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Works for Violin Solo
Aleksandra KULS - violin

***Johann Sebastian BACH** (1685-1750) : Violin Partita No.2 in D minor, BWV 1004

***Krzysztof PENDERECKI** (*1933) : La Follia per violino solo

***Sergei PROKOFIEV** (1891-1953) : Sonata for Solo Violin Op.115

***Eugène YSAÏE** (1858-1931) : Sonata No.5 in G Major

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The early days of the history of the violin, one of the most fascinating instruments created by man, are shrouded in mystery. Academicians will long continue to argue about the roots, etymology and genealogy of an instrument whose 'classical' shape and extraordinary sound qualities have been developed in a long evolutionary process thanks to the mainly Italian violin-making schools. They flourished and gained great fame in the 16th and 17th centuries. While acknowledging the achievements of violin-makers from the Amati and Guarneri families, alongside those of the most famous of them all, Antonio Stradivari, one should not ignore the very old and noble Polish genealogical line of the modern violin. The earliest mention of the Polish violin ('skrzypice') dates from the 15th century and the famous treatise *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* by the music theoretician and erudite Martin Agricola (born in Schwiebus, now Świebodzin, western Poland) contains a description of *polnische Geigen*.

Over two centuries later, another musician with the same surname, Johann Friedrich Agricola, was one of the editors of "Der Nekrolog (Obituary Notice) of the World-Famous Organist Johann Sebastian Bach". It describes the essence of the composer's artistry in these words: "If ever a composer showed polyphony in its greatest strength, it was certainly our lamented Bach. If ever a musician employed the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry, it was certainly our Bach. No one ever showed so many ingenious and unusual ideas as he in elaborate pieces that ordinarily seem to be just dry exercises in craftsmanship".

It is easy to refer to hundreds of examples in the music of the great cantor from Leipzig which are perfect illustrations of this description. The collection of Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin BWV 1001-1006 seems to be the most eloquent proof of the strength of the polyphony and the artistic skill of the harmony. The collection's beautiful autograph, a fine example of the art of calligraphy, dates from 1720, but it seems reasonable to infer that Bach started to work on the composition earlier, by some several years or perhaps more than a decade. It coincided with the Weimar period, during which Bach served as organist and chamber musician at the court of Duke Wilhelm Ernst, and, as of 1717, with his tenure as master of music at the court of Leopold von Anhalt-Köthen. The cycle of six pieces consists of three pairs which complement each other. The sonatas – based on the Italian *da chiesa* pattern – act as a counterpoint, as it were, to the multi-sectional partitas that are modelled on traditional dance suites. Each of them, however, is different. The Partita in B minor (in eight sections) is built on basic dances and their variants (*double*). The Partita in E major is a sequence of light dances, preceded by an introductory *Preludio*, and probably inspired by music for the lute.

The Partita in D minor BWV1004 occupies a special place in the cycle. Its four classical dance sections (*Allemande – Courante – Sarabanda – Gigue*) are crowned with an expanded *Ciaccona*, a thoroughly abstract form, far from the dance, a set of 64 variants on an ostinato of the main theme. It is not a work without precedent as Bach must have been aware of Biber's *Passacaglia*, which supplements his *Mystery Sonatas* dating from around 1676. Yet, it was Bach's *Ciaccona* which was dubbed 'the greatest work for solo violin in existence' (Yehudi Menuhin) and even 'mankind's highest achievement' (Joshua Bell). To claim that such opinions were dictated solely by individual musical taste would amount to belittling the magnitude of the composition. The unique character of the fifth section of Bach's Partita in D minor lies in the fact that it evades and clear-cut description. Indeed the impression one gets is of an elusive piece. It is possible to describe each variation separately, count all the double, triple and quadruple- stopped chords, and chart the demarcation lines between individual 'voices' or various textures.

Having done so, we would still fail to arrive at the essence of the music. For what we are faced with is something of a geometrical puzzle, a musical abstraction or the structure of crystal, or perhaps simply the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics. It is surely a masterpiece of absolute music, but perhaps those who see in the *Ciaccona* an autobiographical element are right. The year 1720 saw the death of Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara (she was buried on 7 July). The serious tone of the *Ciaccona* and the funereal main key are some of the indications that the piece is a kind of elevated epitaph. Masterpieces are ambiguous.

The legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach resonated in manifold ways in the music of subsequent generations of composers. The Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin found their excellent continuation after almost two centuries in the cycle of Sonatas for solo violin Op. 27 by Eugène Ysaÿe. The intertwining of their mutual relationships manifests itself even in the purely external features, if only to mention the same number of pieces in both cycles, identical main keys in four pieces, similarities in the formal pattern (e.g. in the Sonatas in G-minor Op.27 No. 1 and in E minor Op. 27 No. 4), and the use of counterpoint and polyphony. The direct quotation of the main motif from the Prelude of the 3rd Partita in E major BWV 1006 at the beginning of the Sonata in A minor Op.27 No. 2 may be regarded as a symbolic seal on the interdependence of the two cycles. In fact, what gave Ysaÿe a direct stimulus for composition his Op. 27 was a recital by the young Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, which included works by Bach. Each of Ysaÿe's six sonatas was dedicated to a different outstanding virtuoso and each is a sort of musical portrait of its dedicatee.

The Sonata in G major was dedicated by Ysaÿe to one of his best pupils, Mathieu Crickboom, who was second violinist in

the composer's string quartet. Having spent several years in Barcelona where he directed a violin school, he returned to his native Belgium and continued his teaching career, at the Conservatories in Liège and Brussels. Ysaÿe's sonata for Crickboom is renowned not only for its technical complexity (spread chords, double-stops, left-hand *pizzicati*) but also for its aural timbre, its extraordinary 'impressionistic' handling of tone colour. This is particularly evident in the first movement, *Lento assai*. With its programmatic subtitle *L'Aurora*, it is most probably an illustration of the goddess of dawn in Roman mythology. The second movement, *Allegro giocoso molto moderato (Danse rustique)*, is in stark contrast to the intangible 'glow' of the opening movement. The allusions to Walloon folklore, capriciousness of the motivic writing and the stylized, dance rhythms are symbolic references to Mathieu Crickboom's musical roots.

"The concept for the piece originated in a performance of Bach's solo sonatas (or their fragments) by an unison ensemble" – this is how, in a manner slightly bizarre from today's perspective, the provenance of Sergey Prokofiev's Sonata in D major Op. 115 is described by his Polish biographer Jerzy Jaroszewicz. He adds that the sonata "was to have enriched the repertoire with a contemporary piece but its first performance, in a version for ensemble, was held as late as 1960, at the Moscow Conservatory". Perhaps these circumstances can be explained only by the degenerated realities of life in the Soviet Union, a country where artistic freedom was an unattainable dream.

It is difficult today to imagine performing works for solo violin in any kind of unison ensemble. In the case of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas this would smack of heresy. Prokofiev's Sonata, too, would be nothing short of a caricature. The work is the fruit of a rather unhappy period in the composer's career. It was written in 1947, more or less at the same time as the Piano Sonata in C major No. 9, Op.103 (completed in the summer of that year), and, more importantly, the occasional pieces marking the 30th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Of these, neither the *Festive Poem* Op. 113, nor *Flourish, Mighty Homeland* Op. 114 and the mass songs add to Prokofiev's fame. They were hardly noticed by the servile authorities and have by now fallen into total oblivion, which is perhaps not to be regretted.

The Sonata Op. 115 is of rather small dimensions. Its musical language is simple and its textures lucid. The first of its three movements (*Moderato*) is built on two themes of a slightly contrasting character, the first lively and 'optimistic' and the second lyrical and flowing. The movement ends in march-like rhythms, with several textural contrasts giving it the much-required edge. The central movement (*Andante dolce*) consists of five interesting and contrasting variations on a theme that would nicely fit a nostalgic song. After all, Prokofiev was well-versed in all the ins and outs of variation technique. A jocular *pizzicato* at the end is like the blinking of an eye or a foretaste of the sharper sound in the finale (*Con brio – Allegro precipitato*). It is by far the most interesting and most typically Prokofievian part of the Sonata Op. 115, in which articulatory roughness can bring to mind the brutalist effects of the composer's piano sonatas, and some of the phrases are reminiscent of motifs from the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Sonata occupies a marginal place in Prokofiev's output. In the second half of 1947, the degree of creative freedom that musicians enjoyed during World War II was a thing of the past. One work that originated during the war was the Violin Sonata in F minor, Op. 80. An absolute masterpiece, a sincere utterance of an autobiographical character, it was written just before the brutal crackdown on creative freedom masterminded by Andrey Zhdanov, the communist party's commissar for culture. Prokofiev was to experience the effects of this imposition very painfully, and in the spring of 1948 he was officially accused of 'formalism'.

Three weeks after Krzysztof Penderecki's 80th birthday, on 14 December 2013, New York's Carnegie Hall was the venue of the premiere of his *La Follia*, a piece for solo violin dedicated to Anne-Sophie Mutter. The work highlighted yet again Penderecki's admiration for the skills of the German violinist (the dedicatee of his Second Violin Concerto 'Metamorphoses'), at the same time harking back to the composer's very personal, early preoccupations. For it was the violin that shaped the beginnings of his musical adventure as well as his departure from the avant-garde. Indeed, Penderecki's 'time of dialogue with new-found past' commenced with the First Violin Concerto (1977).

La Follia, whose title harks back to the Baroque period, demonstrates yet again the composer's strong attachment to tradition. A kind of serious *capriccio* which demands an extraordinary technical mastery, the work refers to the music of Corelli, Vivaldi, and, naturally, Bach. It proceeds at a slow tempo (in Aleksandra Kuls's copy, the composer's *Adagio* is crossed out and substituted by *Adagio ma non troppo*). The main theme, introduced in *pizzicato* articulation, is followed by nine meticulously-crafted variations, developing in gradually thickening textures and exploring almost of the violin's timbral possibilities (with the exception of 'percussion' effects; after all it had been four decades since Penderecki broke for good with the avant-garde).

Anne-Sophie Mutter has stressed that performing *La Follia per violino solo* gives her a sense of 'the highest musical fulfilment'. Listening to the delicate *Variation VIII (Adagio tranquillo)*, coming, as it does, after the virtuoso fireworks of *Variation VII*, one seems to be confronted with a signpost of a 'musical paradise lost'. Penderecki keeps on searching for it, treading a winding path, as in a labyrinth. What will this paradise look like? What is he going to find there? This – like

the early days of the violin – is shrouded in mystery.

Marcin Majchrowski (Polish Radio)

Aleksandra KULS was born in 1991. Her successes include First Prize at the József Szigeti International Violin and Viola Competition in Budapest (2012) and two special awards at the Henryk Wieniawski International Violin Competition in Poznań in 2011 (the Wanda Wiłkomirska Prize for the best performance of a work by Karol Szymanowski and a Special Critics' Award). She graduated from the Zenon Brzewski Secondary Music School in Warsaw, where she studied with Magdalena Szczepanowska (her first teacher was Jolanta Maciejewska). She continued her studies with Kaja Danczowska at the Music Academy in Kraków, gaining her diploma with distinction in 2015.

In addition to performances in Poland with such leading orchestras as the Warsaw Philharmonic, Sinfonia Varsovia, Kraków Philharmonic and National Polish Radio SO, Aleksandra Kuls has appeared as a soloist in the USA, Italy, France, Germany (with the Zielona Góra Philharmonic Orchestra), Brazil (with Orquestra Sinfonica do Paran), Turkey (with Istanbul Devlet Senfoni Orkestrasi), Hungary (with Duna Symphony Orchestra), Ukraine (with the L'viv Philharmonic Orchestra) and China (with the China Philharmonic). She has taken part in many prestigious festivals, including Chopin and his Europe, in Warsaw (2012-2015), the Polish Cultural Festival in Beijing (2014), the Krzysztof Penderecki Festival in Warsaw (2013), the International Kaposvr Chamber Music Festival in Hungary (2013), Music in Old Krakw (2012), and the International Festival of Young Laureates of Music Contests in Katowice (2012).

She has had the honour of working with such outstanding conductors as Tadeusz Strugaa, Antoni Wit, Krzysztof Penderecki, Jerzy Maksymiuk, Marek Pijarowski, Micha Dworzyski, Andrs Mustonen, Yan Pascal Tortelier, Yang Yang, and Stanisaw Krawczyski. She has also participated in masterclasses with Maxim Vengerov.

In recent years Aleksandra Kuls has been given many grants and awards for her artistic achievements, including the '2011 Passport' from the Polityka weekly (classical music category), a grant from the Pro Musica Bona Foundation (2011-2013), an award and grant from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage (2011, 2012), a grant from the Minister of Science and Higher Education (2012), and the 'Moda Polska' (Young Poland) scholarship for recording a debut album (2014, with the pianist Justyna Danczowska for the DUX label). Her discography also includes the Violin Concerto by the Polish composer Ignatz Waghalter recorded with Sinfonia Varsovia under Andrs Mustonen for the Warsaw National Opera label.