

A portrait of violinist Franziska Pietsch. She is a woman with light brown hair pulled back, wearing a dark turtleneck sweater and small stud earrings. She is holding a violin in her left hand, which is visible at the bottom of the frame. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a stone wall and a body of water.

audite

franziska pietsch

works for solo violin  
bartók | prokofiev | ysaÿe



**BÉLA BARTÓK**

**Sonata for Solo Violin, Sz 117**

- I. *Tempo di ciaccona* 11:17
- II. *Fuga – Risoluto, non troppo vivo* 4:38
- III. *Melodia – Adagio* 7:46
- IV. *Presto* 6:14

**SERGEI PROKOFIEV**

**Violin Sonata in D major, Op. 115**

- I. *Moderato* 4:58
- II. *Andante dolce. Tema con variazioni* 3:59
- III. *Con brio. Allegro precipitato* 3:53

**EUGÈNE YSAÏE**

**Sonata for Solo Violin, Op. 27/2**

- I. *Obsession* 2:40
- II. *Malinconia* 3:12
- III. *Danse des ombres* 4:41
- IV. *Les furies* 3:28

**Sonata for Solo Violin, Op. 27/3**

- I. *Ballade* 7:25

## PURE VIOLIN

To go on stage or in front of a microphone with “just” a violin requires courage. And, of course, outstanding talent and imagination. There is nobody else to depend on, no trusted pianist, no orchestra, no conductor. It simply is the ultimate challenge for a violinist, especially in the solo works of Bach, Paganini, Ysaÿe or Bartók which demand everything of the player. For this solo recital, Franziska Pietsch has put together an individual choice of compositions which have accompanied her from an early age and which, for her, represent significant personal and artistic experiences. She was immediately fascinated by Bartók’s solo sonata: “Architecturally, this sonata is unique: it is an epoch-making piece. One feels that it has no end, and that is a feature of truly great music.” Bartók wrote it in dramatic circumstances in 1944 whilst he was in exile in New York. After the Nazis had seized power, he had refused to perform in Germany and had prohibited German and Italian radio stations from continuing to broadcast his works. In order to escape national socialism and antisemitism in Hungary, he and his wife emigrated to the USA in 1940. For Bartók, this was a “leap into the unknown from the unbearable known”. He spent his final years in a small flat in Manhattan, where he succumbed to leukaemia on 26 September 1945. Bartók never felt at home in America; he was hardly known and relied on help. He was supported mainly by fellow musicians, such as the pianist Andor Foldes, the violinist Joseph Szigeti, the conductors Fritz Reiner, Antal Doráti as well as Serge Koussevitzky, who commissioned his *Concerto for Orchestra* which would become one of his most popular works. Yehudi Menuhin was another of Bartók’s supporters – he first met the composer in November 1943, shortly after performing his second violin concerto and first violin sonata. It was a fateful meeting which eventually led to the creation of the solo sonata. In his memoirs, *Unfinished Journey*, Menuhin wrote: “I knew he was in financial straits, that he was too proud to accept handouts, that he was the greatest of living composers. Unwilling to waste a moment, I asked him on the afternoon of our first meeting if I might commission him to compose a work for me. It didn’t have to be anything large-scale, I urged; I was not hoping for a third concerto, just a work for violin alone. Little did I foresee that he would write me one of the masterpieces of all time. But when I saw it, in March 1944, I admit I was shaken. It seemed to me almost unplayable.”

However, Menuhin soon changed his mind, studied the work and gave its premiere on 26 November 1944 at Carnegie Hall, in the presence of the composer. The *Sonata for Solo Violin* is the last complete work by Bartók and the only chamber piece that he composed in exile. Due to its strict and concentrated form it occupies a special position in his oeuvre. Bursting with contrasts, this work demands everything of the violinist.

In his solo sonata Bartók clearly refers to Bach. As with Bach’s three violin sonatas, Bartók’s is conceived in four movements. The first one, “Tempo di ciaccona”, in sonata form, evidently alludes to the famous Chaconne from the Partita in D minor. As in Bach’s solo sonatas, the second movement is a fugue which sounds rugged and weighty, as a piece by Beethoven might. The third movement, “Melodia”, in three-part song form, is softly melancholy. The fourth “Presto” movement is formally a rondo and features audible folk elements. Bartók considered the quarter tones in this movement merely as a colouring device, without “structural character”, which could also be omitted. Accordingly, Menuhin did not play them at the premiere. Today, the quarter tones are included as a matter of course.



Tempo di ciaccona

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 50$



The expressivity of this music is greatly condensed and enriched with dissonant border-crossings symbolising pain and despair. According to Franziska Pietsch, it can only be accessed with a degree of knowledge of the composer's biography: "Knowing about Bartók's life and personality is vitally important in order to understand this piece. Bartók, a man 'of explosive seriousness' – that is very fitting. This description provided me with an initial spark, as it were, helping me to enter into the spirit of his music. Concealed behind his cool, taciturn exterior was a character that must have been wired inside, harbouring incredible energy and emotions. The solo sonata was written in exile, in deep disjointedness when he was terminally ill. That just needs taking into account. The music cries out at you with such mournfulness, vulnerability and meditation. But there is also an explosiveness, such incredible power, and this exuberant happiness in the last movement. He keeps breaking off and struggles to manage the situation. He puts in everything that can be put in, without any apparent sentimentality and includes folk music, with which he worked throughout his life, in the most subtle fashion. It became a completely unique piece – one which I find utterly fascinating."

One could call Eugène Ysaÿe a romantic and a visionary, for he was the starting point of a new era in the history of the violin. He was the creator of a new sound ideal; a modern, romantically sumptuous tone which naturally also included vibrato. Ysaÿe truly was an artist between epochs, not much younger than Pablo de Sarasate, still playing brilliantly, and the already slightly aged Joseph Joachim. "His tone was noble and grand, able to modulate on the highest level", Carl Flesch wrote in his memoirs. With his multi-faceted colours, warmth and rich tone Ysaÿe truly opened up a new sense of enjoyment in violin-playing. He was the brilliant counterpart to the circus-like Paganini type. It is a stroke of luck that his playing was captured on disc in the early days of recording. Between 1912 and 1914 Ysaÿe recorded a series of fifteen pieces in New York for Columbia, including the finale of Mendelssohn's violin concerto alongside works by his teachers Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps; later on, he recorded several works conducting the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. The sound emerging from the crackling of the shellac discs is unique violin playing, virtuosic, enjoying vibrato, portamento and rubato. Everything that one expects from a violinist today can be found in his playing. Ysaÿe was one of the last violinists who also garnered renown as composers: the *Six Sonatas for solo violin*, Op. 27, are his masterwork. Here, he wants to show once again how much harmony and polyphony the violin can produce. As with the Bartók sonatas, Bach's example is ever-present. These six solo sonatas are incredibly multi-layered compositions, each tailored to its dedicatee: Joseph Szigeti, Jacques Thibaud, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Mathieu Crickboom and Manuel Quiroga. In the concert hall it is still rare to hear works by Ysaÿe; for the most part, excerpts are played as encores. The second and the compact third sonatas are especially popular. "Every sonata has a characteristic aura", explains Franziska Pietsch. "Of course there is also a lot of virtuosity, but that is not central, never an end in itself. With Ysaÿe, the challenge is to find the right balance between virtuosity and musicality. There is also a lot of improvisation involved, even though there are clear indications, a rhythmic structure and sense of strictness, as with Bartók. How free do I want to be, how free can I be, at what point do I cross the boundaries? These are the questions that players need to ask themselves. The slow central movements of the second sonata offer extraordinary latitude. Alongside all the explosiveness, this music has an incredible fragility to it, a great tenderness. And one has to do justice to all these facets." Ysaÿe dedicated his second Solo Sonata to the French violinist Jacques Thibaud. It opens with a quote from the Prelude of Bach's



E major Partita, catching the listener's attention, almost causing confusion as one might think that the player has got the wrong piece. "It is precisely because of this strong link with Bach that I love this sonata especially", Franziska Pietsch enthuses. "With Bach, everything, harmony and sound, remains concrete. With Ysaÿe, we move towards Impressionism and one can do a lot with sound. The second movement, 'Malinconia', for instance, is a reverie, a very fragile, soft piece in which the world comes to a temporary standstill. Such moments are essential for me. In the third movement he circles around the theme, continuing with variations which all have a sense of melancholy. The music doesn't become concrete, the veil doesn't lift. Peace isn't there, and it's not coming. The last movement is, of course, a *furioso*. Something erupts in the "Furies", but again, not tangibly. Impressionist, phantasmal moods keep emerging." A different world opens up in the third sonata which is dedicated to the Romanian violinist George Enescu. "This sonata is dominated by a dramatic structure", Franziska Pietsch declares. "I always imagine opera, big theatre. At the outset, one feels one's way almost impressionistically – the piece gets under way like a train slowly starting up. During the course of the piece there are also dreamy stopping points, a shimmering of colours and sounds. The second sonata is veiled by melancholy, the third exudes great joie de vivre. Energy and vitality – just dynamism."

Sergei Prokofiev expanded the violin repertoire by a series of masterpieces – his two violin concertos as well as his two violin sonatas are compositional milestones of great originality. The *Sonata for Solo Violin*, Op. 115, is slightly overshadowed. Prokofiev composed it in 1947 as an exercise in unison playing for violin students. Despite its didactic conception the sonata represents far more than a simple study piece, for Prokofiev, with great imagination, ingeniously makes this piece into a masterwork. The first movement, "Moderato", is in sonata form with a heartfelt *dolce* secondary movement. This is followed by a slow movement, consisting of a theme (Andante dolce) and five variations. The third movement, "Con brio", features marked folk elements. Prokofiev did not live to see the sonata's first public performance in Moscow on 10 July 1959 with Ruggiero Ricci. Is Prokofiev's solo sonata a second rate piece for students? "Absolutely not. Schumann also wrote pieces for children, which nonetheless are great music", according to Franziska Pietsch. "Prokofiev has many faces, that's what makes him so intriguing. Of course this work is not on the same level as for instance the F minor violin sonata. But folklore was always an important subject for Prokofiev – and there are certain parallels to Bartók. That becomes very plain in this sonata – it is down to earth and original. And then there are these changes in mood, straight away in the first movement. Suddenly there is a different world – I find that fascinating. There are also trivial moments, but they lighten the mood. This is not the grave and gloomy Prokofiev, but an untroubled piece that allows us to breathe freely."

Norbert Hornig

Translation: Viola Scheffel



## FRANZISKA PIETSCH

At first glance, Franziska Pietsch's career seems to have been a fairy tale of good fortune. Born into a musical family in East Berlin – both her parents were violinists – she was celebrated as a child prodigy. Under the tutelage of Prof. Werner Scholz from Berlin's Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler, Pietsch began at a young age to win contests such as the Bach Competition in Leipzig and made her debut at the Komische Oper Berlin at the age of eleven. There followed a number of years in the "Virtuoso Circus", as she calls it in hindsight. She performed the violin concertos of Bruch, Lalo, Sibelius, and Paganini with the finest orchestras in East Germany; at the age of 12, she made her first recordings for the East German Radio (including Sarasate's *Gypsy Airs*). But this fairy tale ended abruptly in 1984 when her father defected to West Germany during a concert tour. Two years would pass before his family was allowed to join him, and these two years would change the course of Franziska Pietsch's life. From one day to the next, she was on her own, as all state-sponsored studies and scholarships were suspended.

"And so, at the age of 14, I was forced to ask myself a number of truly fundamental questions. Why do I want to be a musician? What does music really mean?" Franziska Pietsch found answers in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For an entire year, with no instruction whatsoever, she devoted herself exclusively to his solo works, distancing herself quite consciously from the "circus" life of a child prodigy. After moving to West Germany in 1986, she continued on this path, supported by her teacher and mentor Prof. Ulf Hoelscher. She completed her years of study with the legendary violin teacher Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School in New York.

Franziska Pietsch returned to Germany in 1992 determined to expand her musical horizons beyond the solo literature, turning towards all forms of music-making, and especially the great symphonic masterpieces. For more than ten years, she was the concertmaster of prestigious orchestras such as the Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, the Sinfonieorchester Wuppertal, the WDR Sinfonieorchester, and the





orchestras of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf and the opera in Frankfurt. At the same time, she continued to perform as a soloist throughout Europe, America, and Asia. In 2010, Pietsch gave up her activities as a concertmaster to devote herself exclusively to chamber music.

By the end of 2018, Franziska Pietsch will have recorded nine albums in only seven years for the audite label. With the Trio Testore, she recorded a.o. the complete piano trios of Johannes Brahms. In 2014, Franziska Pietsch decided to focus on the chamber music formation closest to her heart, the string trio, founding the Trio Lirico together with violist Sophia Reuter and cellist Johannes Krebs; this ensemble recorded the works of Max Reger for CD. Pietsch's performances and recordings with pianist Detlev Eisinger (e.g. sonatas by Grieg, Franck, and Prokofiev) have been praised by international critics and nominated for the German Record Critics' Award and the International Classical Music Awards.

In 2017, Franziska Pietsch felt the time had come to attempt once again to express her years of musical and personal experience through the great violin concertos. She recorded both Prokofiev concertos with the Deutsches Sinfonieorchester Berlin under the direction of Cristian Măcelaru. She has felt a deep connection to this composer since her childhood: "It is not only the sometimes dark and melancholy sound colors, which possibly speak to my Czech and Polish roots, but perhaps also Prokofiev's own life, his search for an individual artistic identity under a totalitarian regime." The Prokofiev recording – released on audite as well – was a huge critical success and was nominated for the International Classical Music Awards and won the "Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik" awarded quarterly.

Beginning summer 2018, three new CDs were recorded, documenting the enormous artistic spectrum of this exceptional violinist: The current release with solo sonatas by Bartok, Ysaÿe, and Prokofiev; duo sonatas by Shostakovich and Strauss with pianist Josu de Solaun (release 2019); and string trios by Schnittke, Penderecki, and Weinberg with the Trio Lirico (release 2019).

Franziska Pietsch plays a violin by Carlo Antonio Testore (Milan) of 1751.





**audite**

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