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"The Accompaniment in 'Unaccompanied' Bach: Interpreting the Sonatas and Partitas for Violin," by Stanley Ritchie

David Schulenberg
Wagner College, NY

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Book review: Ritchie, Stanley. *The Accompaniment in “Unaccompanied” Bach: Interpreting the Sonatas and Partitas for Violin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-25-302198-4 (ebook: 978-0-25-302208-0)

David Schulenberg

The greatest problem faced by most students making their first approach to Bach’s compositions for unaccompanied cello or violin is not the formidable technical difficulty of the music or its density of contrapuntal and motivic detail. Rather it is the lack of a relevant knowledge base, of familiarity with the multiple musical styles and traditions from which Bach wove these uniquely allusive pieces. Not one string player in a hundred encountering this repertory for the first time, or even for the twentieth, knows the dance music of Lully, the oboe concertos of Albinoni, or the organ chaconnes and passacaglias of Pachelbel and Buxtehude. And therefore, regardless of their capabilities on their instrument or their theoretical understanding of harmony, formal analysis, and counterpoint, students confront this music in a stylistic vacuum that gives them no context, no deep familiarity with the musical vocabulary that Bach incorporated into these strange and challenging compositions.

The allusiveness of these pieces lies not only in the multiple types of music from diverse national traditions that they echo. It is equally present in the multiple layers of implicit and potential voice leading that lie beneath the musical surface. But the typical violin student sees this music primarily as a baffling technical challenge, a hurdle to get over in order to attain credence as a professional. Even if not awed by the mystique now attached to the three sonatas and three *Partien* (as Bach called them) for violin, most players are so intimidated by the technical challenges posed by these pieces that they cannot understand the latter simply as music.

Stanley Ritchie’s new book on playing Bach’s “six solos for violin without accompanying bass” (*Sei Solo â Violino senza Basso accompagnato*) is presumably meant to help students overcome those challenges. It clearly reflects long experience teaching and playing this music. Master violinists will find here things of interest, some potentially



helpful for teaching or playing. But whether the book will lead students to deeper understanding or more imaginative performances of these masterpieces strikes me as an open question.

Ritchie admits that he is “a violinist, not a musicologist; a teacher, not a researcher” (p. 4). I don’t think that he means to imply that these paired callings are mutually exclusive. Many, however, will read him that way, assuming that one can be either a violinist or a musicologist but not both, or that a teacher can dispense with carrying out research. The book means to adopt a genial tone, but much of it is in the prescriptive manner of a conservatory teacher, directing the student how to play one passage, then another, while imparting bits of wisdom on subjects ranging from general principles of phrasing and rhythm to the detailed execution of individual trills and multiple stops.

This is surprising, for in a brief introduction Ritchie inveighs against “conservatory-style musical training” that teaches “interpretations but not *the art of interpreting*” (p. 3, original italics). Yet despite the author’s assertion that his is a “rational approach” (p. 2), he rarely provides rationales for his advice. Readers may assume that, as a player of so-called “baroque” violins, Ritchie bases his advice on historical documentation. But relevant sources are rarely cited, and the approach taken here is no less prescriptive than that of Ivan Galamian and other pedagogues of the past who made no claim of performing on “baroque” instruments or in “baroque” style.

This is too bad, for most readers of this review are likely to be sympathetic with Ritchie’s approach to playing this music, which treats it as expressive, not merely required recital or audition repertoire. Some players may find this book illuminating, even life-changing. But it is very much a how-to book, more specifically one that explains how to perform this music as Ritchie does. To be sure, he leaves many things up to the individual player; among these is the fundamental decision whether to take up a “baroque” instrument and bow. But a non-violinist looking for information or ideas about this music, or a string player seeking to learn about historical instruments and performance practice, is likely to be frustrated.

Issued in a format meant to sit comfortably on a music stand, the book comprises twelve brief chapters taking up a little more than a hundred pages. Roughly half the matter on those pages consists of music examples that violinists will want to try out, as they incorporate Ritchie’s bowings, fingerings, dynamics, and other markings. Three introductory chapters offer summaries of dance types and some rudimentary analytical ideas; two closing chapters on right-hand and left-hand technique “are substantially identical” to matter from the author’s previous book (*Before the Chinrest: A Guide to the Mysteries of Pre-Chinrest Technique and Style*, Indiana University Press, 2012), albeit covering relevant topics “in greater depth” (p. 100). Seven central chapters cover every one of the thirty-two individual movements, starting with the “improvisatory” preludes of the G-

minor and A-minor sonatas and the three fugues, then proceeding to groups of movements that are classified as “ostinato,” “dancelike,” “virtuoso,” “philosophical,” and “lyrical”—the last two comprising, respectively, the allemandes in D minor and B minor and the slow movements of the sonatas. How an allemande is philosophical is not explained, although the idea seems to have been inspired by Johann Gottfried Walther’s metaphor of the allemande as a logical “proposition” from which the other movements of a suite follow (*Musikalisches Lexicon*, Leipzig, 1732, p. 28).

The awkward title of the present book may suggest to some readers an analytical or critical study. It focuses, however, on the technical problems of playing the music on the violin. Interpretation is, to some degree, inherent in precisely how one fingers, bows, or articulates a line—where one shifts, how one attacks a particular note, whether one divides a phrase between strings—and in the technical means used to bring out individual tones. But Ritchie rarely steps back to consider how decisions about these local details relate to such things as tempo, overall expressive and rhythmic character, or the large-scale form or design of these pieces. Parallels in music by Bach’s contemporaries, or in his own works for organ or keyboard (many of which might offer suggestions about interpretation), are rarely mentioned. Nor is reference made to recordings or critical studies of this music by others. This reader was glad to be spared spurious accounts of “rhetoric” or doubtful characterizations of key, affect, or dance types in this music. Still, there is little to encourage critical or analytical thinking or further reading by students. Repeated admonitions to look certain things up in *Grove* won’t lead students to current views about performance practice or analysis in this repertory, for many of the entries cited here are now seriously outdated.

As a non-violinist, I am not in a position to evaluate the specific fingerings and bowings that Ritchie prescribes in dozens of examples, some of them quite extensive. Taken together, these examples comprise a substantial fraction of the complete musical content of the *Sei solo*, leading one to wonder whether the author should not have simply published a marked-up “edition” of the complete set, like that of Galamian or another violin pedagogue. Doing so would, however, have been contrary to the spirit of the author’s remarks, which affirm received ideas about freedom of interpretation in baroque music. Unless accompanied by a commentary, moreover, such an edition would not have given the author the opportunity to repeat what seem to be favorite chestnuts from teaching, such as “all music is in one,” that is, to be played with one beat per bar (p. 66).

That particular idea cannot be documented from Bach’s day. It is one of many assertions about performance that, however appropriate to this music, represent present-day thought, not a historically documented way of understanding this music. Ritchie is agreeably open to both “modern” and “baroque” violin playing, presenting his ideas about “baroque” style only as personal preferences. Many readers are likely to assume that these derive from historical sources, but in fact they tend, like the assertion about playing “in

one,” to have no clear historical basis.

Another problem lies in the approach to analysis, the way in which Ritchie explains the structure of this music. Chapter 3 shows how a few passages can be understood as elaborations of simpler progressions, the latter represented as either figured bass lines or melodic reductions. But thereafter, how this type of analysis connects to decisions about bowing, fingering, or phrasing is rarely made explicit. In the book’s central chapters, advice about how to play specific examples is given simply as instructions or in the form of the author’s added articulation and dynamic markings in the score.

Thus, although Ritchie informs the reader that “the bass line is the most important,” what he calls “bass-line extraction” is illustrated only once after chapter 3, when a passage from the D-minor allemanda is set above a bass line derived from its lowest notes (p. 92). Elsewhere, the author’s reductive analyses betray a less sophisticated approach than that found in Joel Lester’s book on the same repertory (*Bach’s Works for Solo Violin*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Some analyses, like that of the G-minor fugue (p. 20), leave too many small note values in the reduction, making it difficult to see the author’s point about the music being “in one.” In addition, a certain confusion about how to understand Bach’s writing is implicit in the book’s title, which suggests that this music contains its own accompaniment. That is a traditional way of expressing the apparent paradox of “unaccompanied” violin music. But it misrepresents the fundamental problem of interpreting a polyphonic texture, which is not a matter of projecting one leading line but rather of allowing the listener to hear multiple voices simultaneously. Although Ritchie reminds players to “think horizontally and bring out the individual melodic lines” (as on p. 37), I fear that his recurring suggestion to bring out a “primary melodic voice” (p. 19) will confuse students unaccustomed to playing contrapuntal music on a solo instrument.

To understand Bach’s famously “polyphonic” melodic writing in these pieces—to recognize the “accompaniment” within this music—requires the player to hear the underlying counterpoint, which is often only implicit. This is not an easy thing to teach, especially to non-keyboard players; one way to do it might be through a systematic explication of Bach’s notation, including his slurs. The latter are a famously controversial element in many Bach works, not least these. Ritchie offers solutions in individual instances of slurs that raise technical issues or are drawn indistinctly in Bach’s autograph (“the manuscript,” as Ritchie repeatedly calls it, but of course there are others). But no general principles are adduced, and there are many problematical, even contradictory, assertions.

Ritchie argues that “slurs in this music are not to be regarded as bowings but as part of the language” (79). Yet although he writes that slurs “should never be altered for convenience,” just one paragraph previously he counsels doing precisely that, extending

the slur in m. 15 of the G-minor Presto into the next downbeat “for violinistic reasons” (contrary to his assertion, there is nothing ambiguous at this point “in the manuscript”). At one point in the corrente of the D-minor *partia*, Ritchie declares, “I prefer to read the articulations as short/long, which are [*sic*] more energetic, besides which the bowing works out well” (p. 63). By “short/long” he seems to refer to the breaking up of Bach’s three-note slurs in m. 36 into groups of 1 + 2. True, the first slur is displaced in the autograph to the right, but Bach’s meaning seems clear, and the staccato wedge on the first note in each group in Ritchie’s example is his own addition. Ritchie’s way of playing the passage is doubtless “effective,” but it is neither the most likely reading of Bach’s notation nor, in this case, dictated by any practical necessity. Rather it arises from his desire to project an affect that is arguably more vehement than that implied by Bach’s notation.

Ritchie by no means ignores harmonic or motivic aspects of slurs and other elements of the music. He points out the dissonances on downbeats in the main theme of the E-major gavotte, observing that stressing these brings out the proper metrical pattern of the dance (p. 64). But like the violinist-musicologist Frederick Neumann (not cited), he supposes that the trill which also occurs on that downbeat must start on the main note. Otherwise the trill must begin an octave above the bass, forming a consonance (see Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music, With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach*, Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 330–31). In fact, there is no evidence that eighteenth-century musicians abandoned their usual way of playing trills when the latter decorated a dissonant main note. Doing so does not bring out the dissonance any more effectively than does dwelling on the dissonant note afterward—that is, playing the trill short, rather than continuing it through the entire duration of the main note (something one hears all too often from “baroque” as well as “modern” players unfamiliar with the French idiom that Bach emulates here).

Students will not always recognize where the author makes idiosyncratic generalizations. Some of these may seem useful for teaching, as in a distinction made between chaconnes and passacaglias (the former supposedly beginning on downbeats, p. 47), or the idea that eighth notes move progressively more slowly in 12/8, 6/8, and 3/8 (p. 53). “Good” and “bad” notes are explained in terms of “stress versus release” (p. 91), which is vaguer than the historical antithesis of consonance versus (passing) dissonance. Short notes that follow dotted ones may often have been further shortened, but many players will disagree with the prescription to overdot the loure of the E-major *Partie*, especially where this leads the author to rewrite the rhythm of m. 12 (eliminating the simultaneity *d’’/e’’*, p. 71).

On the other hand, Ritchie advises underdotting or “tripeletizing” the siciliana of the G-minor sonata; he calls this a “customary” rhythmic alteration but cites no evidence for the custom. Particularly doubtful is the assertion that *notes inégales* were “normally” applied only to eighth notes or that the practice was not used “in groups of more than two

slurred notes” (p. 71); such “rules cited in contemporary French sources” have no place in a textbook if the author cannot cite actual rules in actual sources. Another idea, the distinction between so-called variable and invariable appoggiaturas, does have an easily identifiable source. But C. P. E. Bach’s *Versuch* is too late to apply unreservedly to his father’s violin pieces and is concerned with a very different style of music (*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, Berlin, 1753–62, 1:64–66). In fact, every indication is that Sebastian, like his French contemporaries, used only “invariable” or short appoggiaturas, which can be just as melodically or harmonically functional (that is, dissonant) as the “variable” or long type.

The author has not been entirely well served by the publisher. In the examples throughout the book, a basic flaw either in the understanding of music notation or in the software used to generate it has led to the positioning of the stems and noteheads of simultaneously sounding tones directly above or below one another, rather than being slightly offset horizontally. Thus, one of Ritchie’s fundamental precepts, that Bach’s notation is always polyphonic—the notes of each voice being drawn with their own stems—is repeatedly undermined by the autography of the music examples. For instance, the opening sonority of the E-major gavotte appears repeatedly as a chord e’/b’, not separately stemmed notes belonging to distinct voices (p. 64; the examples on this page also wrongly show the lower note a’ of the next chord as a half note). A further hindrance is the absence of both captions and measure numbers from the examples, so that passages cited in the text by measure number cannot be immediately located even when they are illustrated on the same page. At one point (p. 31), there is even a reference to an “example 4.15,” but to find it the reader must count the unnumbered examples from the start of the chapter.

So long as one reads it as one player’s subjective approach to this music, this book can do no harm and may be of great interest to violinists who know the author’s Bach recordings. Those able to play these pieces will doubtless wish to experiment with the author’s annotations—even the nineteenth-century-style wedge-shaped dynamic indications. These might be interpreted not literally but with respect to time, as demonstrating how individual phrases might push forward (crescendo) or hold back (diminuendo). Markings of this type may also be helpful for those who are unprepared to work out such things for themselves.

But the author provides little advice for inquisitive students whose teachers cannot guide them to relevant reading about historical instruments, technique, the music on which Bach drew in devising these pieces, or the ways in which others have analyzed these exceptionally elusive compositions. Such students will need to consult books on the same subject by Lester and David Ledbetter (*Unaccompanied Bach: Performing the Solo Works*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) which are not even in the bibliography; nor does the latter offer any modern writings on historical instruments or bows. The pre-

sent book is well intentioned and may even serve as a valuable document of how a pioneer of the "historical performance" movement approached this music. But how many students will learn from it to "interpret" these pieces on their own?