

## **From Biber to Bach: An Artistic Exploration of Baroque Violin Sonatas**

**Program notes written by ©Sarah Kiel, Spring 2025.**

When putting together this recital program of all 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>-century violin sonatas, I wanted to cover a wide range of periods and styles that represent what I have learned during my time as a Historical Performance Master's student at Longy. These five works by Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, Isabella Leonarda, Pietro Locatelli, Jean-Féry Rebel, and J.S. Bach represent music of the following periods: 17<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemia, 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany.

Since one of my main interests outside of music is fine art, I also created Powerpoint slides showcasing photos of fine and decorative arts from the time periods and geographical locations of each of the pieces on my program. I took many of these photos myself during my frequent trips to the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Harvard University Art Museum. These photos illustrate the varied art and culture throughout Europe during the Baroque musical era, and I hope that they create an immersive experience for you as you listen to this beautiful music. I have also included a handout listing the titles and artists of the artwork shown on each slide, in case you would like to look up any of these works again or feel inspired to look for them on your next trip to the MFA or Harvard University Art Museum!

**Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber's (1644-1704) Passacaglia in G Minor for Solo Violin** is considered to be one of the most important solo violin works written before the Bach Chaconne. Biber lived in an area known as Bohemia, which would later become the Czech Republic in 1993. At that time, Bohemia was ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was under Roman Catholic rule. Biber was one of the earliest composers to write virtuosic violin repertoire. One of his most famous works is a collection of violin sonatas called the Mystery Sonatas, or Rosary Sonatas, which he wrote around 1674 but sadly was not published until 1905. It is a collection of 16 works, the first 15 of which are sonatas for violin and continuo representing the 15 Mysteries of the Rosary. This Passacaglia is the final work in the collection and is the only unaccompanied work. Interestingly, it is also one of the only works in this collection that does not use scordatura tuning – a technique in which the violin strings are tuned to different intervals besides the standard perfect fifths tuning. This Passacaglia may be connected to the Feast for the Guardian Angel, since it uses the same baseline as a hymn to the Guardian Angel. It is a series of variations on a repeated four-note ground bass, which is also a passacaglia dance. The baseline is a descending minor tetrachord (G-F-Eb-D), which was commonly used for laments in Baroque music.

**Isabella Leonarda's (1620-1704) Sonata Duodecima a Violino Solo**, meaning "Twelfth" Sonata, is the final work in her collection of trio sonatas and is her only known solo sonata. Leonarda was born to a prominent family in Novara, Italy and entered an Ursuline convent at age 16, where she remained for the rest of her life. Leonarda may have studied with Gasparo Casati, *maestro di cappella* of the Novara Cathedral, around the time she entered the convent. Although Leonarda likely began composing in her younger years, almost all of her 200 works were published between 1670 (at age 50) and 1700 (4 years before her death at age 84). Part of the reason for this may have been because Leonarda only composed music during her "rest" periods so as not to neglect her other duties, as she explains in the dedications to one of her publications. Leonarda was well-regarded in Novara but little known elsewhere. There is also no mention of her being a singer or instrumentalist, but I personally think that she must have had some knowledge of violin playing to be able to write so idiomatically for the violin. Her collection of trio sonatas is likely the first collection of instrumental sonatas published by a woman. In terms of structure, this sonata is more like early Italian Baroque sonatas instead of the four-movement *sonata da chiesa* ("church sonata") structure developed by Corelli. This Sonata is divided into 7 sections. The slow sections are very free and recitative-like and allow room for the performer to add

ornamentation and short cadenzas. The fast sections are either in duple meter with imitation between the violin and continuo parts or are in triple meter and dance-like with limited imitation between the parts.

**Pietro Locatelli's (1695-1764) Sonata da Camera No. 2 in F Major** is the most virtuosic violin work on this program. Locatelli grew up in Bergamo, Italy and later studied in Rome, most likely under Antonio Montanari or Giuseppe Valentini. Between 1723-1728, Locatelli traveled throughout Italy and Germany, visiting the cities of Mantua, Venice, Munich, Dresden, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Kassel. Most of his compositions were written during this period, although they were published later in Amsterdam. Strangely, although his performances made him famous, no known sources describe his virtuosity. Locatelli moved to Amsterdam in 1729, where he remained for the rest of his life. His most famous works were written to be performed by himself as a virtuoso. His *capricci*, though intended for study instead of public performance, likely inspired Paganini's 24 Caprices. This *sonata da camera* (chamber sonata) is in three movements, as opposed to the four-movement *sonata da chiesa* developed by Corelli. The first movement Andante is very similar to Corelli's opening slow movements, with extensive written-out ornamentation in the violin part. The second movement Allegro is in ternary form with a contrasting Vivace middle section. The Allegro sections feature double thirds throughout the violin part and are reminiscent of music featuring hunting horns. The Vivace section is in the parallel minor and is more lyrical and slightly melodramatic. The third movement Vivace is a set of variations on an "aria" and features up-bow staccato: a virtuosic technique that is made easier by playing with an early-model short Baroque bow!

**Jean-Féry Rebel's (1666-1747) Violin Sonata No. 8 in D Minor** is very typical of French violin sonatas. Rebel began his musical career as a child violin prodigy. He later studied under the famous Jean-Batiste Lully and became a violinist in Louis XIV's renowned orchestra *Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi* (The 24 Violins of the King). In 1726, Rebel received the prestigious title of "Chamber Composer to the King". Today, Rebel is most famous for his instrumental work *Les Éléments* (The Elements), which describes the creation of the world. The first movement, "Chaos," opens with a dissonant chord that uses all the notes of the D harmonic minor scale! Rebel was also one of the first French Baroque composers to write sonatas in the Italian style, although this sonata is more typically French. The first movement is a Grave written in the French-overture style that acts as a prelude to the following movement. The second movement is a Courante (note the French spelling), a moderately fast dance in triple meter. The third movement is a Rondeau, a French dance with a refrain that repeats after each couplet. In this particular Rondeau, two of the couplets feature virtuosic sixteenth notes, first in the violin and then in the continuo part, which gives a bit of Italian flair to an otherwise very French sonata.

**J.S. Bach's (1685-1750) Sonata No. 5 in F Minor for Violin & Harpsichord** is my favorite work on this program and is, in my opinion, the most profound and emotional. Bach composed his Six Sonatas for Violin & Harpsichord between 1720-1723 during his final years in Köthen, before he moved to Leipzig. Unlike many violin sonatas of this period where the continuo part is purely accompaniment, the violin and harpsichord are equal partners in these works. They are composed like trio sonatas, with the violin and right-hand of the keyboard having the two equally difficult upper parts and the left-hand of the keyboard usually playing the baseline. There is also no typical written figured bass in the left-hand keyboard part but instead a fully written-out harpsichord part by Bach, which would be more typical in the Classical-era. This sonata follows the typical four-movement *sonata da chiesa* structure of slow-fast-slow-fast. All the movements in this sonata are intense and very unusual. The very emotional first movement Largo defies expectation by giving the melody primarily to the harpsichord, which the violin answers in fragments until it finally fully enters with the melody. The second movement Allegro is structured like a *concerto allegro* with virtuosic violin and harpsichord parts that trade back-and-forth

throughout the movement. The third movement Adagio is mysterious and haunting, with beautiful arpeggios in the harpsichord part and two-voice eighth note chords in the violin part that would sound like a hymn if the chords were sustained. Harmonically, it travels to unusual keys and finally ends in the relative Ab Major. The fourth movement Vivace is a breathless and very chromatic fugue without any repeats, with a chromatic rising line for its subject introduced by the violin.