



VIOLA

Solo Bach for Viola!! (But which set shall we play??)

by J. David Arnott

As a viola teacher who teaches violin (as opposed to a violin teacher who teaches viola), I have been wondering about the relationship of the viola to the solo music of Bach, namely the *Six Violin Sonatas and Partitas* and the *Six Cello Suites*. Neither set was written for us, though most of us have at least some relationship with the *Cello Suites*. I don't think I have ever met a viola teacher who eschews the *Cello Suites* in favor of the *Sonatas and Partitas*, but I know many viola teachers who never give their students anything from the *Sonatas and Partitas*. Much has been written about the pedagogical value of each set to their respective intended recipients, but let us explore what it is to be the instrument between these two masterful sets.

In my early days of viola playing when I was still in high school I admit to having studied the *D Minor Partita* with a violinist (in the more noble key of G Minor of course). He was an amazing violinist (New York Philharmonic Associate Concertmaster) who taught viola but as far as I know, didn't own a viola nor actually play the viola himself. This was during my transitioning period and I was not fully in one camp or the other at that point. It apparently never occurred to this teacher to give me a cello suite and at that point I did not know to ask. We made it through the first four movements without issue and by that point it was off to college.

My viola teacher in college taught no Bach at all. As for the cello suites, he said they sounded better on the cello. Of course, his teacher (Primrose) actually made his own edition of the *Cello Suites* so at least there is Bach in my family tree—it just skipped a generation.

What we can assume at this point is that violinists don't play the *Cello Suites*, cellists don't play the *Sonatas and Partitas*, and we (violinists) play the *Cello Suites* but not many of us play or teach the *Sonatas and Partitas*. None of my viola students have ever come to me initially with any of the *Sonatas and Partitas* in their repertoire, not even those

who started on violin. Why is this? We play the *Cello Suites* an octave above cellos, so they lie on the instrument exactly the same as they do on the cello. We play the *Sonatas and Partitas* a fifth below the violin, so they lie on the instrument exactly the same way they do on the violin. What's the problem then? Are we willing to admit that the *Cello Suites* are not as technically demanding as the *Sonatas and Partitas*? I am. But that should not stop me from using the violin works at least in a pedagogical sense. I admit that in my own studio I regularly teach the G Minor, the D minor, and the E Major violin works to violinists, and then the C Major, G Major, D Minor, and C Minor cello suites to violists.

Let's compare these two great sets. Each contains six individual multi-movement works. The *Cello Suites* all contain a prelude followed by dance music. The three violin *Partitas* follow the same format ("suite" and "partita" are basically synonyms) but the three sonatas are of the Sonata da chiesa form, art music without obligation to dance. Clearly the violin works require a high level of technical proficiency required to play on viola but they are far from impossible. The question is mainly regarding the pedagogical value of such a venture. It is easy enough to find a viola edition of the *Sonatas and Partitas*. I use the old International edition edited by Clemens Meyer and revised by Joseph Vieland, but there are several other editions including several very nice editions available for free on www.imsip.org so there is no excuse not to have it on hand.

I would make a case for advanced viola students to learn the *G Minor Sonata* in its entirety. The opening adagio presents pedagogical value in tone production, sustain, and especially rhythmic complexity, counting issues, and sub-division. Where else might a young violist see 64th notes? The fuga, while difficult on both instruments, is really as playable on the viola as it is on the violin and Kreutzer number 42 is still the best preview for this contrapuntal masterpiece. It is a great example of polyphonic

string writing. This movement is great for developing independence in the left hand and for expressing multiple voices simultaneously. The siciliano is lovely on viola, warm, dark, and luscious. The presto works just as well on viola as it does on violin.

For violists, learning the first four movements of the *D Minor Partita* is clearly beneficial. The challenge, of course, for both violin and viola, is the chaconne. Over the years I have had many violin students play but the first 4 movements and call it good. The exceptional student will play the chaconne on either instrument. My concession to the violin world regarding the chaconne is that I do not believe it sounds quite as good in G Minor as it does in D Minor. It can lack the bell-like tones in the major mode section.

The *E Major Partita* is also an excellent piece for the violist—again, not as bright sounding in A Major as E, but still a valuable experience. The extended barriolage passages in the first movement, the identical issues in the loured as in the siciliano of the first sonata, and the gavotte-rondo are all of great value to the violist.

So if we agree that there is great value in violinists playing the *Sonatas and Partitas*, and great value in cellists playing the *Six Suites*, it should be twice as valuable for violists to play both. I will endeavor to start my top viola student on the *G Minor Sonata* and report back on his progress next issue.

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