Soul Voice

Penelope Spencer - Baroque violin

Greensleeves

improvisation based on the version published by John Playford in 1685.

This hauntingly melancholic tune probably originated in England in the last decades of the 16th century. At that time, the most common form of publicity was the inexpensive printed sheets or “broadsides” that were sold on street corners and other high-traffic areas. These broadsides spread news about politics, current affairs, gossip, or any other story that might sell. When these stories could be set to verse and sung to a popular tune, all the better! These verses became known as “broadside ballads.”

One such broadside ballad was disseminated in September 1580 as “A Newe Northen Dittye of ye Ladye Greene Sleves.” Six more Greensleeves ballads followed in less than a year, illustrating how quickly this tune gained popularity.

Indeed, by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1597, the tune was already so well-known that the character Mistress Ford refers to “the tune of ‘Greensleeves’” twice, and Falstaff later exclaims:
Let the sky rain potatoes! Let it thunder to the tune of ‘Greensleeves’!

Based on a combination of the “Romanesca” and “Passamezzo Antico” (repeating bass patterns), the tune can be infinitely repeated and varied, while still retaining the unique character imbued by the specific harmonic sequence of these repeating bass patterns.

Here are the first two verses (of many!) from:
A new Courtly Sonet, of the Lady Green
sleeues. To the new tune of Greensleeues.(1584)

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Greensleeues was all my ioy,
  Greensleeues was my delight:
Greensleeues was my hart of gold,
  And who but Ladie Greensleeues.

Alas my loue, ye do me wrong,
  to cast me off discurteously:
And I haue loued you so long
  Delighting in your companie.
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Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644-1704)

Passacaglia

from the Rosary Sonatas (1676)

The Jesuits, a religious order founded in the 16th century, had more influence on both devotional practices and education in Europe than any other religious order during the 17th century. They upheld the well-established tradition of Rosary devotion.

At that time, one of the major Jesuit confraternities was located in Salzburg. It met in the lecture hall—the Aula Academica—of Salzburg’s Benedictine University, which still houses 16 large paintings depicting the mysteries of the Rosary: key events in the lives of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. These images are the same as those found in the original manuscript preceding each of Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber’s “Rosary Sonatas.” It appears that Biber, the most highly regarded violin virtuoso-composer of his time in the German-speaking world, was commissioned to write violin sonatas that would set these paintings to music —paintings that were used by the Jesuits as a focus for their Rosary devotion.

By observing the images and listening to the corresponding music, the devotees were encouraged to create a vivid mental picture, imagining their own personal role within the scene. They would hear what the characters might be saying, study every intricate detail, and develop their own personal response and empathy for the individuals depicted in the scene they were meditating on.

The **Passacaglia**, the final piece in the set, stands out as it is written for solo violin (while all the other sonatas include accompaniment), poignantly symbolizing the journey of each individual through life. The 65 repetitions of the **G - F - E♭ - D** bass figure evoke the constancy of the guardian angel—always present and attentive, representing the divine presence in everyday life. The engraving in the original manuscript beautifully illustrates this theme, depicting an angel watching over a child.

This **Passacaglia** is widely regarded as the most important solo violin composition before the works of **J.S. Bach**.

Johann Joseph Vilsmayr (1663 - 1722)

Artificiosus Concentus pro Camera - Partia 1.

Per violino solo (Salzburg, 1715)

A pupil of Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, Johann Joseph Vilsmayr worked at Salzburg’s Hofkapelle from 1689. Judging by the regular increases in his salary, Vilsmayr must have quickly gained a solid reputation at the court. He held his position in Salzburg until his death on 11 July 1722.

Vilsmayr’s only surviving music is the collection published in Salzburg in 1715, titled **Artificiosus Concentus pro Camera**. It contains six partitas (a term synonymous with a suite, or a set of stylized dances) **à Violino Solo Con Basso bellè imitate**. The description Con Basso bellè imitate probably refers to the polyphonic texture of the works rather than to a missing bass part.

Prelude. Adagio
This movement serves as a warm-up for the violinist, setting the key of A major. Vilsmayr and other violinists of the time would typically have improvised pieces like this before performances, perhaps to gain the audience’s attention and signal that the music was about to begin.

Aria. Allegro
Southern German composers such as Biber, Schmelzer, and Vilsmayr often incorporated local folk music into their compositions. This “aria” could be a decorated version of a folk tune from the region.

Saraband. Adagio
By the 18th century, the originally fast and somewhat risqué Saraband from Spain had transformed, via the influence of the French court of Louis XIV and the Ballet de Cour, into a more dignified, slower courtly dance with regular phrasing. Here, as in the Sarabanda from Bach’s B minor Partita, the bass line is clearly distinguishable throughout, providing an elegant foundation for the melody.

Gavott. Allegro - Variatio
The **Gavotte** is typically a lively dance in 2/4 time, but performed at a moderate tempo. The variation on the Gavotte melody uses the technique of jumping between the high and low strings to suggest two parts.

Menuett
The Menuett was the most popular dance of the 18th century, characterized by its moderate tempo in triple meter and its essential qualities of grace and elegance. Vilsmayr’s Menuetts in this partita embody these traits using different musical techniques, each creating a unique yet graceful atmosphere.

Aria. Adagio - Allegro - Adagio - Allegro
This unusual movement feels highly improvisatory, perhaps reflecting one of Vilsmayr’s successful improvisations that he decided to write down.

Aria. Allegro. This movement evokes the sound of tolling bells or possibly references a folk tune.

Menuett
Here, the elegance of the Menuett is expressed through the use of simple dotted rhythms, maintaining a sense of grace and poise.

Guique. Presto - Final
The Gigue (spelled “Guique” in the manuscript) begins in the traditional lively triple meter typical of the genre. It gradually evolves into the “Final” - a section that feels like an improvisational flourish, reflecting the kind of spontaneous brilliance Vilsmayr might have performed at the end of a concert. The musical figures swirl, tumble, and rise up again, with a sense of joyful abandon that defies the strict boundaries of meter.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

Violin Partita No.1 in B minor, BWV 1002

The date on Bach’s own manuscript copy of the 6 Solos for Violin is 1720, just five years after the publication of Vilsmayr’s collection. It is not clear how familiar Bach was with the Austrian violinist-composers like Biber or Vilsmayr, but he was certainly acquainted with German violinist-composers such as Paul Westhoff (Bach’s colleague at Weimar in 1705), who were already writing dance-suites for solo violin.

When we consider Bach’s compositions for solo violin, however, it is evident that he operates on an entirely different musical level compared to his contemporaries. According to some recent studies, his works may even incorporate layers of theological meaning.

During the Baroque era, composers and performers were keenly aware of the unique characteristics of different keys. Instruments of the period responded differently to specific notes, and the prevailing aesthetics did not require that every note sound equally brilliant. The tempered tuning of keyboard instruments also meant that certain keys sounded more resonant (or in tune) than others.

The key of **B minor** was described by the composer Charpentier in 1690 as “solitary and sad,” and by Bach’s colleague Mattheson in 1713 as “bizarre and melancholic.” Given its awkward nature for the violin, why would Bach have chosen this key for a solo violin piece?

Musicologist and theologian Benjamin Shute, in his book **Symbolum** (published in 2016), suggests that in the B-minor Partita, Bach—who consistently used music to express his faith—might have been portraying the idea of Christ as man on earth. According to Shute, the life of Christ on earth, which was difficult, challenging, and far from perfect, is symbolically reflected in this uneasy choice of key.

In fact, Shute compellingly argues that Bach’s six violin solos may be a musical depiction of the life of Christ:

- G minor Sonata: (Birth - Christmas)
- B minor Partita: (Christ as man on earth)
- A minor Sonata: (Before the crucifixion)
- D minor Partita: (Crucifixion)
- C major Sonata: (After the crucifixion)
- E major Partita: (Heaven)

Bach’s handwriting of the word **“Partita”** might even provide additional evidence of this spiritual journey from earth to heaven. The letters **J** and **S** become increasingly distinct within the letter **P** of **Partita**, until by the third E-major Partita—which symbolizes the court of heaven—**J.S. Bach** is unmistakably present!

In the B-minor Partita, Shute also highlights Bach’s focus on the number 2:

- It is the second work in the series of six.
- B minor has two sharps or “Kreuze” (crosses) in the key signature.
- Each dance movement in the B-minor Partita is paired with a variation (or **“**Double**”**).
- Two cultures are juxtaposed through the alternating Italian and French movement names.

Shute proposes that this emphasis on the number 2 might be Bach’s way of referring to the dual nature of Christ, the second person of the Trinity, following the possible representation of the Nativity in the G-minor Sonata.

Allemanda
The B-minor Allemanda bears strong similarities to the aria “Komm, süßes Kreuz”from the St. Matthew Passion. Like the solo violin Allemanda, the obbligato viola da gamba part of “Komm, süßes Kreuz” (“Come, sweet cross”) features a marked contrast between hard, often jagged dotted figures and smooth, slurred gestures, thus symbolizing the paradoxical juxtaposition of “sweet” and “cross.”
In the solo violin work, it’s interesting to note that the “soft” triplet gesture has the final word at the close of the Allemanda, much like the Epistle of James remarks that “mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Allemanda Double
As with every variation or “Double” in the B-minor Partita, this variation is based on the exact same harmonic sequence as the original dance (in this case, the Allemanda). However, the harmonies are portrayed in constant semiquavers, which are slurred in pairs (again highlighting the number 2). The tempo is thus exactly twice that of the original dance.

Corrente
The Italian Corrente is a running, swift-footed dance (as opposed to the more formal and rhythmically complex French “Courante”).
The musical lines flow in opposite directions, creating the illusion of a series of musical mirror images. Benjamin Shute might argue that this represents Christ as the mirror image of man.

Corrente Double
Here, the term Double seems to imply that the predominant note value doubles the surface movement from eighths to sixteenths, rather than the 2:1 time-signature ratio found in the Allemanda and its Double. Once again, the emphasis on the number two, as Benjamin Shute explains it, appears in these tempo proportions.

Sarabande
Nowhere better than in this Sarabande do we see that solo violin music of the Baroque era is essentially two-part writing, comprising a soprano and a bass line (whether realized or not), with intermediate voices sometimes distinguishable. The very full texture and simplified rhythms enhance the feeling of a steady tread, but to me, it conveys a delicate, refined, almost innocent persona. I don’t sense heavy cloaks or crowns in this piece!

Sarabande Double
In the Sarabande Double, the tempo relationship to the original dance becomes more like 1:1. The lilting triplets trace the harmonic patterns in a way that is both breathtakingly simple yet somehow heart-wrenching.

Tempo di Borea
The Bourée was a lively stamping dance, which aptly describes this movement. However, Bach chose to use the somewhat unusual term “Borea”, which actually means “wind” or “spirit.” Could this be yet another theologically significant layer of meaning in this piece?

Borea Double
One of the patterns in this Partita is the gradual convergence of speed between dance and Double. By this final movement of the Partita, the two are exactly the same. Perhaps this could be interpreted as Christ actually becoming man?

Whether this theological interpretation reflects Bach’s true intentions with this Partita or not is obviously a matter of opinion, but as a performer, I find the idea inspiring and helpful as a general concept for mood and character. I hope you find it interesting too! Thank you for reading and for listening.
Penelope Spencer, October 2024