during the 'most secular' period of his life, Bach's solo violin works also reflect the worldly atmosphere of the court in their assimilation of the social dance. The second section of this paper therefore, will discuss the *secular* roots of Bach's art in terms of the *dance*. The third section will posit the central argument of this paper: *that the universal essence of Bach's music is rooted in the single origin of both the sacred and the secular, the source of both prayer and dance*. I propose this original unifying source as the concept of the *story* I outline. The closing section of the paper uses the simple concept of the story to interpret Bach's musical language and the contemporary performance of the solo violin sonatas and partitas. Focusing on the Bach Chaconne, I will demonstrate how the universal wholeness of Bach's music can be 're-illuminated' in performance through the analogy of *prayer, dance and story*.

## **The sacred roots of Bach's art**

### **Introduction**

#### **Subjective and objective art**

Albert Schweitzer begins his two-volume work on JS Bach with the following words: "Some artists are subjective, some objective." The art of the subjective artist, he claims, has its source in their human personality. These individuals oppose the epoch in which they live in order to originate new forms for the expression of their ideas, Richard Wagner being cited as a case in point. Schweitzer claims that the art of the objective artist on the other hand, makes no personal demands. It works only with the forms and ideas available at the time. This objective art however is not impersonal, but *super-personal*. The objective artist aims only to express what is already in existence around him and within him in "definitive and unique perfection." His art has the ability to transcend personal and individual differences to touch something that is "universal." JS Bach, Schweitzer claims, belongs to this order of objective artist. His work is derived of the forms and structures of his time. It carries the same external defects of his era, but is transfigured and "made immortal by the spirit that breathes through his work" (Schweitzer 3).

This is most of all because in Bach, "the artistic personality exists independently of the human personality" (S, 1). The stark contrast between Bach's calm outer life and his tirelessly searching inner artistic life is the defining characteristic which sets him apart from most musical geniuses that have followed. Schweitzer contrasts the even-tempered personality of Bach with Beethoven's emotionally charged temperament. "In Beethoven, the inner artist seizes upon the outer man, uproots him from his normal life, agitates him

and inflames him, until the inner light pierces through and finally consumes him. Not so with Bach. His artistic creativity goes on side by side with the normal and almost commonplace tenor of his work-a-day existence.” In Bach’s case, the outer man was only the “opaque envelope in which was carefully protected one of the greatest souls and minds of western civilization.” By examining this “dualistic enigma” (164) between the man and the artist more closely, we may uncover the roots of Bach’s ‘objective’ and universal art.

## **Universal Art**

### **Genius unaware**

It is said that Bach fought hard for his everyday life, but that he never really fought for the worldly recognition of his work. He was “not conscious of the extraordinary greatness of his work” (164). He was only aware of his fame and admitted mastery of the organ, clavier, and counterpoint. He was well aware of his professional responsibilities, as a teacher and as a father. As an artist and composer, he never dreamt that his works would, to this day, be widely regarded as some of the greatest masterpieces of all time. He never strove for this goal. “In this respect he is very different from Beethoven or Wagner” (165) and in general from what we understand today by the term ‘artist.’ This brings me back to the opening phrase of this paper. The same friend, who once told me that, " in Bach’s music we can see the world as it is whole;” also remarked that in Beethoven’s music we can see humanity’s process of becoming self-aware and therefore breaking apart from this 'wholeness'. This music is so consumed with its own ‘subjective’ individuality that it has separated itself from the whole, ironically reflective of Beethoven’s tragic inability to hear the whole in his personal surroundings. It is this ‘objective wholeness’, which Beethoven’s music so painfully yearns for, that Bach’s music so strongly emulates. Bach however, was unaware or unconscious of this fact. “No one was less conscious than he (Bach) was that his work was ahead of his epoch. In this respect he stands, perhaps, highest among all creative artists; his immense strength functioned without self-consciousness, like the forces of nature; and for this reason it is as cosmic and as copious as these.”

### **Universal Artist**

It is precisely this universal quality in Bach’s music which leads Schweitzer to claim that “Bach is not a single - but a universal personality.” Centuries of cultural development from the Middle Ages to the Reformation, including generations of musicians and composers (Pachelbel, Boehm, Reinken, Buxtehude, and Schuetz), as well as many of Bach's ancestors who came before him, all laboured hard at the same work before it was ‘objectified’ in the single personality which we know today as Johann Sebastian Bach. From these countless efforts that could not themselves give birth to anything durable,

there emerged a “will equal to the ideal” for which they were all searching. “This genius was not an individual, but a collective soul.” He was the end of a long build up, a terminal point; everything led up to him. “In the language of Kant, Bach was an historical postulate”. To understand Bach’s music therefore, means to understand the entire historical development which led from the Medieval Gregorian chants all the way to the congregational chorals of the Lutheran Church. In searching for the sacred roots of Bach’s art, we must begin by inquiring into the religious roots of his time – The Lutheran Church.

## Church

### Luther’s Church

The Religious significance of the German Reformation of 1517 can be articulated most concisely through Martin Luther’s statement: “The Cross alone is our theology.” Luther’s *theology of the cross* recognized God in Christ’s suffering. It promoted a biblical understanding of *glory* – the idea of “glorification through worship.” It viewed humans as being called to suffer, ultimately allowing God to work in them instead of seeking glory through their own acts. For Lutherans, true knowledge of God and a right ethical attitude in worldly acts were not separate matters but one and the same. Seeking knowledge of God through prayer was the same as seeking salvation through *good work*. According to Lutherans, the purpose of music, including secular instrumental music, “was to glorify God and uplift people spiritually.” For Bach therefore, *good work* was in creating music for the glory and worship of God. In fact, many Lutheran ideals were embedded deep in Bach’s art. He saw music as a “craft involving the concentrated effort of composer, performer, and listener the final aim of which was “the honour and Glory of God.” Bach accepted his work as a member of the *Kantorei* (to write and direct music of divine origin for the church), as his vocation, in full recognition of the ideal of “worship” which Luther had conceived for the Church. In this way “the whole musicianship of Bach obtained its meaning from his devotion. It cast light upon all he did and worked for, against which any personal expression of life for its own sake fell back into insignificance” (Schweitzer, 13).

### Order

As part of Protestant culture, Bach’s immediate contemporaries understood that “ever since the Fall of humanity into sin, it became necessary for hierarchies to be maintained in the present world.” This hierarchy was understood as a certain “order” or “law” that was necessary so that “evildoers be curbed and the public peace stand firm, which it cannot do when persons are equal and without distinction.” This belief in *order* was founded upon Luther’s belief that “God is a God of order” (1 Corinthians 14.33). An important message of this theology however, was that in the next world (the heavenly

one), these hierarchies of present earthly world would no longer be necessary. Nowhere in Bach's day was this idea of *ordering* more present than in the use of the thoroughbass. "Bach offers a definition of the thoroughbass as "the most perfect foundation of music." For him, the thoroughbass was the foundation of the ordering of the tones "which do not perish, but ascend to God - each in their own unique figuration." He taught his students that "the end and ultimate cause, as of all music, so of the thoroughbass, should be none else but the Glory of God. Where this is not observed, there is no real music but only a devilish blare and hubbub"

## **Reform**

It was this principle of ordering, reflected in the thoroughbass, which Bach saw as the means for a musical reformation of the church. In the same way in which he saw the ordering of music through the thoroughbass, "Bach visualized a new regulation of religious life through music." His life's work, as he saw it, was to bring about a "reformation or (re)birth of the Church out of the spirit of music." In 1708, the 23 year-old JS Bach submitted a resignation to the municipal council of Muelhausen in which he described his reason for resignation as being unable "to work for my very end in organizing church music well." At this decisive moment in history, Handel had turned to Italy and the opera - as the source of secular music and the ultimate opportunity for the artist to attain worldly fame and representative power. Bach however, had decided to dedicate himself to the sacred music of Germany as the "final opportunity to give expression to the reformation of religion through music." Bach's final vision of this reformation however differed from that of his orthodox Lutheran employers.

## **Pietism**

During his early years at Ohrdruf and later in Muelhausen, Bach came into contact with a branch of Protestantism called Pietism. While Orthodox Lutheranism enforced the rigid conservation of the congregation as the foundations of faith and Church, Pietism was based more on the individual's relationship with God. Pietism "was the new inwardness of the religious man, the introversion of the individual who made his own inner self the very source of grace and religious intensity." What attracted Bach to this individual spirituality? Bach believed that the act of interpreting the Word depended "upon the pious intensity of the individual and not on the established and sanctified beliefs of the church." For Bach it was the individual's intimate and spiritual conversations with God which revealed the true sense of the sacred word through music, and therefore the true faith. The path to becoming one with his art (interpreting the Word through music) was for Bach the same as the path to becoming one with God.

## **Bach's Religion**

### **Humanism**

In preparation for the following paragraphs, and in clarification of some of the ideas already mentioned above, I would like to define a few “spiritual terms” according to Schweitzer’s *Humanism* because his belief seem to correspond closely with that of Bach’s. Schweitzer begins by describing *ethics* as “the (sustainable) maintaining of life at the highest point of development. For him, the maturity of ethics is ultimately portrayed as “love expressed in action.” This ethics, profound and universal, has the significance of religion. It is religion. Religion, he says, is either dogmatic, in which case it has no relation with free thinking and only emphasizes the difference between thinking and believing; or religion is free of dogma, in which case it is freethinking spirituality or humanism. For Schweitzer, this *spirituality* is not a natural instinct, but an acquired awareness or consciousness. He describes the natural world as a ghastly drama of the ‘will-to-live’ divided against itself. One existence makes way at the cost of another. Instinctively, there is no yearning in life to arrive at unity with itself, to become universal. There is no justification in nature’s impersonal laws for the human mind’s reflective thought and ‘yearning to exceed its own frailty and become universal” (to touch the infinite within a finite existence). This is a human concept which, in Schweitzer’s vocabulary, equates with spirituality. Spirituality therefore, he describes as “the yearning of the human mind and heart to exceed its own weaknesses, to rise above pettiness, envy, and jealousy, to be courageous, noble, unselfish, and to give of oneself without seeking glory or applause.” Because he expresses in words no more than what he himself experiences, Schweitzer claims: “I never speak of ‘God’ but only of the ‘universal will to live.’ This universal will to live (God) is experienced as a ‘creative will in the manifestations of phenomena around me, and as an ethical will that I experience within me. God is simply

“the unfathomable principal of eternity and life. The essence of Being, the Absolute, and the Spirit of the Universe are all similar expressions which denote nothing actual but something conceived in abstraction, which precisely for that reason is absolutely unimaginable. The only reality is the Being which manifests itself through phenomena.”

Like Spinoza, this manifestation of God as a “synonym for nature,” connects Schweitzer and Bach with Goethe - through the latter’s ‘Philosophy of nature’.” One of the strongest of these manifestations however, for both Schweitzer and Bach - is music. For both these men, music, as the practice of ethics and religion, was “the expression of universal love that sometimes contradicts common sense conclusions.” Ultimately, these are all humanistic acts. “Humanism, in its simplicity, is the only genuine spirituality” (Schweitzer, Nobel acceptance speech).

## **Holy Art**

Ultimately, if Bach is to be understood from any standpoint at all, it is that for him, “art was religion” and this is why Bach had little concern with worldly success. It was an end in itself. Bach included religion in his definition of art in general. “All true and deeply-felt music, whether sacred or secular, has its home where art and religion dwell.” His artistic activity and his personality therefore are both based in his piety. All great art, even secular art, was in itself religious in his eyes. If Bach is to be understood from any standpoint at all, it is that for him *art was holy* and *making music was an act of worship*. All of Bach’s music therefore is ultimately spiritual and sacred in essence. His works were written first and foremost, not for the public’s entertainment, nor for his own recognition or personal indulgence, but rather for the “Glory of God.” This expression of devotion was in fact Bach’s most personal and emotional expression of faith. The sacred root of Bach’s art therefore, is ultimately expressed as *a personal act of prayer*.

## Prayer

### Senza basso

Bach’s solo violin sonatas therefore, represent some of Bach’s most intimate prayers and beliefs. In the baroque “Age of the Thoroughbass,” Bach clearly knew how unusual it was to write a set of violin works without a supporting bass instrument. His autograph score redundantly refers, no fewer than four times, to the absence of a bass part. Bach wrote on the title page “*Sei Solo a Violino senza Bass accompagnato Libro Primo*” and emphasized again at the top of every Sonata and Partita “*senza basso*” (without bass). Why was Bach so aware of the peculiarity of this ‘unaccompanied form? What urged him to write these solo works in the first place? What is their meaning for us today?

It is my belief that these works are an expression of Bach’s very private and pious belief in a personal and individual spirituality of humanism. Precisely because these works are not accompanied by a bass instrument, are they liberated and freed from the musical ‘ordering’ of the Lutheran Church, normally represented by the presence of the thoroughbass. This can in fact be seen as a musical representation of a religious reformation away from the ordering of the Orthodox Lutheran Church, towards the individual spirituality of pietism. Moreover, the synthesis in these works of the bass line with the melodic and harmonic material, can also be clearly observed as a step towards the union of sacred and secular, whose ultimate manifestation is the union of individual human with God. To re-phrasing Bach’s words: *a re-birth of individual spirituality through the spirit of music.*”

## Conclusion

### Conflict

The first argument of this paper is that performance of Bach's music calls for an attitude of *prayer*. By defining the sacred roots of Bach's art as "the re-birth of the church out of the spirit of music," we arrive at a problem: the "spirit of Bach's music" is essentially opposed to Bach's Luthern Church. If Pietism produced Bach's characteristic approach to the Holy Word, it was also responsible for many conflicts he had to undergo. His very personal attitude towards God and his art were at conflict with his professional duty and ultimate aim of reforming church music. "While the composition of the cantatas (following the lessons of the calendar through the whole church year), were derived from the orthodox formalism, Bach's devout interpretation of the text through music came from Pietism." We can imagine how deeply this conflict affected him, if we consider that his artistic goal was the reorganization of church music. Bach was about to make the individual artist alone responsible for the creation of church music, interpreting the Holy Word in the spirit of pietism. However, his goal was only possible within the orthodox Lutheran church and was impossible within Pietism. While Pietism attracted Bach for personal religious reasons, it repelled him because it denied the presence of artistic music within its service. This was the personal and professional conflict which Bach found himself in. This conflict between Pietism and Orthodoxy was the reason that Bach, in 1708, wrote the well known letter, already mentioned above, stating his reason for leaving Muelhausen as "being unable to work for my very end in organizing church music well."

This conflict however, would ultimately remain with Bach as long as he pursued his goal of reforming music *within* the confines church. In order for him reach beyond the scope of the church, Bach had to leave the Church. He had to dig down into the secular roots of his art and learn to speak a language which all would be able to understand, even those outside of the church. In order to accomplish this, Bach would eventually have to leave his position in the church; to venture out into the secular world.

## **The secular roots of Bach's art**

### **Introduction**

#### **From cantor to kapellemeister**

In 1708, following his resignation from Muelhausen, Bach moved to Weimar. It was here, while continuing his initial goal of 'rewriting church music,' that Bach began to study and become acquainted with the emerging dominant musical style in Europe - Italian baroque music. What started for Bach as simple compositional exercises "alla maniera Italiana" (due to his curiosity and breadth of musical interest), ultimately turned

into a life altering force that was sweeping across all of Europe. The dawn of the “Age of Enlightenment” had liberated Western Europe from the gothic shadows of religion. It was replacing the old medieval faith in God with a new belief in human scientific ingenuity. The power of the Church was being replaced by the power of the Royal Court. Slowly, Europe was changing from a sacred to a secular society.

Bach had grown up during the time of social reconstruction from the disruption caused by the Thirty Years War. Over 300 German states, each ruled by a prince, were in the process of elevating their social condition. It was for this reason that elements of French and Italian culture were being introduced into Germany as symbols of sophistication and progress. For Bach, the Italian baroque style embodied this shift. Eventually, Bach's study of the “maniera” led him to leave the Church and his mission of reforming church music, in favour of a more socially respected position as Kappellemeister at the Court in Kothen. It was during these six years at the court in Kothen that Bach’s opened his art up to the secular world of the court which, in music, expressed itself most strongly through dance.

## Leaving the Church

### Maniera Italiana

The maniera italiana stimulated a new direction in Bach’s life and in his music. By studying and writing in this *maniera*, Bach began to see his music in light of the whole of European music. The more Bach explored this “maniera,” the more perturbed he must have become. In the Italian forms he encountered an expansive power over the rest of Europe which made him feel that “his previous *religious* judgments of music had been practically perverted due to his constant confinement to the German town.” All the power with which Italians were directing European music made itself felt through the medium of compositions that were in all ways *secular*. The Italian baroque music held the secular quality to be the highest essence of its being. With this style, Italian music controlled all of European music. Bach’s music was limited to a single German town. In its essential quality Italian baroque music was secular; while Bach’s work was essentially sacred. Bach’s recognition of this secular Italian style had far-reaching consequences. For the first time in his life, Bach availed himself of European measures and started to think in European terms. “It raised new hopes that he might himself reach out and seize upon an expansive power like that of the Italian style, so that his work might be heard throughout Europe.” For the first time, Bach started to become conscious of the potential greatness of his own work.

### Crossroads

In light of this awakening self-consciousness, Bach must have, at some point, come to doubt whether the work he had previously composed would ever attain the European rank to which, of course, it had just title. He must have seen clearly how the *Kantorei* of the German church had become an entirely inadequate means of expressing the future music of Europe. Did he visualize a complete reform of all musical life in Germany? This is highly unlikely. Bach was already well aware at this stage in his life of the ever widening gap between the religious musical tradition in Germany, and the rising tide of secular music in the rest of Europe. Until this moment in his life, Bach's aim of reforming church music had always guided his decisions. The reformation of church music however, could only be carried out if Bach kept his position within the church as organist and cantor. The problem was that such a position did not allow Bach to break through the narrow confines that the church imposed upon his music. "The vision of a vast province of action in the world of art was not in keeping with the idea of reforming church music. The two were incompatible." Bach stood at another crossroads in his life. In 1717, Bach made his choice. He had learned from his studies of the "maniera" that the culture of the royal court was the home of the new secular Italian baroque style. Discontinuing his activity in Weimar, the 32 year-old Bach left his heritage of sacred music, and ventured out into the secular world to serve as Hofkapellmeister at the Calvinist court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Kothen writing music for the Collegium Musicum and the court Kapelle.

### **Bach's Goal**

#### **Change of goal**

It should be noted that this new direction in Bach's life and music cost him many a sacrifice. In going to Kothen, Bach gave up the possibility of playing the organ - the instrument which had, until this moment, "given him the widest reputation and the deepest meaning in his life." Most of all however, in moving to the court and leaving his position in the church, Bach was giving up the possibility to continue his goal of reforming church music. "There was not a single factor in the musical situation at Kothen favourable to Bach's art had he really wished to continue working toward his old aim, nothing that lent itself to realizing his plans of reforming church music." So definitely had Bach made up his mind that he was even ready, at one point, to go to jail for it! What was it in Kothen that made Bach give up the sacred aim of his art?

#### **Self**

In his work, *Bach: The conflict between the sacred and the secular*, Leo Schrad, argues that Bach's move to the court in Kothen was the result of a drastic internal change of

plan. He describes how Bach abandoned his original goal of “reforming church music” for the new goal of seeking European status as a composer. Schrade describes how the royal court was known to be the medium through which artists could win recognition in Europe. “Because aristocratic life became the vehicle through which artists gained international rank, musicians eagerly seized upon every opportunity to obtain a position as Kapellmeister. The Kapellmeister was the one position in which the musician could reach out to the powerful manifestation that emanated from the style of nobility.” Bach’s new position as Kapellmeister meant the “possibility of European rank as a musician, and an international reputation, in contrast to that of a church cantor, which at best led to local significance.” In becoming Kapellmeister at the court, Bach became the “spokesman of a form of life that had made an all-embracing *style* the guide for each and every human expression.” The position of Kapellmeister afforded Bach the “possibility to mould his own destiny.” In Schrade’s opinion, Bach’s new goal was an “admission of his failure in the face of insurmountable obstacles between his original task (reforming sacred music) and the growing secular spirit in Europe.” Schrade illustrates the abrupt change in the categories of the music Bach composed upon commencing his work in Kothen. The sacred chorals, cantatas, and organ works of the Weimar period were almost all replaced by secular chamber music (such as the *Wohltemperirte Clavier*, the solo violin and violincello works, and the *Brandenburg Concerti*). Schrade concludes that “we cannot escape the reasons that lie deep in the composer’s attitude, and which his repertory reflects in the nature of his compositions . . . that Bach has given up his former aim and set up a new goal for his art?”

## Service

Is it really possible that Bach, pious and stubborn as he is often described, could have given up his original goal (of serving sacred music, of serving God) in search of personal worldly fame? Is there no alternative explanation for this drastic change in the essence of Bach’s music from sacred to secular? This paper attempts to offer an alternative explanation. *What if Bach’s original goal (“the rebirth of the church out of the spirit of music”) was only the conscious and visible branch of a much deeper, yet still unconscious, yearning concerning not only the church, but all of humanity?* Did Bach not “choose” the vocation of church music simply because it was the vocation into which he had been born? Is it possible that, finding himself where he was (at a dead-end with church music), Bach was forced to dig much deeper within himself to the root of his original goal (*the rebirth of the church through music*), and in doing so, find a much larger goal - *the rebirth of humanity through art*? While outwardly, Bach may have appeared to give up his original goal of reforming church music in search of worldly fame, inwardly, maybe even somewhat unconsciously, Bach’s original goal had now deepened to encompass a more *universal language* which church music was unable to fulfill. The court, more than the church at this point, offered a possibility of a more

universal artistic language. Bach moved to the court in Kothen because he felt that his music was unable to grow within the confines of the church. His choice therefore, was ultimately not for personal fame, but in deeper service of his art. Instinctively, Bach must have known that he needed to learn the secular musical language of the court in order for his work to fulfill its ultimate and universal purpose.

## **Court**

### **Universal style**

It was in Kothen that this universal language of Bach first found expression. During these years, Bach's art moved almost completely out of the sphere of church music. Instead, Bach was building up a stock of compositions, new in the total range of his work. These works include some of his most well known pieces: The Organ Prelude (Fantasia) and fuge in g minor, the Clavier Buchlein for his son Wilhelm Friedemann (1720) which became the Wohltemperirte Clavier (1722), the Two-Part Inventions, the English and French Suites (1722, 1723), the violin concerti, the Brandenburg concerti, and the solo works for violin, and cello. Bach's aim in these works was the sphere of art that Italian baroque music had more and more successfully made the extreme opposite of church music, the realm of chamber music, indissolubly linked to the life of the court." All the compositions written during this period have something in common:

“An almost unmistakable tone showing Bach intent upon massive effects, fullness of sound, rhythms of unimpeded vitality, upon characteristics by means of which many articles of the baroque age in all the arts expressed the harmony and order of the world. Never again did Bach come out with so powerful a manifestation of vitality, never again was he so certain of the sovereign gesture as an expression of life, never so full of self-assertion and of a natural demand of mastery, as in the grandiose scale of the Brandenburg concerti.”

The inner freedom Bach had gained for his art, the contact with the whole of European music he had found for his compositions, and the power of the universal spirit of baroque life, all granted him the feeling of being in unison with his times. The strength that this harmony with his circumstances gave him eased his life and “bestowed upon his work a convincing and spontaneous sweep which is not always present in his compositions.” It is for this reason that Bach often referred to these six years in Kothen as the happiest time of his life. Through the Kothen period, Bach had begun to speak the new European musical language whose foundation was the ultimate expression of the life of the court – the *social dance*.

## **Baroque dance**

### **Bach and baroque dance**

The baroque social dance reached its highest sophistication at the court of Louis XIV (1661-1715), “the most brilliant and influential court in Europe. There in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, nobility of mind and spirit was the ideal to be cultivated by the aristocracy” KJ 2. Music, having previously been the means for Man to meet God through the religious service, now became the means for humans to meet each other – through the social dance. Bach’s first encounter with the French social dance was in Luneburg where he attended St. Michael’s School and a *Ritter-Academy* for young aristocrats. Here the young Bach had the opportunity to attend classes in French etiquette and language and take daily dancing lessons from Thomas de la Selle, a dancing master who also taught the rules to the highly civilized behaviour of court life JK 3. Later, Bach visited the court in Celle where he would have met the finest French musicians and heard French dance compositions by Lully, Marais, Campra, Monteclair and Couperin. Yet it was in Kothen that Bach became intimately familiar with the secular instrumental musical forms of his day.

### **Musical forms**

The three most important secular instrumental musical forms to develop during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were the *Sonata*, *Partita* and *Suite*. Sonata, from the Italian *suonare*, to sound, developed from the 16<sup>th</sup> century French vocal *Chanson*, to sing. This polyphonic song form was known for its clear sectional structure, imitative counterpoint, and repetitious use of thematic material. Between 1540 and 1580 the French chanson was transferred to the organ and then to the instrumental ensemble in Italy. These new forms were known as *cansona d’organo* and *canzona da sonare*, the latter form being the ancestor of the baroque and classical sonata form. The term *Sonata* appeared late in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Andrea Gabrieli, 1520-1586, Venice). By 1650 it had grown from a simple, single-movement piece alternating frequently between slow homophonic and fast polyphonic or fugal sections, to a standard four-movement work (Adagio, Allegro, Adagio and Allegro), known as the *Sonata de Chiesa*. This “church sonata” was used by many composers including Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). Its main characteristics were the alternation between slow homophonic and fast polyphonic movements.

The Partita, from the French *partie*, (meaning part or movement) was a set of consecutive dance *tunes* (traditional or courtly) used to accompany dancers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It has been thought that in Germany during the 17<sup>th</sup> century the terms “partita” became erroneously interchangeable “suite.” The Suite was one of the most important classical forms used during the Baroque period. It consisted of several movements, written in *dance form* (as opposed to an actual dance) in the same key (or related keys). Generally these dance-like pieces were written in binary form with a repetition following each section. It may be noted that almost every European country contributed a dance

form from its folk tradition the identifying characteristics being a difference in rhythmic motives. The dance forms of the baroque suite are briefly listed below.

### **Baroque dance forms**

**Allemande:** A stately and prefatory dance from Germany in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is moderately slow, in 4/4 and was often written contrapuntally.

**Bourree:** derived from *bouurrir*, meaning “to flap wings,” this French dance in 4/4 (or alla breve) originated in Auvergne.

**Chaconne:** The descending ground-base line and variations to a set harmonic progression have often been erroneously been associated with the Passacaglia. The passacaglia, from *passacalle* meaning “street song,” was also a choreographic dance form. However, while the passacaglia was an emotionally quiet dance form originating in Spain, the chaconne originated in the heart of native Central America before coming to Spain and was known as the most sensual and deeply passionate of all the Spanish dances. Cervantes referred to the Chaconne as the “Indiana Amulatade.” (trectick, 5).

Upon arriving in Spain as a folk dance around 1600, the chaconne was already a slow, stately dance in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time whose phrase was based on an eight measure long basso ostinato. In Spain, due to the lack of musical literacy and composition at the time, the Chaconne developed into a free form with a compound (chromatic) base ostinato used independently in all voices. This form spread to France and then to Germany by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Courante:** from the French *courir*, and Italian *corrente* meaning “to run,” the early eighteenth century Italian corrente was a virtuoso piece for violin or keyboard. It usually consisted of continuous elaboration in eighth or sixteenth notes over a bass in fast triple meter, with simple textures, slow harmonic rhythm, and phrases of varying lengths. The French Courante however has been described as being more serious and solemn, noble and grand, hopeful, majestic, and earnest."

**Gavote:** taking its name from the Gavot people, the distinctive rhythmic feature of the original gavotte was that phrases began in the middle of the measure. Gavottes in some areas were accompanied by singing, with a soloist alternating either with a group or with another soloist; in other areas gavottes were accompanied by instruments such as the violin, drum, or bagpipe.

**Gigue:** Originating from the English *jig* and derived from the French *giguer* - “to dance” and the German *geige* - “fiddle,” this fast dance in compound meter was often the finale of the Suite.

**Loure:** originating in Normandy and named after an ancestor instrument of the bagpipes. This dance of slow or moderate tempo was in ternary meter (6/8, 3/4, or 6/4) with the rhythmic impulse on the down beat.

**Minuet:** originally a French folk dance, this dance for two persons in 3/4 time succeeded the courante as the most popular court/social dance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The name was adopted, under the influence of the French *menuet*, meaning “small, pretty, delicate,” a diminutive of *menu*, from the Latin *minutus*. The word probably refers to the short steps, *pas menus*, taken in the dance. At the period when it was most fashionable it was slow, ceremonious, and graceful, but quicker when not accompanying actual dancers.

**Sarabande:** a slow, stately Spanish dance in triple metre with the distinctive feature that beats 2 and 3 of the measure were often tied corresponding with dragging steps in the dance. In history and development it is comparable to that of the Chaconne. Rhythmically it reveals the Central American dance influence which is also present in the chaconne. The sarabande was first mentioned in Central America: in 1539, a dance called a *zarabanda*. The dance became popular in the Spanish colonies before moving back across the Atlantic to Spain. It was banned in Spain in 1583 for its obscenity, yet was frequently cited in literature (for instance in the works of the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616)).

## Conclusion

### Return

Bach needed to learn the language of the secular court in order to make his art whole. If he would have never left the church, Bach’s music might never have realised its universal language of expression. While he knew that he had to experience this new secular form, Bach also knew that he would return in the end to the service of sacred music. We see this in his final period; Bach’s attempt to reconcile sacred and secular. However, he had chosen a lonely path for the rest of Europe was leaving religion completely for science. “Bach himself, toward the end of his life, came to see the dawn of a new age which he probably understood as little as his sons understood their own father.” Bach’s universal message however is not conflicted and contradictory. His music transcends both church and court; as Harold Bloom describes Shakespeare, “before (and beyond) any such forms of “anxiety.” It is the union of the ideals of church and court. It presents an *image* of the world when it was still whole.

## **Union in Bach's art**

### **Introduction**

#### **On the nature of art**

##### **Absolute and representational art**

We speak to day of *absolute* music versus *programme* music. We generally consider the music of Berlioz and Wagner to be “representational” and that of Bach and Beethoven to be “abstract.” Bach, in fact has generally been referred to as “the priest of abstract music.” Schweitzer explains how this “fear of material representation in Bach’s music” has led to a mis-interpretation of his work. In order to prove that Bach’s music is not materialistic, the most remarkable feature of his work-“the connection between the tone and the word” has to be explained as kind of musical accident. This leads Schweitzer to inquire on the real nature of art in general, a phenomenon he calls the “cooperation of all the arts.”

##### **Cooperation of the arts**

We generally classify the arts according to the materials which they use in order to express the world around them. One who expresses himself in tones is called a musician; one who employs colours - a painter; words - a poet, movement - a dancer. This, however, is purely an external division. In reality, the material used for expression is a secondary matter. Any artist, regardless of the medium, is not only a painter nor only a musician but all in one. Various arts have their habitation in his soul. His work is the product of their cooperation. All have a part in each one of his ideas. Neither in painting, nor in music, nor in poetry nor in dance, is there such a thing as an absolute art that can be regarded as independent from the others. “In every artist there dwells at least another who wishes to be expressed,” the difference being that in one the activity is outward, and in the other it is inward and hardly noticeable to the outside world. “Herein resides the whole distinction. Art in itself is neither painting nor poetry nor music nor dance, but an act of creation in which all cooperate.”

The cooperation of the arts can be observed clearly in examining historical individuals in which “the other artist, at times, almost gained a dominant place in the artist’s consciousness.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, for example, considered becoming a painter at one time. Frederic Nietzsche described Wagner in the following way: “as a musician Wagner’s place is among the painters, as a poet his place is among the musicians, as an artist in general his place is among the actors.” Beethoven’s work struggled for years to transcend its own element (of music) and become a universal art, “until at last, in the ninth symphony, it seized upon speech, worked out its own salvation, and united the severed arts in one.” From these examples we can see how the various art

forms are interconnected and often used to describe each other ‘the imagery in poetry, the movement in music, the rhythm in dance, the narrative in painting. Perhaps Bach’s work is the most universal because he developed a language in which sound, word . . . dance and image (picture) are the most unified – of any composer.

## **Language**

### **Art as language**

“Art is a language.” It is a translation of the conscious and unconscious associations and ideas of the artist which communicate themselves through the art-work. This art work speaks only in signs and symbols. The part of a work of art that is perceptible by the senses is in reality only “the inter-mediator between the active efforts of the imagination” - the imaginations of the creator and the receiver. Artistic expression therefore is complex in quality until the moment when it finds definite physical expression. In this artistic expression there comes into action all the feelings and ideas of which a human being is capable. No one can ultimately explain how it happens that the artist can arouse in us an experience that he or she has lived through. “No artistic speech is the adequate expression of what it represents; its vital force comes from what is unspoken in it.” Artistic expression however is only a specific case of the general way in which people perceive the world. Some people have simply developed the faculty to express in words, tones, colours, or movement – the way they experience the world around them. We call this the language of art. It is not so much that these are more fundamentally artists than the others, but only that they can speak the language, while others can only understand it. While these artists have been given the “gift of speech,” the language itself is innate and understandable by everyone.

### **Absolute music**

In most art forms (literary, visual, and performance arts), this *artistic language* has at least a minimal direct association with the physical world. In music however, the language of expression is wholly symbolical. The translation of even the most general feeling and ideas into tone is, and I believe will always remain, a complete mystery.

In order to explain this mystery we have developed the idea of “absolute” music. Schweitzer however, argues that music does not express something abstract or absolute, but only that music, working in the most abstract and ethereal of mediums, quickly reaches its limits of clear literal and pictorial ideas and images. "The tragedy of music is that it can only express with limited intelligibility the concrete ideas and images from which it has sprung." Attempts to surpass these natural limits “have in all epochs given birth to a false music, that imagined it could express objects and ideas which are beyond its means. This music lives by pretension and self-deception. Its arrogant view of itself as *absolute music* will always bring it into discredit.” It is precisely this false perception that

has led some people to “look with suspicion upon the poetic and pictorial” in Bach’s music and falsely hoist the banner of ‘absolute music’ over his work.

## **Division**

### **Mysticism**

This banner however (as the priest of absolute music) was falsely placed over Bach due to a religious misconception which separated the spirit from the body. Long before Bach’s time, this divide between spirit and body was born of the separation and elevation of the human being from the nature. Through the institutionalization of religion, the spirit was “set into direct conflict and competition with the body.” It was only logical therefore that Bach’s religious and spiritual music be explained as the “freeing of the spirit *from* the body.” Schweitzer describes this final level in understanding Bach’s art as *mysticism*. “In the last resort Bach’s real religion was not Lutheranism, but mysticism.” He describes how “this robust man, who seems to be in the thick of life with his family and his work and who seems to express something of comfortable joy in life, was inwardly dead to the world. His whole thought was transfigured by a wonderful, serene longing for death.” For Schweitzer, Bach’s music represents the “resurrection of the spirit *from* the physical body of this world.”

### **Spirit and Body**

This paper however, ventures to argue otherwise. It is true that Bach’s music brings us closer to our universal and spiritual origin. His music is indeed a searching to express something universal and infinite. As Schweitzer himself says, Bach’s music expresses “the yearning within us to exceed our own human frailties;” our human longing to touch the infinite within our finite human existence. In my own experience however, Bach’s path toward this infinite is not through death, but through life. Bach’s music does not lead us to an ‘abstract’ or ‘heavenly’ world beyond life, but rather to the centre of expressing life itself. The spirit, in its loneliness, yearns for transcendence. Yet spiritual transcendence does not have to mean the separating of the spirit from the world. “Ultimately, the spirit and the body cannot be divided; their mutuality, their unity is inescapable; they are reconciled not in division, but in harmony. What else could be meant by the Bible’s words: *the resurrection of the body?*” Spiritual salvation then, is not the transcendence of the spirit *from* the body, but rather the continual resurrection of the body *through* the spirit. Bach’s musical aim therefore, was not the transcendence of the spirit *from* the body, but rather the resurrection of the body *through* the spirit - *the resurrection of humanity through the spirit of art.*

## **Bach’s musical language**

### **Syntax**

The establishment of a *musical language* in Bach is not a mere pastime for the aesthete, but a necessity for the practical musician. "It is often impossible to play a work of his in the right tempo, and with the right accent and the right phrasing, unless we know the meaning of the motive. The simple 'feeling' does not always suffice."

The unique characteristic in Bach's music is the clearness and completeness of his musical language. Schweitzer describes how in Bach's musical language we can really speak of *roots* and *derivations*, of *musical syntax*; these elements, being mostly of the pictorial order. He shows how almost all regularly recurring characteristic expressions in the Cantatas and Passions resolve themselves into about twenty to twenty-five root themes." The understanding of this musical language is valuable for the interpretation of Bach's purely instrumental works. Many pieces including the violin sonatas "speak quite definitely to us, as it were, when the meaning of their themes is explained by the text that accompanies similar themes in the choral works." (such as the subject of the C major Fugue taken from the choral "By the Waters of Babylon")

### **Imagination**

"Few composers, however, have been great enough to fashion a language for themselves in which they could express intelligibly the concrete part of their ideas/imagination." Just because Bach did not give us any kind of programmatic notes, does not imply that his music relates only to pure, abstract ideals. While it is true that what lies before the performer is only the "pure" musical notation, this music is only the hieroglyphic, in which is recorded "the imagination and concrete experiences of the composer." It is the task of the performer to translate this hieroglyphic back again into the concrete experience. To find a path along which the listener can experience, as well as possible, the line that has been taken by the creative imagination of the composer. "Many musicians have confessed that they could not grasp the latest quartets of Beethoven. This derogates neither from them nor from Beethoven; it only implies that their imagination had no point of contact with his."

### **Word and tone**

Bach's music "brings word and tone into unity".

The relation of Bach's music to its text is "the most intimate that can be imagined." His music is not so much melodic, in comparison to Mozart, as it is declamatory in nature. "While Eccard, Praetorius and others harmonised the melody; Bach harmonized the words. For him the choral melody by itself is indefinite in character; it only acquires a personality when allied with a definite text, the nature of which he will express in his harmonies." "We get impression that if we let a theme of Handel fall to the ground, the melody and words would separate under the shock; whereas a Bach phrase would remain unbroken and inseparable, his musical being only the text recast in tone."

We can object to this assumption of complete musical language in Bach: that he parodied his work in thoughtless ways, and that he never said anything of this language to his pupils or sons. Both objections are historically unanswerable. Yet they cannot invalidate the facts revealed to us in the music. Only can ask to what degree Bach was aware of his unique language – only a result of profound musical reflection.

## **Word**

The Sufi musician, philosopher and teacher Hazrat Inayat Kahn, in his book *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, describes the harmony found in music as a reflection of the laws that govern all of life. Kahn explains how modern science has proven to us that the origin of the whole universe is in movement - in the vibration of molecules. He describes how “the movements of the stars and planets – all perfect and unchanging – show us that the cosmic system is working by the “harmony of the spheres,” a movement to the law of music. The ancients called this primary universal vibration *Om* or the *Word* – “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.” (Gospel of John, 1, 1:1)

## **Performing Bach's solo violin works**

### **Introduction**

#### **Creed**

Johann Sebastian Bach's six solo violin Sonatas and Partitas remain to this day as possibly the most important works ever written for solo violin. They are the personal prayer and creed, the alpha and omega of almost every violinist – often being the first pieces a violinist will learn and one of the last pieces he or she ever plays. The Bach Chaconne is considered by many to be the pinnacle of these works and is often referred to as the 'holy grail' of the solo violin literature. It therefore behoves every violinist to know these works as intimately as possible *off* the violin - in order to play them *on* the instrument. These works were written almost 300 years ago, yet why is it that for 80 years after they were written (50 years after Bach's death) these works along with most of Bach's music fell into near oblivion. Moreover, how is it that since their “rediscovery,” these works have then stood the test of time and been arranged, edited and re-interpreted - from Mendelssohn's first piano accompaniment in 1847, to Joachim's “romantic” edition in 1908, to the rise of period performance practice starting with Sigiswald Kuijken in the 1960's.

#### **History**

## Score

The oldest known autograph dating from 1720 (Köthen period) was found in 1814 by Polchau in St Petersburg and was supposedly in a stack of papers destined for the butter shop! S, 385. The 2<sup>nd</sup> manuscript is in one volume with cello suites and is titled: *Pars I. Violino Solo, Senza Basso, compose par Sr. Jean Seb. Bach, Pars II. Violincello Solo, Senza Basso, compose par Sr. J. S. Bach.*

*Maitre de la Chapelle et Directeur de la Musique à Leipsoc. Ecrit par Madame Bachen. Son Epouse.* Bach, it will be observed, is not yet called “Court composer” – therefore this copy must date earlier than 1736. These works were first printed 1802 by Bote and Bock in Bonn (L 6), yet were disregarded as old-fashioned and so were and played only by students as practice etudes (quote).

## Editions

The solo sonatas and partitas were brought to the concert stage over 200 years ago with Mendelssohn’s base accompaniment of the Chaconne and Joachim’s first solo performances. Since then, almost every student has learned and studied these works possibly as the one of the first they have ever performed. Every violinist hears and plays them differently. Countless edited versions and interpretations, from the romantic to the every more ‘period performance practice’ approach. In 1854 Schumann edited them with piano base, following Mendelssohn’s version of the Chaconne (386). Numerous violinists have also edited these works Hellmsberger (1877), Hans Sitt (1896), Arnold Rose (1901), Joseph Joachim and Andreas Mser (1908), Tavadar Nachez (1915), Lucin Capet (1915), Leopold Auer (1917), Henri Marteau (1922), Carl Flesch (1930), Ivan Galamian (19??), etc. Today’s growing baroque aesthetic has created more and more possibilities in play this music. This brings up the important question of authenticity and period performance practice. The first place to start in this enquiry is with Bach himself.

## Bach and the violin

### Ideal

Bach played the violin from early childhood and there is no doubting his capability and thorough understanding of the instrument. Yet he was most famous for his ability on the organ and clavier. Fundamentally however, Bach conceived of everything for an ideal instrument; “an instrument that had all the keyed instrument’s possibilities of polyphonic playing (and harmonizing), and all the bowed instrument’s capacities for phrasing.” Polyphonic solo violin playing did already exist in Germany during Bach’s day (most notably in the work of Husum who was a pupil of Buxtehude). However it was very simple and had at most 3 voices in short intervals. What sets these works of Bach apart?

It is said that Bach was primarily self-taught. His teachers were untiring in their work and incessant experimentation. Having been orphaned at 10 years of age, Bach became very independent and sometimes an overly stubborn fighter. He had many disputes with his various employers and at one point he was even imprisoned for a short period for insubordination (reword, find quote). This self taught and stubborn Bach belonged to no school. No preconceived ideas guided his studies. He learned by transcribing the works of old and contemporary masters: Vivaldi, Frescobaldi, Corelli, Froberger, Albinoni, Buxtehude.

### **Polyphonic playing**

It was Bach's stubborn search for an unattainable ideal and his born instinct as a fighter, that enabled him in the solo violin works to "surpass the very limits of the instrument by writing four-part fugues for an instrument whose very nature seems to exclude such polyphonic devices. Schweitzer laments how everyone who has heard these sonatas must have realized how sadly the "material enjoyment of them falls short of the ideal enjoyment. There are many passages in them that the best player cannot render without certain harshness" in sound. Perhaps the archetypal example of this discrepancy between the musical ideal and actual execution is in the Chaconne. Every violinist who has played the opening chords of this piece knows the personal frustration of being physically unable to reproduce the sustained, unbroken, and majestic "organ-like columns of sound arching from one to the next" that is heard in the mind of the performer. The modern mechanics of the instrument simply make this ideal impossible to achieve. The question arises: Is it up to the performer to imagine something which the instrument is ultimately incapable of, or has Bach "acted against his own principles of setting an instrument only such tasks as it can solve with satisfaction to the ear." To answer this question we must look at the historical development of violin playing from Bach's day to the present.

### **Performance practice**

#### **Schools**

The two most important schools of violin playing in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were in Germany and Italy each with very different technical demands. While the Germans emphasized polyphonic writing, the Italians stressed the *bel canto* – singing melodic line. As a result, it was not only the technique but also the actual instruments (bows) that differed. The Italian bow was longer and the stick straighter – to enhance the ability to project and sustain the sound. The German bow on the other hand was shorter and the stick had a convex arching (in contrast to the Tourte-style concave bow of today), which enabled ease of polyphonic playing (Tretick, 20).

#### **German Bow**

According to Arnold Schering it is “probable that the old German arched bow, with which the tension was effected not by means of a screw but by the pressure of the thumb, was still in use in Germany in Bach’s time.” While the modern Italian and French bows with mechanically stretched hair (screw frog) were known in Germany, they were only slowly introduced. The German violinists of Bach’s time therefore, were still able to manually stretch the bow hair with their thumb while playing. This curved bow (with the hair far from the string enabled them to play four-note chords just by loosening the hair tension with the thumb so that the hairs curved over all four strings. This fact accounts for the fact that the Germans cultivated polyphonic playing much more than the Italians or French did. Is it possible therefore that Bach demands nothing impossible but only what was normal performance practice of his time. The opening chords of Chaconne are only ‘unplayable’ with modern arched bridges, flat bows, and tight hair? “Anyone who has heard the chords of the Chaconne played without any restlessness, and without arpeggiation, can no longer doubt that this is the only correct and, from the artistic standpoint, satisfactory way of playing it. If we play the chords with this relaxed bow hair, we get an almost organ-like, ethereal tone.” However, with the rise of larger audiences, concert halls, orchestras and the ascent of the concerto and soloist, the Italians and French developed a bow for the projection and volume of sound. What we have gained today in projection and power, we have lost in beauty, subtlety of texture, and polyphonic ability. While the old German bow had the ability to play multiple chords and a beautiful subtle sound, it lacked the projection and power of the modern bow. Schweitzer claims that if we adopted this authentic style of playing Bach’s solo sonatas, “the result would be that these works would disappear from the larger concert halls, and would be restored to the chamber music setting to which they really belong.”

## Historical analysis

### Perspective

Similarly, Joel Lester's research on these works suggests that it can often become problematic in using modern analytical principles (such as binary and sonata form - derived only during the Classical period) when analysing music from a previous era (such as the Baroque era). Lester essentially attempts to answer the question: "what makes Bach's solo violin works "archetypically Bachian" considering they lack a basso continuo (the defining characteristic of "The Age of Thoroughbass)." As a solution Lester proposes *rhetoric* and *intensifying musical activity* as the underlying compositional principals in all of Bach's music and shows how these contemporaneous ideals of the Baroque era "reveal aspects of performance unattainable solely by modern perspectives." What is important to realize is that these were not written for large concerts, in fact maybe not for concerts at all - or more precisely not for “entertainment.” Schweitzer

claims that “the unintelligent modernization of Bach is the greatest hindrance to the true understanding of his works” (S, 52). We cannot go back in time. We don’t have the same consciousness of Bach’s day and we cannot hear things in the same way. It is an impossibility. We can only learn from the past, as we press forward in our attempt to order and inform the present.

## **Conclusion**

### **Sacred and secular union**

In this paper I have tried to show how, after 300 years, Bach’s solo violin sonatas and partitas still speak to us today. I have attempted to capture the *universal essence* in Bach's music as the ideal of *wholeness*. By exploring the historical context of the solo violin sonatas and partitas, and the life of the man who wrote them, I have argued that this wholeness in Bach’s art can be described as the *union* and more precisely the *original source* of the *sacred* and the *secular roots of Bach’s art*. I have tried to demonstrate how the sacred element in performing these works can be seen as an expression of prayer through the spoken word, while the secular element is expressed through the presence of dance and movement. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to arrive at a way for the performer to express the union of these two roots in Bach's music.

### **Story**

Having discussed Bach’s art in terms of its *sacred* and *secular* roots, and his musical language in terms of the *word* and the *image*, I have arrived at what I believe to be the original source of these polarities, something which represents the union between sacred and secular and a kind of marriage between word and image. The *story*, as a form of expression, predates religion and art. It is the primary means by which prehistoric cultures practiced art and religion, the sacred and the secular - all in one unified whole. Bach, to rephrase Widor’s remarks in the opening of this paper, “is the greatest of story tellers.” His music is a story, and our responsibility as performers, is to tell these stories.

## **Today**

### **Relevance**

The contemporary Bach expert and internationally renowned conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt once said: “I only feel justified to perform music when it has something relevant to say to people today. The music must be necessary today, and necessary for me. Music should always affect people’s lives. It is not there to soothe people’s nerves or

to relax them, but rather to open their eyes, to give them a good shaking, even to frighten them. If music cannot do this, then I do not play it.” This brings me to the final question of my paper. What is the relevance of performing Bach’s music today? Why should I perform, or “re-tell” these solo violin works again when they have already been performed, recorded, transcribed, and edited an infinite number of times? What do these pieces have to say to us today? For me, the answer lies in their power as stories “which show us the world in its wholeness.”

## **Un-whole**

Albert Schweitzer, in his “Philosophy of Civilization,” argues that the survival of our civilization today depends on an understanding of the whole – what he defines as a “philosophy of the universe.” He warns us that we are losing this today. While on the one hand, our current civilization is becoming more and more globally oriented (through international free trade, instant communication, and high speed travel), we are also becoming increasingly fragmented in our daily lives, and more and more separate from each other. This separation and fragmentation is ultimately leading to a general decrease in health – both on the global environmental level and on the individual human level. We are experiencing a loss of health because we are experiencing a loss of wholeness – and a loss of holiness.

## **Bushman**

### **Wholeness**

In searching for the importance of the idea of *wholeness* in our world today, I would like to close with a second image from Africa that links with the experience I described at the beginning of this paper. This example concerns the Kalahari Bushmen of Southern Africa, believed to be the first peoples of Africa nearly 25,000 years ago. The writer and anthropologist Sir Laurens Vanderpost, in his writings on these hunter-gatherer communities, describes the defining characteristic which separates our societies today from that of the ancient Bushman, is a sense of *wholeness*. “It is in this sense of wholeness, meaning, and connection,” claims Laurens Vanderpost, “that the Kalahari Bushmen of the past differ from our societies today.” He describes this wholeness as

“a life-giving sense of wonder out of which all that man has of religion, art and science is born . . . at the heart of this great togetherness, the human being knows how small is the area within himself where thinking is at the disposal of conscious will. He becomes an instrument of life through which something beyond articulation initiates the thinking.”

Vanderpost suggests that the Bushman's awareness and understanding of this wholeness was articulated most strongly in his stories. The Bushman had leisure and this explains how he could evolve the richest and most complex form of stone-age civilization in Africa. "The proof of all this is there most of all in his stories." Vanderpost shows us how the Bushman's stories were his identity. "Ultimately the Bushman needed his stories more than people. They were the food without which the life of his spirit would die, destroying even the unique love of his kind and their will to live no matter what the odds." In describing a conversation with Carl Jung, Vanderpost relates how Jung believed that the "key to the human personality is the story." No human could discover his greatest meaning unless he lived, and grew as it were, his own story." Vanderpost believes that the Bushman lost his way of life because he lost his stories.

Today, we are forgetting the stories (such as those of the Bushman) that are critical to our health, and survival as a civilization, because these are the stories that recall our origin and ultimate interdependence to the whole. It is the belief of this paper that Bach's music, when approached through prayer, dance, and the story, can remind us of the whole. Ultimately, the story of Bach's life and the stories that permeate his music, provide us with a means of realising and accepting our *place within this whole*. Instead of seeking ultimate fame and recognition throughout the royal courts of Europe, Bach returned, in the final part of his life, to writing music for the service and "glory of the most-high" (from the Musical Offering dedication). In the Chaconne, we see not a victorious ending in D major, but rather an accepting and humbling return to the opening theme in d minor. I believe it is this humbling return to serve the whole that is Bach's final message for us today. Bach's life and work show us that it is only in the service of wholeness, holiness and awe in the sacredness of creation that we are given the chance to become a part of something unimaginably greater than we could ever become alone - - - something universal, timeless, and infinite, within this finite world.

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