



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Stirring Stills

Bach for Viola

Esther Apituley



SUPER AUDIO CD

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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

[1] Adagio from Sonata for Solo Violin no. 1	4:41
[2] Prelude from Suite for Solo Cello no. 4	4:49
[3] Sarabande from Suite for Solo Cello no. 4	4:21
[4] Prelude from Suite for Solo Cello no. 6	5:12
[5] Andante from Sonata for Violin no. 2	6:05
[6] Sarabande from Suite for Solo Cello no. 3	4:43
[7] Sarabande from Partita for Solo Violin no. 2	5:21
[8] Gigue from Partita for Solo Violin no. 2	3:41
[9] Sarabande from Suite for Solo Cello no. 5	4:38
[10] Chaconne from Partita for Solo Violin no. 2	16:56

total time 60:35

Dear Mr. Bach,

You don't know me, but I've known you for most of my life. I play the viola and I'm addicted to the sound of the viola and to classical music. Addicted to classical music because there are no boundaries, one's imagination is free and and one can travel to worlds that no-one even knows exist.

For a long time, it's been my heart's desire to record on the viola the notoriously monumental closing movement of the *Second Partita* you wrote for solo violin – the *Chaconne*. After bowing my way through thousands of miles of notes, I've finally worked up the courage to record the piece.

It seems you wrote the *Chaconne* after returning home from a long and exhausting journey on foot to discover that your beloved wife had passed away in your absence. A composition of fifteen minutes in length for a single instrument, offering great solace but making huge demands on the performer. A composition full of power and mystery. 32 variations in mood, written above a bass line of four measures. An imposing achievement in composition, Mr. Bach!

But you also played the viola, and there are even some who say it was your favourite instrument. So why did you never write anything for solo viola? It's a mystery to me. The viola can throb like a cello and sparkle like a violin. A viola bridges the sound worlds of both those instruments – what more could you ask for?

There are lots of questions and 'theories' about how your work should be interpreted. How are we supposed to play your music, when you left so few indications on the page? Also, there's never just one single 'good' way to play it. I actually really like the fact that there are so few indications on the music, as this lets your music generate its own impulsive response at the point when you start to play it.

I embarked on my confrontation with your mystery over there, in that little chapel looking out over the Pyrenees, and I tried to record what I felt at that exact point in terms of timing, vibrato and bowing. Your notes were the only markers I had to keep myself on course. Your music has its own heartbeat, and it can speed up or slow down all of a sudden. I could take my time between your notes, while at other times I'd just press on. This freedom is a complex thing. If everything is good, then nothing is wrong. This is exactly why it's such a delicate piece to record. But I went on and did it – I recorded your notes – all on my own in that little chapel. And without even a recording technician. This meant I could record whenever I wanted to. Even if it was in the middle of the night. To me, this was the only way to reach the essence of how I wanted to record your music. With complete freedom.



So much has already been written about you. Joshua Bell says “The *Chaconne* is not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It’s a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect.”

And Brahms wrote this, in a letter to Clara Schumann: “On one stave, 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.”

And I would like to add to this “The *Chaconne* tells us more of the mystery of life than any number of books could.”

Respectfully yours,

Esther Apituley (Amsterdam 2016)

PS: in numerical symbolism, your name is equivalent to 14.
My name is coincidentally 14 letters long!

Apituley meets Bach / Esther meets Johann

The interview takes place while Esther Apituley is hard at work, preparing what she herself describes as her classical music in the theatre – “Bach & Bleach” – about a violinist and a cleaning lady, in which she attempts to bring the music of Johann Sebastian Bach to a wider public. This production revolves around the *Chaconne* from the *Second Partita* for solo violin, what Apituley describes as a ‘monumental’ work.

Johan van Markesteijn: Your two previous CDs, ‘Violent Viola’ and ‘Viola Viola’, (issued by Challenge Classics as CC 72156 and CC 72165) were both high profile: unusual programming that raised quite a few eyebrows. How do they compare with what you’re programming just now? How did you get the idea of doing something with the *Chaconne*? After all, it was written for the violin, not the viola.

Esther Apituley: Bach – himself a viola player – wrote the *Chaconne* for solo violin. But I enjoy a challenge and really wanted to play the piece on the viola. I feel it’s even more attractive on the viola and there are not many recordings of the *Chaconne* on viola.

The first four measures (played a fifth lower on the viola!) create a completely different ambience than you’d hear on the violin. There’s something monumental going on. Every note has a certain weight, like running a marathon in hiking boots, because of the thicker strings that demand a different attack. I also play the piece slower than a violinist would, which emphasises the work’s *gravitas*.

The other movements that precede the *Chaconne* I also play rather slow – *Preludes*, an *Andante* and *Sarabandes*. The darker sounds, the deeper tones, obstinate and melancholy, reach down into the depths of your soul. An approach to the mystery of the *Chaconne*.

Johan van Markesteijn: Why this *Chaconne*?

Esther Apituley: The whole story behind the work’s composition is quite special. Bach returned home after four months of travelling to discover that his wife had passed away. He was only kept going by his faith and his large family. He wrote the *Chaconne* to give some expression to his grief. It was a source of solace to him. This is how I think of it: the composer’s bewilderment and grief at the death of his wife mellow into acceptance and understanding, followed by acceptance and hope, until finally we see faith and the will to keep on living. All of these elements can be perceived in the *Chaconne*. The other works on this recording all have to do with some aspect of ‘longing’, and everything coalesces in the final work on the CD, the *Chaconne*. This also explains the sequence of the works on the CD.

Johan van Markesteijn: Your previous productions have been unusual, but this one is even more so because you recorded all of the works in a very special place. Can you tell us about this?

Esther Apituley: (laughing) Yes, it certainly was special. For my recording venue I found a 12th century chapel, called Sant Bartomeu de Torres, in northern Spain. It has a really special acoustic, and lovely views out across the Pyrenees. Because the pieces I'd chosen are so delicate, I decided that I'd make the recordings for this CD entirely on my own, without a technician or a sound engineer. (If only I'd known how that would work out!)

The technician set everything up and explained to me how everything worked and how to deal with it. This let me record any time I wanted, day or night, whenever the mood struck me as being right. It was a fantastic experience, offering unique possibilities and complete freedom. This great degree of freedom meant that I was really vulnerable, and it was a battle to do this all alone. The final results are now on my new CD. It was a fabulous experience and I'm thrilled to have been able to achieve this.

Johan van Markesteijn: We started off with your "classical music in the theatre", a special project with its genesis in your latest CD. The *Chaconne* is also a central element here, but in a completely different setting. Bach's music played on harmonica, cello, violin, piano, double bass and percussion, as well as the viola. What do you want to achieve with your projects?

Esther Apituley: I bring together different styles and disciplines. I find it a challenge to make the musicians I play with and the audience listen more closely.

Bach still has an unfathomable quality. As a musician, I think I've understood the heart of the composition, but every time I play it I make a new discovery. It really seems as if there's a deeper layer behind Bach's notes. You can't see it but you can definitely feel it.

I hope that more people will come to value the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, even those who have nothing at all in common with classical music as a whole. If people enjoy my performances and appreciate the music of Bach, I'll have achieved my objective!

Interview by Johan van Markesteijn, Amsterdam, February 2016

Translation: Bruce Gordon/Muse Translations



Esther Apituley was born in Amsterdam. She started playing the violin at the age of twelve and quickly moved on to the viola. She graduated from the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam, having been taught by Mischa Geller, and went on to study with Bruno Giuranna at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin.

Esther Apituley was one of the instigators behind the Microkosmos project, to music by Béla Bartók, a performance with visual elements by Jeroen Henneman. The NPS broadcast Microkosmos as a series. She also presented the TV programme 'Reiziger in Muziek' (Traveller in music) in 2000.

Esther Apituley has appeared as a soloist with ensembles including the Dutch National Ballet Orchestra, North Holland Philharmonic, Metropole Orchestra and the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra. She has performed viola concertos by Berlioz, Bartok and Chiel Meijering, Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* and *Lachrymae* by Britten.

Apituley also makes regular international solo appearances in Japan, Spain, Germany, the Czech Republic and elsewhere. In four summers from 2007 onwards, she gave concerts and masterclasses at the International Music Festival in Campos do Jordao, Brazil.

Esther Apituley is now well known for her quite unique way of presenting concerts. For instance, her appearances with the Amsterdam Viola Quartet also represent a particular break from tradition. The Quartet's repertoire is wide-ranging, from baroque through classical to modern and close harmony.

They have now had considerable success at home and abroad, including appearances in Morocco, the Czech Republic, Austria and Cyprus, and a lengthier tour of Indonesia in 2010. The Amsterdam Viola Quartet is also regularly joined by guest artistes, such as the tap dancer Peter Kuit, actor Hans Dagelet, whistler Geert Chatrou or mime artist Rob van Reijn. The Quartet has now given thirty or so concerts with actors Hans Dagelet and Lizzy Timmers, in "De Hydropathen".

Her first CD, 'Violent Viola', appeared in 2005 and was followed in 2007 by 'Viola Voila', to very warm reviews in all the newspapers.

Esther Apituley was appointed artistic director of the ViolaViola Foundation in 2009. This Foundation is devoted to promoting the viola, and also to encouraging new audiences, partly through the medium of the Viola Festival. After successful runs in 2012 and 2014, the third edition of the festival – entitled 'Esther Apituley's Locomotive' – will be held in 2016. With Bach & Bleach Apituley performs at festivals in the Netherlands and abroad.

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Sena

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www.challengerecords.com / www.estherapituley.nl / www.violaviola.nl

