

# barbican

## Kavakos Plays Bach

2 & 3 May  
Hall

Classical Music  
Concert programme



# Important information



## When does the concert start and finish?

This concert begins at 7.30pm and finishes at about 9.20pm, with a 20-minute interval.



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# Kavakos Plays Bach: Part 1

Thu 2 May 7.30pm, Hall

**Leonidas Kavakos** violin

**Johann Sebastian Bach** Violin Sonata No 2  
in A minor

- 1 Grave
- 2 Fuga
- 3 Andante
- 4 Allegro

**Violin Partita No 3** in E major

- 1 Preludio
- 2 Loure
- 3 Gavotte en rondeau
- 4 Menuet I and II
- 5 Bourrée
- 6 Gigue

*Interval 20 minutes*

**Violin Sonata No 3** in C major

- 1 Adagio
- 2 Fuga
- 3 Largo
- 4 Allegro assai

Produced by the Barbican

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**The esteemed Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos takes to the stage for the first of two evenings dedicated to Bach's mighty solo masterpiece: the Sonatas and Partitas, a work that continues to challenge, fascinate and move us 300 years on.**

The autograph score of JS Bach's set of set of Six Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas, *Sei Solo – a violino senza Basso accompagnato* BWV1001–6, dates from 1720, when he was Kapellmeister in Cöthen – although it is thought possible that material for the works dates further back, to Bach's Weimar years. In any case, they are likely to have been at least partly inspired by Johann Paul von Westhoff's publication of solo violin partitas in 1696, the first volume of its kind. Westhoff played at the Weimar court until his death in 1705, so the two musicians would probably have met there.

Bach's inspiration for the Sonatas and Partitas may also have stemmed from a more personal source: the death of first wife, Maria Barbara Bach, who was buried on 7 July 1720. It was Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, who prepared the fair copies, using more fluid notation than that most usually employed for Bach's keyboard works, representing an ideal of performance more than literal expectation. This allowed for interpretive flexibility, and reflects the complexity of Bach's violin writing: implied counterpoint from a single instrument. The sense that Bach was challenging himself in these pieces is palpable throughout: the sonatas in particular demonstrate a sense of struggle – of striving to work through a puzzle, but one with a profound emotional undercurrent.

The Sonata No 2 in A minor, BWV1003, with which Leonidas Kavakos begins, opens with an improvisatory Grave replete with multiple-stopping that enriches the melodic line. At such a slow tempo, the highly

ornamented melody seems to meander at will, navigating a course of highly contrasting rhythms and decorative flourishes.

The Fugue that follows is based around a melancholy theme developed via an array of imaginative techniques, including passages of semiquavers and multiple-stopping, Bach conjuring the sense of interwoven lines. In the Andante there are also clearly demarcated roles for the melodic and harmonic aspects of the violin's material; the beautiful melody is accompanied by a continuously moving and highly rhythmic bass line. In the dramatic final Allegro multiple-stopping is replaced with broken chords punctuating the melodic line in perpetual motion.

The Third Partita is the sunniest and most immediate of the three; Bach seems to have been particularly pleased with its opening movement, as he transcribed it twice. In 1729 he turned it into a sinfonia for a wedding cantata and, two years later, reworked it into an introduction to a cantata (BWV29) for the inauguration of the Leipzig city council. This brilliant opening Prelude has almost continuous semiquavers, with passages of *bariolage* – in which the melody moves around one static, repeated note.

For the rest of the Partita, Bach eschews conventional dance-suite movements, choosing instead *galantries*: incidental suite movements used to break up the usual pattern of dances. The French Loure is a stately type of gigue and here has a plaintive quality, leavened by elaborate ornamentation. The jaunty Gavotte en rondeau is an inventive hybrid form, combining the rhythm of the gavotte with the structural implications of a rondo. There are fleeting moments of solemnity, but the prevailing atmosphere is of infectious good humour. Two Menuets follow: the first

elegant and refined, the second pastoral, with a rustic drone using tied minims. There are some striking dynamic contrasts in the Bourrée, followed by the vivacious final Gigue.

The Sonata No 3 in C major, BWV1005 is the last of the set's sonatas and includes a Fugue of such magnitude that it has drawn comparisons with the famous Chaconne that ends the Second Partita. The Sonata opens with a profoundly contemplative Adagio that ranges from one to four-part writing, anchored by double-stopping placed at regular intervals throughout the movement. Its slow stacking-up of notes is a technique once considered impossible on bowed instruments.

The open-ended Adagio is resolved by the vast Fugue, a masterpiece of overlapping lines built into a great edifice of enmeshed musical ideas lasting more than 10 minutes. Its theme derives from an antiphon for Pentecost, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. In complete contrast, the serene Largo provides respite, unfolding with relative clarity and simplicity. Like the Adagio, it is punctuated by double-stops, but the complex textures of the Fugue are replaced by long-breathed single lines – to refreshing effect. The work concludes with a lively Allegro assai, Bach unleashing a torrent of rapid and intricate passagework, with more *bariolage*.

Reviewing the first edition of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas in 1805, the German composer and writer Johann Friedrich Reichardt summed up their extraordinary achievement thus: 'Perhaps the greatest example in any art form of a master's ability to move with freedom and assurance.'

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# Kavakos Plays Bach: Part 2

Fri 3 May 7.30pm, Hall

## Leonidas Kavakos violin

### **Johann Sebastian Bach** Violin Sonata No 1 in G minor

- 1 Adagio
- 2 Fuga (Allegro)
- 3 Siciliana
- 4 Presto

### **Violin Partita No 1** in B minor

- 1 Allemanda
- 2 Double
- 3 Corrente
- 4 Double (Presto)
- 5 Sarabande
- 6 Double
- 7 Tempo di Borea
- 8 Double

*Interval 20 minutes*

### **Violin Partita No 2** in D minor

- 1 Allemanda
- 2 Corrente
- 3 Sarabanda
- 4 Giga
- 5 Ciaccona

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**For the second evening of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas we continue our journey with Leonidas Kavakos, which culminates in the mighty Chaconne that closes the D minor Partita, a movement that has fascinated composers as varied as Brahms, Busoni and Berio.**

Although JS Bach was principally a keyboard player, we know from one of his sons, CPE Bach, that he sometimes led orchestras from the violin while playing with a tone that was 'pure and penetrating'. Bach certainly pushed the boundaries of what was possible on the instrument in his Six Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas, BWV1001–6, the autograph score of which dates from 1720.

Leonidas Kavakos continues his journey with the First Sonata in G minor, BWV1001; it opens with a highly decorated Adagio that unfolds in the manner of a mournful soliloquy, imbued with a recitative-like rhythmic fluidity. Bach swiftly moves the music away from the tonic key, taking the material on a journey through a series of expressive harmonic excursions. The exhilarating four-part Fugue that follows is a taut, sinewy movement in which the theme remains audible at every turn. That theme is characterised by an insistent figure, the quality of which shifts within the movement from being plaintive and delicate one moment, persistent and forceful the next. Bach later reworked this movement as an organ fugue (BWV539): though you might expect the texture of this keyboard version to be richer, in fact the two are remarkably similar, demonstrating the skill of Bach's writing for the violin – which plays three and four-part chords throughout.

The Siciliano (a dance style that originated in Sicily) is the only dance movement to be found in these solo violin sonatas (in contrast to the dance-filled partitas), and is another of the composer's triumphs of counterpoint,



the violin sustaining a three-part texture. Yet the *Siciliano* wears its technical prowess lightly, and the effect is of spacious, unhurried beauty, balancing a pastoral tone with pulsating rhythmic drive. The final movement is a brilliant, breathless *Presto*, full of intricate semiquavers and virtuoso flourishes.

On the surface, the First Partita in B minor, BWV1002 seems the most uncomplicated and reserved of the three partitas. Each of its four standard suite movements has its own 'Double' – a variation of the original. The first movement is an *Allemande* characterised by disjunct lines and wide leaps, followed by a simpler *Double* in which the work's hidden depths begin to emerge in writing tinged with a wistful, bittersweet quality. This tone is temporarily brushed away by the breezy *Corrente* and its *Double*, followed by the movement at the heart of the Partita, the noble and elegant *Sarabande*. In the final movement, a *Bourrée*, Bach makes extensive use of sequences to drive the music forwards.

As with every genre he touched, Bach took an existing concept far beyond what had hitherto been achieved, and in the Partita No 2 in D minor, BWV1004 he produced something particularly remarkable: a final *Chaconne* that is longer than all the preceding movements put together. Such is the audacity of Bach's violin writing in this movement that it has become a stand-alone work, a monolithic edifice not only of solo violin repertoire, but also in endless transcriptions for other instruments.

A *chaconne*, in common with a *passacaglia*, is a type of ever-extendable variation form made up of a short repeating idea. In a *chaconne* this is restricted to the bass line, whereas in a *passacaglia* the recurring theme may be used in other parts of the

texture. During Bach's lifetime there were several national *chaconne* styles across Europe, beginning in Spain and Italy and extending to Germany, France and England. A hybrid style of *chaconne* combines aspects of these different traditions, and it was this that Bach adopted – and pushed to its limits – in this piece. He also enhanced the movement's formal coherence with an over-arching tripartite structure, the central section of which is articulated by a radiant turn to the major.

The recurrent motif of Bach's *Chaconne* is beguilingly simple: a descending theme that goes D–C–B–flat–A. Yet Bach's elaboration of this idea embraces techniques from widely spaced arpeggiated chords to dexterous, quicksilver passagework. This complexity amounts to much more than a dazzling display of technique: at the *Chaconne's* heart is an intense, even desolate emotional language.

Brahms, writing to Clara Schumann, summed it up: 'On one staff, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.' It was something of which he had first-hand knowledge, reworking the *Chaconne* for piano left-hand alone. Around a century later, on composing his *Sequenza VIII* for solo violin (1976), Luciano Berio wrote that it became, 'inevitably, a homage to that high-point of music, the *Chaconne* of the Partita in D minor by Johann Sebastian Bach, in which violin techniques of the past, present and future coexist.'

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## Leonidas Kavakos

Leonidas Kavakos is recognised across the world as a violinist and artist of rare quality. He works regularly with leading orchestras and conductors and appears as a recitalist in the world's most esteemed recital venues and festivals.

He has developed close relationships with major orchestras such as the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic orchestras, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and Leipzig Gewandhausorchester. He also works closely with the Dresden Staatskapelle, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic and Budapest Festival Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala.

In recent years, he has also developed a strong profile as a conductor, appearing with the Israel and New York Philharmonic, the Dallas, Danish National, Houston and Vienna Symphony orchestras, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Maggio Musicale Fiorentino and Filarmonica Teatro La Fenice.

This season's highlights include performing at the opening gala concert of Carnegie Hall with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Riccardo Muti and appearances with the Bergen, Boston, San Francisco and Vienna Symphony orchestras, Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, Berlin Staatskapelle and NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra. As a conductor he makes his debut with the Philharmonia Orchestra, as well as the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. He tours with regular recital partners Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma to concert halls across Europe and the US, and returns to China for a series of recitals and performances with the China Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony orchestras. He performs Bach's Partitas and Sonatas across Europe and Asia, following the release of his critically acclaimed album *Bach: Sei Solo* in 2022.

He is an exclusive Sony Classical artist. Recent additions to his prize-winning discography include three albums of Beethoven symphonies in trio arrangements with Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma and Bach concertos with the Apollon Ensemble.

Leonidas Kavakos was born and brought up in a musical family in Athens, a city where he curates an annual violin and chamber-music masterclass, attracting violinists and ensembles from all over the world.

He plays the 'Willemotte' Stradivarius violin of 1734.

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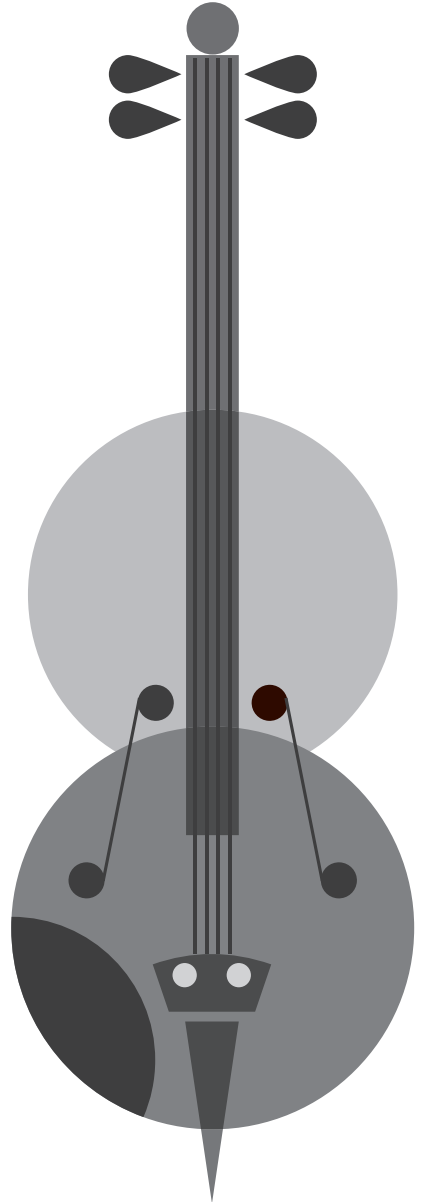
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