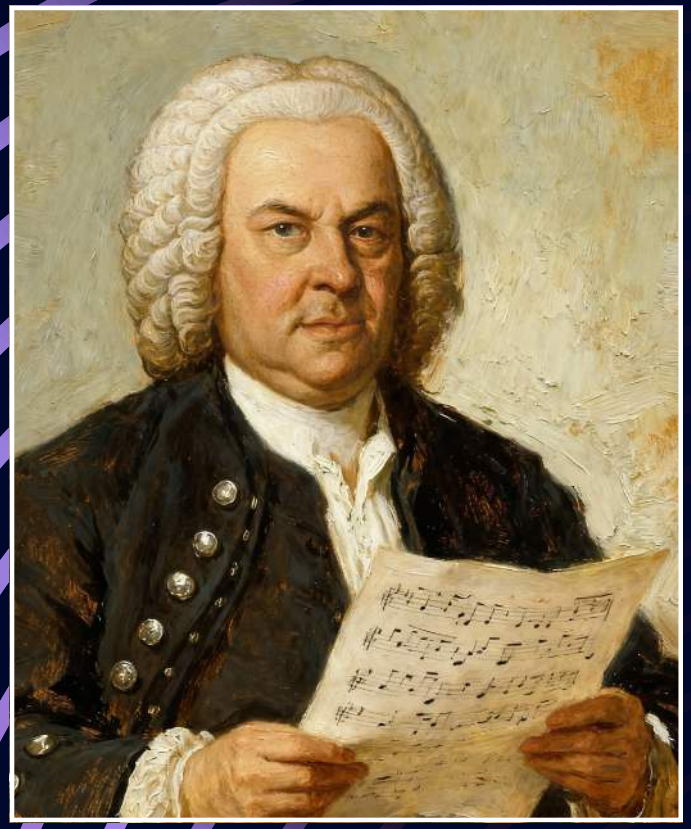
BACH

The Six Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord

Igor OISTRAKH, *violin*

Natalia ZERTSALOVA, *harpsichord*



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Johann Sebastian Bach
The Six Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord

Sonata No. 1 in B Minor, BWV 1014

1	I. Adagio	4:49
2	II. Allegro	3:02
3	III. Andante	3:50
4	IV. Allegro	3:38

Sonata No. 2 in A major, BWV 1015

5	I. (Largo)	4:01
6	II. Allegro assai	3:14
7	III. Andante un poco	3:46
8	IV. Presto	4:50

Sonata No. 3 In E Major, BWV 1016

9	I. Adagio	5:27
10	II. Allegro	2:58
11	III. Adagio ma non tanto	5:45
12	IV. Allegro	3:54

Sonata No. 4 In C Minor, BWV 1017

13	I. Siciliano. Largo	5:16
14	II. Allegro	4:29
15	III. Adagio	4:11
16	IV. Allegro	3:20

Sonata No. 5 In F Minor, BWV 1018

17	I. (Largo)	8:11
18	II. Allegro	3:15
19	III. Adagio	3:55
20	IV. Vivace	2:55

Sonata No. 6 In G Major, BWV 1019

21	I. Vivace	3:36
22	II. Largo	2:17
23	III. Allegro	2:43
24	IV. Adagio	4:20
25	V. Allegro	3:38

Igor Oistrakh, *violin*
Natalya Zertsalova, *harpsichord*

Recorded in 1987 at All-Union Recording Studio, Moscow.
Original producer: **Igor Slepnev**
Original engineer: **Edvard Shakhnazarian**
Originally issued in 1990 as Melodiya SUCD 10-00017 and -18

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach composed his Six Sonatas for Violin and Keyboard, published today as BWV 1014–1019, during his years in Cöthen, between 1717 and 1723, though evidence indicates that some were possibly completed in Leipzig soon thereafter. These sonatas were something altogether new in the history of chamber music: works that transform the relationship between violin and keyboard from the latter as mere accompaniment to an elevated, true partnership. To modern ears, these sonatas sound refined and inevitable; in Bach's time, they marked a watershed in the evolution of duo sonata writing.

Before Bach, the standard sonata for violin with keyboard — most often with harpsichord continuo — was built around a principle of hierarchy. The violin carried the melody while the keyboard player reinforced harmonies with chords and a bass line. Even distinguished examples by Corelli and Handel retain this structure. Bach, however, envisioned something more democratic. In his six sonatas, the right hand of the keyboard becomes a fully independent voice, sharing thematic material with the violin and engaging in complex counterpoint. Meanwhile, the left hand provides a bass line of striking character, creating a sense of music closer to a trio — two voices with continuo. Bach's model influenced his sons, particularly Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, and paved the way for later music for violin and keyboard Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and even Schoenberg's Fantasy, all of which owed a clear debt to these pioneering works.

Bach's exact motivation for composing these sonatas remain uncertain, though stylistic evidence suggests a close link with his years serving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. During this period, Bach enjoyed the rare privilege of composing primarily instrumental music for a cultivated, musically passionate court. It was here that he also produced the Brandenburg Concertos, the Cello Suites, the Violin Sonatas and Partitas, and the Well-Tempered Clavier – all works exploring instrumental dialogue and contrapuntal possibilities.

Parts of the violin-keyboard sonatas — particularly movements from BWV 1019 — suggest later revisions. Bach often reused material, adapting compositions for new contexts. Some scholars have speculated that a Leipzig version may have served pedagogical purposes, perhaps performed by his sons or students, who played both violin and keyboard. Whatever their origin, the sonatas display remarkable consistency of conception: each four movements long (except for the five-movement BWV 1019), alternating slow and fast tempi in a balanced, almost architectural plan.

Bach's design for these sonatas reveals his keen instinct for balance not only between instruments but within each sonata's greater structure. Typically, each opens with a slow movement — lyrical, often deeply expressive — followed by two fast movements framed around a final mature reflection. The slow movements are frequently in binary or ritornello form, their melodies spun in long, unbroken lines that invite the listener to savor harmonic suspensions and gentle dissonances. The faster movements embrace fugal writing, perpetuum mobile rhythms, and intricate imitation.

Though unified by design, the six sonatas each possess a distinct emotional vocabulary.

BWV 1014 in B minor offers profound introspection. Its opening Adagio weaves chromatic suspensions that evoke quiet lament, while the brisk final Allegro brings exuberant relief.

BWV 1015 in A major is warmer and more lyrical. The first movement sings with cantabile grace, and the buoyant finale dances in triple time, a graceful blend of virtuosity and charm.

BWV 1016 in E major, perhaps the most radiant of the set, opens with resplendent sonority and intricate counterpoint. The Adagio forms one of Bach's most poignant instrumental soliloquies, its melodic lines unfolding with serene inevitability.

BWV 1017 in C minor plunges into intensity from the start: a grave Siciliano rhythm lends a vocal quality, reminiscent of an operatic lament. The closing Allegro provides dazzling contrapuntal display.

BWV 1018 in F minor returns to introspection. Its opening movement paints a world of dark elegance, with subtle chromatic turns foreshadowing the expressivity of Beethoven's slow movements.

BWV 1019 in G major, the most varied, possibly assembled in multiple stages, offers a joyous finale to the collection. Alongside its lively outer movements stands an aria-like central Largo in E minor — a meditation of extraordinary poise and tenderness.

In Bach's time, these sonatas were intended for harpsichord and violin. The bright, articulate sound of the harpsichord, with its quick decay and clarity of attack, allows the contrapuntal lines to remain transparent. The violin, likely strung with gut and played with a lighter Baroque bow, would have produced a purer, more speech-like tone than its modern counterpart.

Yet the pieces lend themselves beautifully to modern instruments, provided the performers preserve their conversational balance. In the 19th century, when Bach's music began its revival, pianists and violinists from Mendelssohn onward rediscovered these works, adapting them to modern sensibilities.

Behind the architectural clarity of these sonatas lies an expressive world of startling range. Bach's music, often seen as abstract or cerebral, here speaks relatable and with deep feeling. The tenderness of the slow movements, sometimes compared to arias without words, contrasts with the exhilarating drive of the fast ones. Every movement, however, remains informed by Bach's contrapuntal logic — each melodic gesture is answered, mirrored, or transformed. This continual interplay embodies a philosophical ideal: that harmony in music arises from dialogue and balance, much as harmony in life arises from mutual understanding.

In fusing formal structure with virtuosity and emotion, Bach set the stage for the Classical era. Mozart knew several of these sonatas and studied them carefully; Beethoven's early violin sonatas and Mendelssohn's duo sonatas exhibit clear echoes of their three-part textures. Even Brahms, a century later, revered them as models of integrity and invention. Each sonata feels self-contained yet open-ended, inviting continued exploration by performer and listener alike.

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

Soviet and Ukranian violinist **Igor Oistrakh** was born in Odessa in 1931 – the son of Tamara Rotareva and violinist David Oistrakh. He began studying violin with Valeria Merenbloom at age 6, though his main teacher was his father. In 1943, the 12-year-old Oistrakh enrolled in the Central Music School, Moscow, studying with Pyotr Stolyarsky, who had taught both his father and Nathan Milstein. He made his concert debut in 1948, and in the following year won the International Violin Competition in Budapest. He won the Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition in 1952 after having enrolled in the Moscow Conservatory, from which he graduated in 1955. He then joined the faculty of the Conservatory in 1958, becoming a lecturer in 1965. He was twice a member of the jury of the Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition in Poznan, in 1972 and 1977. From 1996 to 2010 Oistrakh held the post of Professor of the Royal Conservatory in Brussels, and lived in Belgium. He moved to Russia with his family in 2011. On 14 August 2021, Oistrakh died at age 90 from acute heart failure; however, media generally reported this on 1 September 2021.

Oistrakh enjoyed an international concert career, both as a soloist and in joint recitals with his father, or with his father conducting. He made numerous recordings for a number of labels, most notably Melodiya, Deutsche Gramophone, Decca, HMV, Columbia UK, Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga, and Eterna. He also performed regularly and recorded with his wife, pianist **Natalya Zertsalova Oistrakh**, a distinguished student of legendary piano pedagogue Yakov Flier Their son, Valery, is an active violinist.

Audra Fendrick

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