

The Charm of the Viola – Notes on Three Pieces by J. S. Bach, Schumann, and Hindemith

Among the instruments in the violin family, the viola has perhaps suffered the most neglect, misunderstanding, and prejudice. Lacking the brightness of the violin and the powerful sonority of the cello, the viola has been regarded by many musicians, past and present, as a subordinate instrument devoted to filling the middle harmonic void between the violin and cello. J. J. Quantz, in his *Essay* (1752), described the viola as an instrument “of little importance in the musical establishment. The reason may well be that it is often played by persons who are either still beginners in the ensemble or have no particular gift with which to distinguish themselves on the violin.”¹ Cecil Forsyth, in his *Orchestration* (1914), explains to his readers why the viola must not be prominent in an ensemble:

[The top string’s] quality has something nasal and piercing; something suffering, even unpleasant. A prominent melody on this string becomes unbearable after a short time..... It is on [the middle two strings] that the viola does most of the accompanying and filling-up work, to which a great part of its existence is devoted.²

Despite these negative opinions, the viola, when played properly by an able musician, could be as beautiful and sonorous as the other string instruments. The three pieces performed in this recital are fine examples in the viola repertoire showcasing the range of expressive possibilities achievable by the viola: from brilliant (Bach) to intensely lyrical (Schumann) to wild and savage (Hindemith). William Primrose, the great 20th-century violist, once spoke eloquently of the viola’s power:

Whenever we hear it said that the viola ranks among the less expressive instruments, we may be sure that the speaker has not the instrument properly revealed to him, and that his opinion has been formed by listening to inferior playing. A vicious circle of thought surrounds the viola. One hears it badly played, one is well aware that it sounds unpleasant, and one draws the conclusion that such an instrument must be highly limited. In point of fact, it is not limited. Even a cheap viola

produces a pleasing sound, in hands that know how to play it.³

And yet, it is true that the discovery of viola’s potential as a solo instrument in either chamber music or concerti came later than those of the violin and cello. Before 1750, there was virtually no solo viola music. It is especially puzzling that J. S. Bach, a proficient violist himself, composed nothing for the solo viola. But this has not stopped viola enthusiasts from experiencing the wonder of Bach’s music by transcribing his Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin (BWV 1001-6), as well as his Suites for Unaccompanied Cello (BWV 1007-12), for solo viola. Viola editions of Bach’s Cello Suites appeared early in the 20th century,⁴ and since then, they have been performed and recorded by many notable violists, including Primrose, Patricia McCarty, and Barbara Westphal.

J. S. Bach composed his set of **Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello** most probably during his service as Capellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen from 1717 to 1723. The prince’s court was calvinist, and there was little demand for elaborate church music there. Thus, during his Cöthen period Bach was able to compose several important collections of instrumental music, such as The Well-Tempered Clavier (Book I) and the Six Brandenburg Concerti. The immediate circumstance leading to the composition of the Cello Suites has remained unknown; it is possible that they were conceived originally as didactic pieces (like the Well-Tempered Clavier) or as chamber pieces for court performances (like the Brandenburg Concerti).

Suite No. 3 in C major (BWV 1009) is probably the most brilliant sounding suite in the set. Here, and especially in the Prélude, Bach demonstrates how harmonic progressions can be articulated even by a single line of spinning notes. For instance, in the following passage, a modulation from C major to E minor is so clear and unambiguous that one can even hear the voice leadings of the chord progression:



A single voice can not only show harmonic progressions, but also imply contrapuntal textures. A simple and obvious example occurs in the Bourée. The following phrase,



is suggestive of a 2-voice melody:



Through his imagination and compositional virtuosity, Bach transcends the limit of the solo cello (or viola) by inviting the performer to hear interacting voices beyond those defined by the actual written notes. These dances are more than just monophonic movements; to fully appreciate them, the audience has to be as imaginative as the performer.

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From 1750 onwards, composers have become increasingly appreciative of the viola's potential to function beyond an "instrument of the middle". In Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* for Violin and Viola (1779) and Berlioz's *Harold en Italie* (1834), the full capacity of the viola as a solo instrument in concerti was demonstrated for the first time. In chamber music, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven all composed string quartets in which the viola is in constant dialogue with the other three instruments, at times stating important themes or elaborating structural motives. The growing number of professional violists and viola amateurs had also inspired many composers – such as Hummel, Weber, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Schumann – to write original music for viola and piano.

Schumann's *Märchenbilder* (Images of Fairy Tales) is undoubtedly one of violists'

favourite set of pieces originally conceived for the viola. It was composed in 1851, just three years before Schumann's mental collapse, for Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, the concert master of the Düsseldorf Orchestra, who later became one of the first biographers of Schumann. Its first performance was vividly described by Wasielewski in his biography:

After Schumann had written his *Märchenbilder*, which to my great pleasure, he dedicated to me, he had his wife play them through while I took the viola accompaniment. He then said with a smile: "Childish pranks! There's not much to them," By this he merely meant to imply that the pieces belong to the genre of *Kleinkunst* [literally, small art]. He made no objection when I called them delightful.⁵

As suggested by the informal and domestic nature of this premiere performance, *Märchenbilder* belongs to the genre of *Hausmusik* (literally, house music), a type of chamber music, usually modest in technical demand, that was originally intended to be performed by amateurs in bourgeois homes rather than concert halls. *Hausmusik* was closely associated with the Biedermeier phenomenon, a cultural current in the several decades following the Congress of Vienna (1815), during which increased political censorship in Germany had forced many writers, musicians, and poets to retreat into their domestic lives.

Märchenbilder was probably not the ideal *Hausmusik* for the 19th-century amateurs, however. Both the viola and piano parts are so technically challenging that only the connoisseurs and professionals might be able to play the work decently. Far from being "childish pranks", the four movements in this set are poetic miniatures exploring different combinations of colors through subtle interplay between the two instruments. For example, the first movement opens with an intensely lyrical melody set in the middle to high range of the viola, followed by a 7-note motive presented by the piano:



This motive then appears in many different guises for 35 more times within this movement of 72 measures! But it is painted with a slightly different color each time it reappears. Initially, this motive is presented by the piano and accompanied by the lower register of the viola; but later, it is sometimes accompanied by the higher notes of the viola, sometimes stated by the viola with piano accompaniment, and other times stated without the viola. Towards the end, this motive is cleverly combined with the opening melody. The end result of such recombination of colors is a musical fantasy lacking any obvious overarching structure, but possessing a reflective, dreamy quality that is at once charming and hypnotizing. One is reminded of the Romantic German poet Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), who remarked that in *Märchen* (fairy tales), there should always be “a quietly progressive tone, a certain innocence of representation ... which hypnotizes the soul like quiet musical improvisations without noise and clamor.”⁶ Schumann’s spontaneity apparent in this work has certainly transformed these “delightful” miniatures into *Märchen ohne Worte* (fairy tales without words).

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The early 20th-century saw the emergence of several virtuosic violists, most notably the English Lionel Tertis (1876-1975) and the Scottish William Primrose (1903-82). With the recognition of the viola as an instrument worthy of a distinctive curriculum by the *Conservatoire de Paris* in 1894,⁷ a whole school of French violists also emerged, comprising names such as Louis Bailley (1882-1974) and Maurice Vieux (1870-1951). More original works for viola were composed by important composers of the time. The ones most familiar to violists of today include the viola concertos of Walton and Bartók, and the viola sonatas of Hindemith, Rebecca Clarke, and Shostakovich.

In particular, **Hindemith** himself was not only a composer, but also a proficient violist and violinist. He began his composing career in the First World War years, during which he served as a sentry in the German trenches, luckily surviving several grenade attacks.⁸ He started composing his **Viola Sonata (Op. 11 No. 4)** as a soldier in 1918, and finished it immediately after his release from the army in 1919.

This sonata is almost certainly the most frequently performed work by the young Hindemith, and also, a staple in the violists’ repertoire. It comprises three movements, played without any break between them. The opening movement is a fantasia, functioning as a prelude to the second movement, which contains a set of variations on a modal theme. The finale is structured like a classical sonata-form movement, but at the same time it contains additional variations on the second-movement theme. The formal design of this sonata may be summarized by the following diagram (variation numbers are denoted by Roman numerals, and theme groups, by alphabets in italics):

1st movt. 2nd movt. 3rd movt.
Fantasie – Theme-I-II-III-IV – A-B-V-VI-A-B-V-VII

It is difficult to assign a unique stylistic label to this viola sonata as a whole; each section or variation seems to be deliberately modeled after a particular style. The first movement, with its lyricism, supple and opulent harmonic progressions, and motivic transformations, reminds one of Brahms or Max Reger. The theme of the ensuing movement, however, sounds like a transcription of a Germanic folk song. And then, in the second and third variations, Debussy’s influence cannot be more obvious. It is tempting to speculate that these two variations were conceived as a tribute to this French master, who passed away when Hindemith was composing this sonata. Hindemith himself gave a moving account on how he learnt of Debussy’s death, deserved to be cited here *in extenso*:

During my time as a soldier in the First World War I was a member of a string quartet which served our commanding officer as a means of escape from the miseries of war. He was a great music-lover and a connoisseur and admirer of French art. It was no wonder, then, that his dearest wish was to hear Debussy’s String Quartet. We rehearsed the work and played it to him with much feeling at a private concert. Just after we had finished the slow movement the signals officer burst in and reported in great consternation that the news of Debussy’s death [on March 18, 1918] had just come through on the radio. We did not continue our performance. It was as if the spirit had been removed from our playing. But now we felt for the first time how much more music is than just

style, technique and an expression of personal feeling. Here music transcended all political barriers, national hatred and the horrors of war.⁹

Such an admixture of styles within a single work foreshadows Hindemith's later identification with a German artistic current in the 1920s known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity; but literally, New Matter-of-fact-ness). Artists under this movement tended not to understand art works as expressions of fleeting emotions or individuality, but rather as "self-standing uncontenting object[s], equal in dignity to other phenomenon of the world."¹⁰ A musical corollary of such an understanding of art is that the style of a particular piece should be dictated not by the composer's fancy or personality, but by the character and function chosen for it by the composer.¹¹ In this sonata, Hindemith might be trying to expose the difference in character between variations by deliberately modeling each variation after a particular style he knew. The New Objective composers at times also tended to write with a linear, polyphonic texture over a formal structure that is almost completely rhythmically driven (as opposed to motivically or harmonically driven). In this viola sonata, the first, sixth, and seventh variations all reflect such a tendency that could characterize many of Hindemith's later compositions in the 1920s.

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It is said that William Primrose had an abbreviated answer to the question, "What is the difference between the violin and the viola?", which he was asked innumerable times: "The viola was a violin with a college education."¹² Whether her graduation deserves the honor *summa cum laude* is perhaps a matter of personal taste; but at least, as attested by the three pieces performed in this recital, she went on to have a distinctive, independent voice of her own, which to many is both alluring and charming.

-Vincent CK Cheung
April 21, 2006

Endnotes:

¹ Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute* [1752], tran. Edward R. Reilly (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 237.

² As cited in David Dalton, "The Viola and Violists." <<http://music.lib.byu.edu/piva/VnV.html>>, accessed April 20, 2006.

³ As cited in Dalton.

⁴ Maurice W. Riley, *The History of the Viola* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Braun-Brumfield, 1980), 113.

⁵ As cited in Dariene R. Berkovitz, "Program Notes for Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center – *Märchenbilder* for Viola and Piano, Op. 113, Robert Schumann." <http://www.pittsburghchambermusic.org/series/2004/CMS LC/program_notes.php>, accessed April 20, 2006.

⁶ As cited in Berkovitz.

⁷ Riley, 255.

⁸ Giselher Schubert, "Hindemith, Paul, §2: World War I and the early 1920s", in *Grove Music Online*. <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.13053.2>>, accessed April 20, 2006.

⁹ As cited in Geoffrey Skelton, *Paul Hindemith: The Man Behind the Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 49.

¹⁰ Daniel Albright, *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004), 277.

¹¹ Giselher Schubert, "Hindemith, Paul, §3: The 'New Objectivity'", in *Grove Music Online*. <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.13053.3>>, accessed April 20, 2006.

¹² As cited in Dalton.