

**Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)**  
***Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin (ca. 1720)***

Sonata No.1 in G minor BWV 1001 [16:34]

Partita No.1 in B minor BWV 1002 [29:03]

Sonata No.2 in A minor BWV 1003 [23:32]

Partita No.2 in D minor BWV 1004 [30:45]

Sonata No.3 in C major BWV 1005 [22:18]

Partita No.3 in E major BWV 1006 [18:29]

Atilla Aldemir (viola)

rec. 2019, St. Agnes Kirche, Köthen, Germany

Reviewed in SACD binaural stereo.

**CYBELE RECORDS 2SACD321903** [69:11 + 71:33]



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We have become used to hearing Bach's *Suites for solo cello* played on the viola, and sometimes even on the violin, but recordings of the *Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin* on viola are rare. I did an online search and came across a release from 2006 on the Eroica label played by Scott Slapin, but other than that Atilla Aldemir appears to have the field to himself. Thinking about it, this seems odd. The appeal for both players and listeners of playing Bach's sublime music on an instrument that has deeper sonorities than a violin would seem entirely natural. Atilla Aldemir is equally at home with the violin, but transferring Bach to the viola has been a long-standing preoccupation:

"Among other things, the lower-pitched instrument gives me the possibility of foregrounding the contrapuntal elements. Using the *Viola Pellegrino de Micheli* from 1560, whose tonal characteristics are wonderful and which I trust unconditionally, was something about which I was certain. I also found inspiration in the notion that the instrument existed during Bach's lifetime and that he maybe had a chance to hear it."

There is a further synergy in the choice of the St. Agnes Kirche in Köthen, a space well-known to Bach, and a richly atmospheric acoustic that suits this recording perfectly. J.S Bach had, according to his son Carl Philip Emmanuel, a preference for playing the viola, and three such instruments appear in a posthumous inventory of his possessions. Whatever the arguments in favour of this recording, it is in any case a marvellous one. I have an affection for resonant acoustics, but the recorded balance here is perfectly caught, with plenty of detail and texture in the viola sound, while the space provides its own character on the effect of the whole. We reviewers are on occasion justifiably criticised for reviewing surround-sound SACD discs in boring old stereo, but Cybele's binaural layer means that headphone users like myself can relax and enjoy a true Hi-Fi experience without fear of missing out. Comparing the conventional CD layer against SACD binaural is like experiencing the same space but almost with heightened senses, as if you can gauge the temperature of the tiles beneath your feet and see the motes of dust floating in the air as the music resonates around you.

Atilla's Bach tends to be a bit slower than you would expect from a performance on violin, but with the shift in spectrum on the viola this sounds entirely natural, and in any case he is no slouch when it comes to rapid passagework such as that demanded from the *Double* that concludes *BWV 1002*. There is no sense of struggle here, but there is a physicality in the action, a feeling of added active movement that takes us closer to the cello. There is a certain amount of 'effort' perceptible in something as tricky as the *Fuga* of *BWV 1005*, but even in this thicket of notes the music triumphs over the complications. The tone of the historical instrument used here is gorgeous and expressively satisfying but also lively and responsive, and there is nothing at all stodgy in either the performance or the nature of this music when played on the viola. The effect of the double-stopping and counterpoint on the viola means that we can experience these pieces anew, the emphasis on lower notes drawing the balance down from the upper register and the ear's tendency to latch onto melody or upper lines.

Atilla describes himself as an intuitive musician, and another aspect of these performances that I like is that they are respectful to Bach without being overly reverential. He contrasts articulation from time to time, and seeks out the dance feel in the music where the score demands it - movements such as the *Tempo di Borea* from *BWV 1003* more stately than on most violin recordings, but unmistakable in their rhythmic direction. Lightness of touch gives movements such as the *Fugue* in *BWV 1003* a sense of floating elegance that, alongside the more earthy tone of the viola, surprises the ear.

Do I have any criticisms at all? Not really. People used to regard the viola as second-rate when compared to the violin with its pantheon of superstar virtuosos, but once you accept the character of the viola as a unique instrument in its own right then such prejudices fall away. The remarkable *Ciaccona* that concludes *BWV 1004* has sounded more dramatic and theatrical than in this recording, but such extrovert frills are less in the nature of the viola. Atilla Aldemir takes all of the technical demands of these works in his stride, and at 14:26 for this particular movement might even have taken more time over his transitions at some points. The delight here is in a kind of expressive intimacy, drawing the listener in to hear Bach's intricate musical narrative rather than blowing our socks off with virtuoso fireworks - which of course are all present, but which are delivered with considered weight rather than dashing plumage.

In short, all lovers of Bach's *Sonatas and Partitas* should acquire this recording. There have been a few very fine violin recordings of these works recently, and I will of course be hanging on to both [Christian Tetzlaff](#) and [Thomas Zehetmair](#) in their excellent renditions. Some days however, you want a change from the violin and a way of discovering these pieces anew, and in this Atilla Aldemir delivers superbly. Cybele's presentation is excellent as usual, with informative booklet notes in English, German and French, and lots of nice photos taken on location.