

CD REVIEW 21
HILARY HAHN plays J S BACH



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Partita no. 3 in F, BWV1006

Partita no. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004.

Sonata no. 3 in C BWV 1005.

Hilary Hahn (violin)

SONY CLASSICS SK62793 [78.44]

I saw this young American violinist from Baltimore playing Mozart's Fourth Concerto, K218, at a Prom. This was a very good performance but, for me, the finale did not quite come off. And, with respect, it is Mozart's fault. He keeps changing the tempo. First, 15 bars at andante, then 57 at allegro, 15 at andante, 43 at allegro, 59 at andante, 33 at allegro, 7 at andante and 25 at allegro. This is stop and start music. She was persuaded to play an encore at this Prom and she choose Bach. I was impressed with her Bach and this CD reinforces that first impression.

I was seriously deterred from Bach's solo violin music because of some really awful performances that I had to endure and from leading professionals. I also determined never to hear it again. But along came Hilary. I adore her Bach playing and in a few years time it will be even better than it is now although I hasten to add it is already really very fine indeed. There is so much to admire and she avoids the mistakes and idiosyncratic quirks that some famous violinists make.

Firstly, she plays the works as music not as studies or showpieces.

Secondly, she is not hindered by authenticity of style. She has not wasted her time, or ours, on ensuring that it is in the style that Bach would have known which, quite frankly, is a stupid pursuit anyhow.

Thirdly, she does not fuss over ornaments but plays them naturally as if they are an integral part of the music. Perhaps they are but so many soloists herald a trill and you know it is coming and then ham it up as if it is an essential theatrical gesture.

Fourthly, she plays the music at sensible and compelling tempi and with few irritating rallentandos. To put this into common parlance she gets on with it and does not labour or linger over stylish features as some do.

Fifthly, she plays with a controlled brilliance and, please forgive me saying so, only a professional musician will understand and appreciate this point.

Sixthly, there are no excesses. The control does not detract from the music and its quality. But here already is a maturity that some violinists three times her age have not yet found. Some never do. Music is communication not demonstration. Music is for both the brain and heart not for ostentation and eccentric personal interpretations.

If we look at the Partita number 3 we note that she plays all the repeats. There is, however, one minor qualm. The movements are set out in the notes to include Minuet I and Minuet II as successive movements, This is misleading. It is a movement of two minuets played consecutively and the first one is repeated making up an ABA form. But, of course, they are not really minuets. You could not

dance the minuet to either of them and I do like the way Hilary avoids playing them as such with that contrived precision beat of ONE, two, three, ONE, two, three etc.

The opening Prelude is at a well-judged tempo. Occasionally the microphone(s) is a little too close and picks up the depressing of the strings and the rare smudge. Don't worry. All violinists do it. It is difficult to always keep on one string with music like this. She observes the tone variations as in my Urtext edition. A couple of rallentandos do slightly hold the music up but her double stopping is very secure. The second movement, Loure, has a grace but it is not the powdered wig variety. The music still moves on without affectation. The end of bar 4 and following sounds identical with that lovely aria from Handel's 'Messiah' But who may abide. The performance does not have a weak elegance but a strong one and I like that. The third movement (Gavotte and Rondeau) captures the two parts very well but I wish she did not emphasise the third note of the theme which is a major seventh. Very noticeable in my copy as, for example, in bar 41. The minuets follow and then a Bourrée which does not dance and perhaps should have had a little more energy in it. The music itself presents one problem. As anyone who knows anything about music will tell you if you have four crotchet beats in a bar and the first and last notes are crotchets and beats two and three are four quavers then they must be written and beamed as two groups of two. It is grammatically incorrect to have crotchet, four quavers beamed together and another crotchet but my Urtext version does. The Associated Board would mark any student of mine wrong if they had written this. The final Gigue needed perhaps a little more energy too but on balance I would rather have a sensible secure performance than a reckless one.

The Partita No. 2 is a very meditative work compared with number 3. The opening Allemande is slow but played with a real beauty of tone however, as happens in Bach, the music seems too long to maintain the thematic material. A lack of contrast of tone and character particularly in a solo instrument piece can be tedious. The Courante has a controlled jauntiness and is impeccably played. Again there is total absence of excess and attention seeking by employing sheer display. But again this music is only of moderate speed. The Sarabande is performed with real sensitivity and was strangely beautiful. Her double stopping is so natural and undemonstrative. She has a ravishing tender sound here and, quite frankly, it is the loveliest sound I have heard from a solo violin in a very long time. There is feeling here as well, something one does not always associate with Bach who is often played so clinically and academically, but here it is simply gorgeous. That is down to the player's interpretation. This is an example of slow quiet music that is both cerebral and emotional without being sentimental or cloying. The following Gigue has a deliberate tempo. I would have preferred a quicker one but the security of the notes is maintained. As said before accuracy is better than recklessness and wrong notes and smudges. There are some exquisite tone colours as well. However, I did not care for the allargando at the end. The finale is the famous Chaconne which other composers have arranged and, perhaps, deranged. I have always had problems with this movement. It is very long at almost 18 minutes whereas the previous movements total about 15 minutes in duration. Again it is predominantly slow and wanders and has a lot of note spinning and padding to extend its length. It takes a lot of stamina to enjoy 18 minutes of music of this sameness. But one is left to admire the superb playing and some truly lovely moments of real tenderness and choice tone. How she structures the piece is also magnificent and, again, no demonstrative ostentation.

The Sonata No. 3 in C is wonderful. It has more classical lines than the dance movements of the partitas. The opening adagio is so very beautifully played and is deeply expressive. Again Ms Hahn brings a compelling structure to her performance and only someone who loves this very special music could play it this well. The very quiet music is ethereal and heavenly. A truly moving experience. The second movement is an extended fugue. There are some people who still believe that a violin can only play one note at a time. Not so. It is very clever and I assume that Bach was the first composer to do this. Here her exemplary bowing technique and articulation are heard at its best and, yet again, there is no showing off. She allows the quality of the music to speak for itself. As with the Chaconne in the Partita No. 2 this movement is long at almost 12 minutes whereas the rest of the movements last about 15 minutes. But, my goodness, how well she plays it. And no ugly double stopping. It is all so mercurial

and the sound is exquisite. She brings out the fugue subject each time with a superb clarity. The following Largo is in F major and is another gorgeous slow movement. The final allegro assai bounces with energy and concludes a super sonata and a truly enjoyable disc.

For lovers of Bach and violin playing this is an unqualified must. It is really special.

David Wright

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