

Saxophone

Bach for Saxophone



3 Partitas

arranged by
Raaf Hekkema

ED 22061

 SCHOTT



Saxophone

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685 – 1750

Bach for Saxophone

Bach für Saxophon

3 Partitas for Saxophone solo

3 Partiten für Saxophon solo

BWV 1002 / BWV 1004 / BWV 1006

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Bach's Partitas – Essential material for the saxophonist

Even before I entered conservatory to study the saxophone, it was clear there was one composer who stood head and shoulders above the rest: Johann Sebastian Bach. During my studies I used movements from the violin sonatas and partitas as etudes, and realized I could spend endless hours on them without getting bored – and that for someone who hated practicing. Only much later did I learn that scales and etudes are futile if one approaches them with aversion. I therefore thank my present finger technique to the fact that I listened with gusto to recordings by Bach specialists from the 1980s, and whose tone, phrasing and articulation I did my best to emulate on my own instrument.

Thanks to my life-long inspiration *Calefax Reed Quintet* I met my 'heroes of the authentic movement' in the flesh. Frans Brüggen, the brothers Barthold and Sigiswald Kuijken, the musicologist Kees van Houten, the string players Vera Beths, Anner Bijlsma, and later, Jan-Willem de Vriend. They were all happy to coach us on Bach, Mozart and Schubert. None one of them had (or at least expressed) misgivings about us performing 'their' music on modern instruments, not even the saxophone.

Meanwhile I had found another way to delve into Bach, namely by arranging his music for our quintet. Arranging begins with a thorough study of the notes and the construction of the musical material as well as an awareness of the circumstances surrounding the music's origins, so I read books on Bach and his time, and musicological accounts of those of his works I was tackling. Soon enough I caught on that Bach's music did not just appear out of thin air. If I were to understand his work on a deeper level, I would have to bone up on the era that preceded him, the seventeenth century, and then on the eras before that. *Calefax*, as usual, kept its end up, and from the very beginning we had the music of De Machaut, Josquin, Ockeghem, Byrd, Gesualdo, Monteverdi and a smattering of more obscure composers on our music stands. With each new work to be rehearsed, we read about it, listened to recordings of respected performers and tapped the knowledge of specialized teachers.

One of them was Paul Van Nevel, who enthusiastically invited us to participate in concerts given by his *Huelgas Ensemble* at several early music festivals, such as in Saintes and at the Festival of Flanders. There I stood with my saxophone, a piece of musical farm machinery, amid the pommers, zinks and theorbos. We had a similar experience at the Early Music Festival Utrecht, where the artistic director Jan Nuchelmans (*Calefax* fan from day one) managed to smuggle us onto the programme. Of course it goes without saying that there are countless musicians whose Bach and early music expertise far exceeds my own, but as a saxophonist I feel quite privileged to be in such company.

Bach was a permanent feature of my music stand. As a good start to the day, to explore the finesses of articulation, to practice playing long phrases – even during the time I was immersed in the Paganini caprices, which eventually led to the CD *Paganini Caprices for Saxophone* (MDG 619 1379-2) and the accompanying printed music (*Paganini for Saxophone*, Schott ED 20559). For years *Calefax* had often played *Die Kunst der Fuge*, and even more often the *Goldberg Variations*, excerpts from *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* and *Das Musikalische Opfer*, a few organ works and the *Vom Himmel hoch* variations. The Paganini experience had honed my proficiency in arranging violin music for saxophone, as well as bolstering a sense of security in what long used to be a rather unsure finger technique.

In 2012 I recorded, purely for personal use, all the Bach solo arrangements I had made up until then, including the first four movements of the second partita. After listening to them I realized that my self-imposed decree to keep my hands off the chaconne from that partita, suddenly no longer seemed etched in stone. So I took a stab at producing a convincing version of it. Following my Paganini formula, I first made an 'analytical' version: one that would do justice to the construction of the music, disregarding all thoughts of what might be fun to play. An important step, because otherwise you end up taking the instrumental route too soon.

Bach's music is implicitly polyphonic: a melody usually contains more than one voice, played in turn and together forming the melodic curve as a whole. The register and relationship between the voices largely determine the buildup of tension in the music. This applies to nearly all of Bach's music, but in the violin works he often uses multiple strings simultaneously to explicitly underscore the polyphony. So first I had to find a credible solution for the issue of polyphony. After that the other me would get his chance: the saxophone player who had free rein to determine what sounded good and, perhaps more importantly, where the advantages of the saxophone over the violin (arpeggios, for instance, are easier to play on the saxophone) could be put to good use. In this inner collaboration, the analyst constantly had the upper hand, for we were talking about a meticulously-constructed work by the greatest musical architect ever.

The resulting version satisfied both my identities: the analyst and the instrumentalist. With a sense of liberation I set to work on the remaining movements of the *partitas*, which went with hardly a hitch. Of course, now – nearly a year after completing the work – not one of the nineteen movements is the same. This is one of the great benefits of arranging for your own instrument: you are free to tinker with the notes whenever and however it suits you.

On performing Bach

Playing Bach is good for almost everything: for instrumental technique, for acquiring good taste in musical composition, for understanding developments in music history, for the sake of experiencing art and as meditation. I believe it is good for your health. But perhaps when preparing a *performance* of this music one may want to take a few things into account.

- Bach wrote his music for musicians trained in the tradition of their era. Not all of the information needed for a decent performance can be found in the printed notation alone. Listening to historically informed performers helps, as well as reading about the style of the time and how to handle the rhythms and ornaments.
- These pieces can be played on all saxophones, but I favor the soprano saxophone for its light timbre, articulation and phrasing. For my cd recording I used soprano and for variation I played Partita III on alto, thereby using an old Buescher mouthpiece (1920s) with a very small tip opening, again to facilitate precision in articulation.

Raaf Hekkema

The recording of this Bach *Partitas* will be released simultaneously with this publication by *Challenge Classics* (CC 72648). See www.challengerecords.com.