

Yo-Yo Ma / Chris Thile / Edgar Meyer

Bach Trios



Trio Sonata No. 6 in G Major, **BWV 530**

1. I. Vivace 3:12

2. II. Lento 6:08

3. III. Allegro 2:59

4. Prelude No. 19 in A Major *from* The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, **BWV 864** 1:36

5. Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, **BWV 645** 4:43

6. Fugue No. 20 in A Minor *from* The Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, **BWV 889** 1:34

7. Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ, **BWV 639** 2:29

8. Prelude No. 18 in E Minor, **BWV 548** 5:41

9. Fugue No. 18 in E Minor, **BWV 548** 6:11

10. Passepied *from* Keyboard Partita No. 5 in G Major, **BWV 829** 2:04

11. Kommst du nun, Jesu, vom Himmel herunter, **BWV 650** 2:55

12. Contrapunctus XIII: Rectus *from* The Art of the Fugue, **BWV 1080** 2:20

13. Contrapunctus XIII: Inversus *from* The Art of the Fugue, **BWV 1080** 2:22

14. Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott, **BWV 721** 4:11

Sonata for Viola da Gamba No. 3 in G Minor, **BWV 1029**

15. I. Vivace 4:54

16. II. Adagio 4:18

17. III. Allegro 3:15

Yo-Yo Ma, *cello*

Chris Thile, *mandolin, guitar (Erbarm dich mein...)*

Edgar Meyer, *bass*

All works composed by Johann Sebastian Bach

Arranged by Yo-Yo Ma, Chris Thile, and Edgar Meyer; published by Sound Postings Music (ASCAP), Chris Thile Music admin. by Kobalt Songs Music Publishing (ASCAP), Eggbert Music admin. by Hendon Music (BMI)





Put any random combination of musicians in a room together, and no matter their instruments, histories, personalities, it's more than likely that they'll find common ground playing Bach.

This is partly because Bach addressed so many musical contexts over the course of his lifetime. Though he is revered as a protean creator and obsessive craftsman, he was also equal parts humble artisan and compulsive speed-writer. Suffering was not yet a requirement for 18th century artists; in Bach's music, one senses instead a musician eager to make himself as useful as possible, to find every outlet for his immense skill and energy.

In a musician's repertoire, therefore, Bach is both a foundation and a pinnacle. You start your training with something from the Notebooks for Anna Magdalena, a two-part invention or simple prelude—music that teaches you not just how to play, but how to listen to harmony, counterpoint, voice-leading, and form. And you gradually ascend to the heights of instrumental and compositional virtuosity—the *Goldberg Variations*, the D-minor Chaconne, *The Art of the Fugue*.

In these epic pieces, the performer necessarily channels the composer through a kind of individual heroism. But at the core, Bach was an intensely collaborative musician. Part of the utility of his music is its protean adaptability to any number of instrumental combinations; the labor of performing is divided easily into voices or parts, each a satisfying narrative thread on its own. The more diverse the voices, the more it becomes possible to tease out the movement of these separate lines. There's always something interesting happening, no matter which frequency you decide to listen to at a given moment. The act of hearing the mercurial A-minor fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book II becomes a kind of auditory tennis match, as subjects and sequences volley among players at warp speed.

One of the joys here is the extraordinary chamber group, comprised of three virtuosi: Chris Thile, Yo-Yo Ma, and Edgar Meyer. Mandolin, cello, and double bass are, at face value, an unlikely instrumental combination, but this is an obviously harmonious set of personalities and musical predilections. Indeed, the history of collaboration between these three is long and wide-ranging; they first found themselves playing Bach together as encores while touring in support of the *Goat Rodeo Sessions* in 2012.

There is a huge range of possibility in Bach interpretation, from the revisionist, almost authorial approach (Busoni or Glenn Gould) to the scholarly and historically informed (epitomized by John Eliot Gardiner). There's much to be gained from both schools, and, wisely, the Ma/Thile/Meyer trio finds its voice somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Here, drawn in by the directness of the music itself, it's entirely possible to lose oneself for long stretches, just listening.

The trio sonatas bookending the album are straightforward and direct, with all the athletic rhythmic snap of the best period-instrumentalists. In fact, through some sleight-of-hand sonic mimicry, it sounds remarkably Baroque. Chris Thile's mandolin takes on the personae of harpsichord, lute, or even something close to a piano; Yo-Yo

Ma's cello, a whole chorus of human voices and a few centuries of stylistic string-playing besides. Other moments, though, are unmistakable musical signatures. The rollicking arpeggios in *Kommst du nun, Jesu*, jaunty with the barest hint of swing, could only be Mr. Thile; the chorale tune answering it, complete in its shape and phrasing, characteristically Mr. Ma. Edgar Meyer's bass, vaulting far above the instrument's typical continuo register, gives a vigorous rhythmic punch to the opening subject of the A-minor Fugue.

This unique and shifting orchestration brings an unexpected transparency to some familiar music. Though one thinks of cello and bass as similarly dark-hued instruments, here they tend to take opposite roles in the three-part harmony, with the cello melody soaring above. The mandolin, so idiomatically suited to moving, contrapuntal lines, keeps the pulse while maintaining a crystalline clarity. Similarly, when the mandolin takes the highest voice, as in the bustling Sonata for Viola da Gamba, its short reverberation moves aside quickly, allowing the ear to parse the maze of interchanges and switchbacks between cello and bass. Even more complex is the massive E-minor Prelude and Fugue, originally an organ piece. Far from making things simpler, dividing the soloist's labor among three creates an opportunity to show off the trio's virtuosity. The central section of the fugue is transformed into an over-the-top chase scene, cello pouncing on the mandolin's tail in endless barrages of running notes. This technique, called *hocket*, in which musicians interrupt each other at just the right moment to form a continuous musical line, is found in everything from central African Pygmy music to the work of the contemporary Dutch composer Louis Andriessen.

Not everything is quite so rough-and-tumble. Moments of suspended, almost shocking harmonic beauty abound, especially in the chorale-derived works. In the second phrase of *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, the continuo (bass accompaniment) stubbornly clings to the same note two beats longer than the ear expects—interrupting long enough that the arc of the vocal line (here a plangent and nearly vibrato-less cello) turns into a sequence of unstable, dissonant intervals on its downward path, sounding simultaneously inevitable and lost.

The organ chorale *Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott* also features the cello as vocalist, though it is the uncharacteristically stark accompaniment that stands out—plucked bass, with Thile now joining on guitar, strumming a constant eighth-note pulse. The complete absence of contrapuntal activity draws attention to a sly harmonic ambiguity: beginning seemingly in B minor, constantly feinting at D major, but never quite sticking the landing. The final phrase ends on B minor's dominant, F sharp, as if to say, "Again." Light and shade give way to each other in an endless cycle.

Bach's music gives the player a sense of making something tangible, conjuring the physical out of the abstraction of a fugue or chorale. A musical score is, of course, just a set of instructions—the steps to take in construction, with little specified about the finished product. In Bach's catalogue, we have an entire city in plans, its cathedral ringing with organ preludes, its back rooms full of chamber music. That everyone has access to this trove—and can, with a little experience, will these same creations into being—is one of the most profoundly democratic facts I know of, and stands as a great equalizer in an unequal world.

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