

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TRAILBLAZERS, INNOVATORS, AND FUTURISTS:  
350 YEARS OF THE SOLO VIOLIN

Dissertation directed by: Professor David Salness, School of Music

The purpose of this dissertation is to outline a three-concert performance project, entitled *Trailblazers, Innovators, and Futurists*, by Christopher Whitley that examines the rich and varied repertoire of the solo violin from the seventeenth century to the present. Each concert program centers on a specific theme or topic related to the history of the solo violin repertoire.

This dissertation seeks to accomplish three main objectives. The first is to demonstrate specific thematic, compositional, and artistic through lines that have their foundations in the Baroque period and continue to exist in contemporary works for violin. The second is to present three highly curated and immersive concert experiences that include multimedia, dramatic lighting, and a variety of performance practices. The third objective is to draw historical connections concerning the role of technology in the development of violin repertory, along with the role of the composer-performer in violin literature. Finally, this project will offer a contemporary approach to the programming and performance of Western art music that reflects on the potential impact of technological integration and creative plurality within the field. Each performance

features four works for solo violin, two of which include an element of technology (playback track, live processing, accompanying visuals, etc.). Each performance is dedicated to a single, overarching thematic focus that links each work and includes a demonstrated historical example of a “trailblazer,” “innovator,” and “futurist.” Finally, each program features one of my own original compositions created for each concert.

TRAILBLAZERS, INNOVATORS, AND FUTURISTS:  
350 YEARS OF THE SOLO VIOLIN

by

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## PREFACE

*Trailblazers, Innovators, and Futurists* is a performance project that brings together a number of my personal interests as a violinist, curator, and composer. As a violinist primarily dedicated to chamber music, this project offered me the opportunity to embrace the freedom and challenge of solo repertoire. These concerts were also a step towards building a personal solo repertory that I can return to in years to come, a body of repertoire that inspires my creative passion and artistic curiosity and challenges my abilities on the violin. This project offered a unique curatorial opportunity to experiment with multimedia performance and to draw connections between repertoire inspired by a variety of musical vernaculars. Including my own compositions and visual art alongside works by Johann Sebastian Bach and Kaija Saariaho felt like a bold step towards legitimizing my compositional practice, adding another level of vulnerability and risk to the project.

The history of the solo violin repertoire is rich and varied. There are large swathes of representative repertoire not featured on these programs. Rather than attempt a thorough survey of solo violin repertoire I chose to explore three musical concepts that I found to be prevalent across the centuries and to demonstrate these ideas through repertoire choices guided by personal aesthetic preference.

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to thank Prof. David Salness for his unflappable support during the development and execution of this project. This project is dedicated to my wife Kumiko who has been my number one fan for over a decade. I would not be the musician, artist, or person I am without her.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Trailblazers, Innovators, and Futurists* is a three-part performance project that examines the rich and varied repertoire of the solo violin from the seventeenth century to the present. The project consists of three recitals, with each recital program examining one specific compositional, formal, or thematic element that has appeared in the solo violin repertoire over the course of its history.

Each concert will feature four works for solo violin, three of which will serve as examples of a musical “trailblazer,” “innovator,” and “futurist.” I define “trailblazer” as a precursor or contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach. I use “innovator” as a composer who innovated upon the work of those early Baroque composers. Finally, I defined “futurist” as a composer who uses technology to further the work of the “trailblazer” and “innovator.” The final work on each program will be one of my own original compositions for violin and electronics inspired by the overarching theme of each concert.

The first program, *CYCLES*, explores the use of cyclical forms, repetitive motifs, and musical loops. The second program, *A CHORUS OF ONE*, examines polyphony and counterpoint in the solo violin repertoire. The final program, *BODIES IN MOTION*, explores the influence of dance forms and styles on the history of the violin repertoire.

## *CYCLES*

This concert program examines various applications of cyclical composition on the formal, phrase, and motivic level. The repertoire draws on compositional traditions and techniques established in the Baroque era, as well as methods popularized by twentieth century American minimalist composers.

### **Christopher Whitley—Selections from *Solos* (2018, rev. 2022)**

*Solos* is a collection of pieces for violin and electronics that I composed in 2018. It formed the basis of an album which was released in 2019 through the UK-based label Fluid Audio.

*Solos* began as a series of improvised loops recorded and overdubbed in Ableton Live, a digital music production program. These small fragments of overdubbed violin were then subjected to a variety of digital effects, with a particular emphasis on reverb, distortion, and overdrive.

I was interested in how much I could expand the sound of a single violin. In composing the pieces, I took particular inspiration from the heavy metal I loved as a teenager, along with the work of experimental noise and ambient artists like Christian Fennesz and Tim Hecker. I was curious to see how much noise tonal music could withstand before it lost its “beauty.” Each of the loops I created was firmly rooted in traditional harmony, leaning heavily into the “cinematic” character of string music. It turned out that I could subject the loops to an immense amount of overdrive, reverb, and distortion and the music would still retain its “beating heart.”

As I began to conceive of my dissertation project, I decided that this particular body of work would be the perfect fit for a program exploring cyclical musical forms. I chose three pieces to serve as interludes between the three other works featured on the program. Each of these short pieces demonstrates a slightly different processing approach, resulting in differing levels of audibility with regards to the original source loop. For this concert I paired each piece with an original video projection. The visuals, created with Max MSP's video-processing program Jitter, are based on a single short visual loop that, like the compositions they accompany, are subtly or dramatically transformed over the course of the work.

### **Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber—Passacaglia from the *Rosary Sonatas* (1674)**

H.I.F. Biber is in many ways a trailblazer, innovator, and futurist all at once. As a contemporary of Corelli, Biber was among the trailblazers of the seventeenth century violin repertoire.<sup>1</sup> In his imaginative use of double stops, bowing techniques, and *scordatura* (alternate tuning systems), Biber was a true innovator.<sup>2</sup> Biber's novel timbres and violinist techniques, not to mention the sheer virtuosity of his writing, paints Biber as a futurist in the context of seventeenth century violin repertoire. On this program Biber will serve as the "trailblazer." His Passacaglia is representative of cyclical Baroque forms, also seen in the chaconne and folia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David D. Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Boyden, *History of Violin Playing*, 226.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners* (Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2013), 103.

Biber's Passacaglia, the final piece in the cycle of *Rosary Sonatas*, is a set of variations on a simple descending bass line, adhering to Judy Tarling's definition of a passacaglia as "an extended movement in triple meter with variations over four-bar bass sequences."<sup>4</sup> But it is much more than that. In Biber's hands the Passacaglia is an emotional journey punctuated with movements of great sweetness and pathos alongside fiery virtuosity and improvisational flair. In the context of the *Rosary Sonatas*, a set of fifteen pieces for violin and continuo based on specific moments from the life of Jesus Christ, the Passacaglia is the only unaccompanied work and one of the longest pieces in the set. It is also one of only two pieces that uses standard tuning (E-A-D-G) rather than the *scordatura* found in the other sonatas. The convenience of standard tuning and the emotional breadth of the work has allowed the piece entry into the standard repertoire, making this one of Biber's most widely-performed works.

### **Kaija Saariaho—*Frises* (2011)**

Kaija Saariaho represents the "futurist" on this program. In *Frises*, Saariaho's innovative use of electronics creates an evocative sound world that has deep roots in the compositional forms of the Baroque era.

Saariaho's four movement work for violin and electronics takes direct inspiration from the cyclical forms of the Baroque era. The work was composed as a response to J.S. Bach's monumental Ciaccona at the request of violinist Richard Schmoucler. Saariaho's

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<sup>4</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 114.

piece was designed to directly follow Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor in concert, with its opening pitch emerging from the final D of the Ciaccona.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the four movements makes use of a particular variation form (carillon, passacaglia, ground bass, and chaconne), three of which have direct links to the Baroque era. Saariaho expands the sonic potential of the violin through the use of electronic processing, with each section featuring a unique electronic element that further illustrates the conceptual framework of the movement. The electronics consist of a variety of pre-recorded sounds and processing effects, including looping, delay, and transposition. Using a custom-designed program built in the computer software MaxMSP, the performer triggers the electronics at specifically notated points in the score.

*Frises* takes extra-musical inspiration from the works of French painter Odilon Redon and the Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher. The first, second, and fourth movements take their titles from three of Redon's painted friezes, decorative panels that Saariaho encountered during the composition of the work. Redon's friezes blur the lines between abstract, figurative, and impressionist painting, creating a hazy, dream-like landscape for the viewer. This combination of approaches can be heard in Saariaho's compositional language as she plays with timbre, texture, and motive. The influence of M.C. Escher can be heard in the off-kilter rhythmic drive of the third movement, *Pavage*.<sup>6</sup>

The first movement, *Frise jaune*, begins with a soft, sustained open D string note, echoing the final pitch of Bach's Ciaccona. This pitch is slowly transformed using a

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<sup>5</sup> Kaija Saariaho, "Frises," *Kaija Saariaho*, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://saariaho.org/works/frises/>.

<sup>6</sup> Saariaho, "Frises."

variety of harmonic trills and changes in timbre as the violinist is required to shift the bow from a normal contact point to the *sul ponticello* position (playing with the bow placed next to the bridge) on the bridge. What follows is a rhapsodic, quasi-improvisational prelude based around the held open D string, punctuated by electronically produced “carrilons” or, as Saariaho notates in the score, “clouds of chimes, layers of ostinatos...”<sup>7</sup> These chimes create dense, high frequency clusters that expand in chromatic richness as the violin departs more dramatically from the central pitch of D. The piece ends with a final shift down to the open G string, suggesting an extended V–I cadence that sets up the pitch center for the second movement.

The dream-like quality of the first movement reflects the swirling abstraction of Redon’s *Frise Jaune* (Yellow Frieze), an artwork that is largely occupied with swathes of bright yellow and punctuated by swirling floral images in soft lavenders and grays. The figures in the frieze suggest florals and branches from an alien world.

The final pitch of *Frise jaune* leads directly into the first notes of *Frise de fleurs*, which opens with a series of broken double-stop chords punctuated by silence. Each chord dissolves into the high overtone-rich timbre of *sul ponticello*. This series of opening chords represents a ground bass on which Saariaho constructs the movement. The chords gradually grow more harmonically dense with the addition of electronic tone clusters. The violin part increases in musical intensity, with dramatic motives interrupted by movements of sudden sweetness. In the second half of the movement the electronic chords are transformed into triplet ostinato figures, accompanying a delicate melody in

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<sup>7</sup> Kaija Saariaho, *Frises* (London: Chester Music Ltd., 2014), 2.

the violin. The movement ends with the return of the opening broken double stops, alternating in sounding point between *sul tasto* (over the fingerboard) and *sul ponticello*.

Odilon's *Frise de fleurs et baies* (Frieze of Flowers and Berries), one of the friezes that may have inspired the movement, is more clearly figurative than Odilon's *Frise Jaune*. As the title suggests, the frieze depicts a series of plants, branches, and berries alongside mildly surreal floral shapes. Set across a foggy background, the painting's blurred edges are echoed in Saariaho's use of harmony, motives, and figures that gradually crystallize over the course of the movement. It is music that comes into musical and emotional focus before dissolving into the background.

*Pavage* (Paving) is characterized by almost constant rhythmic drive, buoyed along by a variety of regular and irregular ostinato patterns in the electronics part. In this movement, the MaxMSP program creates small, repeated loops of musical fragments, from a single *pizzicato* pluck or an extended phrase, that accompany the violin throughout. These sonic processes create instances of cacophony, rhythmic instability, and rich harmonic combinations, as the violinist performs virtuosic running notes. The electronics cease only briefly, in the middle section of the movement, when the violinist is free to rhapsodize. Short, energetic slurred figures are interrupted by moments of sweetness. The electronics return for an expressive waltz-like section, with two delay effects creating live electronic counterpoint with the violin part. After a dramatic chord in the electronics the driving rhythms return and continue until the final notes, when the violinist and electronics both decay into silence.

The artistic inspiration for *Pavage* departs slightly from the work of Redon. While she was still inspired by the smooth, "paved" effect of an architectural frieze, here

Saariaho was drawn to the mathematical constructions of M.C. Escher; geometric forms that suggest “continual metamorphosis” rather than perfect symmetry.<sup>8</sup>

The final movement, *Frise grise*, is a sort of strange passaglia. The violinist performs a constant accompaniment of left-hand *pizzicato* triplets, while playing sorrowful melodic lines with the bow. The computer software transposes the violin down a semitone and three octaves in real time, opening up an extremely low register typically impossible on the violin. This creates an eerie and sombre character that remains throughout the movement. The melodies begin on the violin’s highest string and gradually descend across each of the strings before resolving with the open string D, thus returning to the opening pitch of the piece.

In his *Frise Grise* (Gray Frieze), Odilon Redon forgoes the rich palette of the previous works and instead makes use of grays, browns, and beiges. This painting is the least vibrant of the three but maintains a swirling impressionism, evoking a quartz-studded rock formation or the surface of the moon.

### **Kevin Puts—*Arches* (2000)**

Kevin Puts represents the “innovator” on this program. The symmetrical formal structure of *Arches* is a large-scale cycle, an arch form that innovates Baroque compositional techniques at the structural level.

*Arches* is a five-movement work, with the bulk of the piece performed *attacca*, or without pause between movements. The movements alternate between caprices and arias, varying between highly virtuosic and lyrical music. The musical language of the work

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<sup>8</sup> Saariaho, “Frises.”

encompasses the sounds of American fiddle music, Baroque violin, the lyricism and formal innovations of Béla Bartók, and the rhythmic drive found in the works of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and John Adams.

The first caprice, marked “Unassuming,” begins with a wandering line that gradually accelerates over the course of the movement, reaching a ferocious speed by the final measure. Puts was inspired by a particular scene in the film *The Red Violin*, in which a student is forced to play an etude faster and faster until he reaches his very limit.<sup>9</sup> The rhythmic values and time signatures morph and fluctuate beneath a constant stream of notes, shifting the rhythmic impulse and dance feeling of the movement.

The next movement, an Aria marked “Unblemished,” is the only movement of the piece not performed *attacca*. The lyrical quality of this movement evokes the music of Bartók and Alban Berg, using rich chromaticism to great emotional effect.

The third movement serves as the central movement of the arch form. In this caprice, marked Intermezzo with the indication “Unruly,” Puts makes use of rapid sixteenth note passages punctuated by vibrant *pizzicato* chords and acrobatic *glissandi* (slides) up to extremely high harmonic tones. A dance-like middle section is followed by an ever-ascending virtuosic run of notes, not unlike passages in the first movement. The constant sixteenth notes dissolve into silence in the high register of the violin.

After a brief silence we begin to “descend” down the other side of the arch. The densely chromatic material of the second movement returns, this time played in the high register of the violin with false harmonics. This passage leads into the fourth movement,

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Puts, “Arches,” *Kevin Puts*, accessed March 27, 2024, <https://www.kevinputs.com/works/arches>.

another aria, which is a dramatic re-imagining of the opening of the second movement. The delicate unblemished sound is here replaced with exuberant chords, serving as the climax for the work. The fourth movement again dissolves into harmonic tones before moving into the final movement.

The fifth movement, a caprice marked “Unfettered,” features extensive use of *arpeggiando*, a broken chord technique seen widely in the virtuoso violin repertoire. The motoric nature of the work evokes American minimalist music, while staying firmly rooted in the virtuoso solo violin tradition. Puts again pushes the violinist to extreme velocity, with a constant flurry of notes taking the piece to a spectacular finish.

## *A CHORUS OF ONE*

This concert program explores polyphonic violin writing, with each work featuring one or more approaches to polyphony, fugal writing, or counterpoint.

As I prepared this program, I became interested in how composers over the centuries have created the impression of “true” polyphony, two or more notes sounding in unison, on an instrument where polyphony beyond two voices is difficult to achieve with a single attack.<sup>10</sup> While a three- or four-note chord is possible to perform on the violin, it requires a high degree of technical ability to achieve the simultaneous voicing of a chord that would be easily realized on a keyboard instrument or in the context of a multi-part ensemble. A violinist will largely rely on a “broken” chord, or slightly arpeggiated chord, to achieve a three- or four-note harmony.

While there are numerous applications of “true” polyphony on this concert program, there are a variety of examples of “implied” polyphony, or what I classify as “artificial polyphony.” I define “artificial polyphony” as chordal and contrapuntal approaches that suggest specific violinistic techniques allowing the performer to create the aural effect of polyphony and counterpoint without simultaneously sounding multiple notes at once. This concept can be seen in the works of Matteis Jr. and Johann Sebastian Bach, and even more explicitly in the work of Fjóla Evans and my own composition *vlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvln...*, both which incorporate fixed media tracks that make use of

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<sup>10</sup> Wolf Frobenius, “Polyphony,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed April 8, 2024 <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.42927>.

multi-part overdubbing. This concept will be examined further in the following program notes.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach—Sonata No. 2 in A Minor, BWV 1003 (1720)**

Johann Sebastian Bach serves as the “innovator” on this program. His six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin feature ingenious use of polyphony and counterpoint and innovates on the work of earlier composers like Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, Johann Paul von Westhoff, and Johann Vilsmayr.<sup>11</sup>

Bach’s Sonata No. 2 in A Minor offers a plethora of polyphonic approaches that remain innovative and novel to this day. Each movement contains at least one singular contrapuntal or polyphonic compositional technique that creates the effect of two or more voices sounding at once. The polyphonic approaches found in Bach’s sonata range from the “true” polyphony of double- and triple-stops, to the use of “echo” effects that create the impression of spatialized antiphony.

The opening movement, marked Grave, is an improvisatory fantasy that requires the violinist to perform both melody and the chordal support beneath it; the performer must be two musicians at once. Despite the relative simplicity of the texture, (akin to a singer accompanying themselves on a keyboard), the technical demands of the movement present a significant challenge. Despite Bach’s specific notational approach, especially in the contrasting rhythmic notation of chord and melody, this movement offers the performer a wide range of interpretive freedom in his or her approach to voicing chords, bass line, and melody. The opening chord, for instance, is notated as a four-part, quarter

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<sup>11</sup> Di Su, “The Tardy Recognition of J.S. Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo,” *American String Teacher* 61, no. 2 (May 2011): 26.

note, A minor chord. Stem directions may give a hint to Bach's intentions with regards to the breaking of the chord (low A first, the three remaining voices after), but even that particular voicing could be interpreted through significant variation, from a slowly arpeggiated chord to a single bass note followed by a simultaneous sounding of the top three voices. The performer is thus able to explore a spectrum of polyphonic execution, ranging from the "true" polyphony of simultaneous sounding to the artificial polyphony of chord arpeggiation.

The second movement, Fuga, is a stunning display of contrapuntal writing that presents a wide variety of technical, musical, and analytical challenges to the solo violinist. The performer is tasked with performing multiple iterations of the fugue theme simultaneously, requiring subtle nuances of bow weight, speed, and sounding point to create multiple distinct melodic profiles. The Fuga makes use of triple- and quadruple-stops in rapid succession, presenting challenges of sound production and intonation while creating moments of powerfully emotional musical drama. This movement also features a contrapuntal technique that I classify as "artificial" which appears prominently in the fourth movement of the sonata. The episode beginning at m. 45 makes use of an echo effect that foreshadows the artificial antiphony of the Allegro and appears nowhere else in the second movement.

The compositional styles and contrapuntal approaches found in the first and second movement of Sonata No. 2 are not entirely unique amongst the Six Sonatas and Partitas of Bach. The Grave from Sonata No. 1 features a similar melding of improvisatory melody and multi-part harmony and each of the three sonatas in the collection feature a fugue. The contrapuntal technique featured in the Andante movement

of Sonata No. 2 is unique, particularly among the three slow movements of Bach's solo violin sonatas. The Andante feature a long melody with an ostinato bassline resulting in two constant and independent musical lines. Bach creates the impression of an intimate duet between two voices that must be executed by a single performer.

In the final movement, marked Allegro, Bach utilizes sudden changes in dynamic to create the effect of two violinists performing antiphonally. This spatializing effect requires rapid shifts of sounding point and bow weight, technical demands that are particularly difficult at a fast tempo. There are no double stops or chords in this movement and yet Bach creates the impression of polyphony through violinistic sleight of hand.

#### **Nicola Matteis Jr.—Fantasia in A Minor, “Alia Fantasia” (c. 1720)**

Nicola Matteis Jr. serves as the “trailblazer” on this program. While the exact date of this composition is unknown, Matteis was a contemporary of Bach and this work demonstrates that the polyphonic approaches evident in Bach's solo violin repertoire was present elsewhere in Europe in the early eighteenth century.

The Fantasia in A Minor is one of two fantasies for solo violin by Nicola Matteis Jr., the English-born violinist and son of the celebrated violinist and composer Nicola Matteis Sr. Matteis Sr. is partly responsible for introducing the British public to the virtuoso violin playing of Italy, through his collection of Ayres published in 1676.<sup>12</sup>

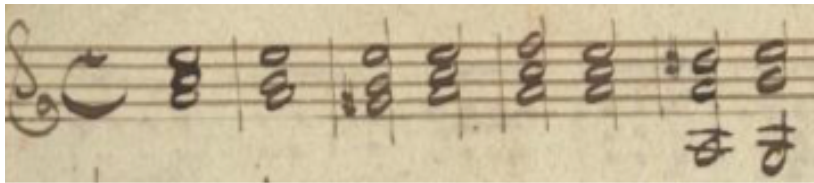
This brief work by Matteis Jr. is comprised almost entirely of block chords (fig. 1), notated in stacked three- and four-part harmonies, with the implication that the

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Jones, *The ‘Stupendious’ Nicola Matteis* (York: University of York, 2003), 32.

performer ornament the notated polyphony through arpeggiation. This implied arpeggiation can be realized in a variety of ways, through different combinations of slurring and articulation. The piece makes a number of technical demands of the performer, from the challenging left-hand positions required by the chordal writing, to the string crossings and bowing nuances needed to bring out the voice-leading and rich dissonance in Matteis's polyphony.

Figure 1. Three and four part harmonies in Fantasia in A minor  
Source: Matteis Jr., Nicola. *Two fantasias for violin solo*. Manuscript, ca. 1700.



While there is no explicit indication of arpeggiation, seen, for example, in Bach's Ciaccona (fig. 2, next page), it is hard to believe that Matteis Jr. expected the violinist to perform simultaneous four-part harmonies on a single violin. Contemporary recordings of the work has established arpeggiation as standard performance practice.<sup>13</sup> As I prepared the work for performance, I began to consider this arpeggiation technique as another form of artificial polyphony. The listener hears the accumulated harmony through the use of arpeggiation but the performer is not required to perform multiple notes at once.

Figure 2. Arpeggiation in Bach's Ciaccona.  
Source: Bach, Johann Sebastian. *Drei Sonaten und drei Partien für Violino solo*. Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1958.



<sup>13</sup> Peter Wollney trans. Charles Johnston, "Isabelle Faust: Solo," liner notes for *Isabelle Faust: Solo*, Isabelle Faust, recorded April 2020, Harmonia Mundi 902678, 9.

I see in Matteis Jr.'s piece a musical analogue to an early motion picture technology that would appear over a century after Matteis Jr.'s death. The effect of rapid arpeggiation brings to mind the zoetrope, a spinning cylinder from the mid-1800s that used a series of rapidly spinning still images to create the effect of motion in a continuous loop. I began to see the implied arpeggiation in Matteis Jr.'s piece as an early example of artificial polyphony, a violinistic sleight of hand that is a forerunner of the use of the multi-tracking in the music of Fjóra Evans.

### **Fjóra Evans—*In Bruniquel Cave* (2022)**

Fjóra Evans represents the “futurist” on this program. One of Canada’s most prominent emerging composers, Fjóra has composed works for string quartet, symphony orchestra, and mixed ensemble, while maintaining a commitment to the integration of electronic and recorded media in her compositional process.<sup>14</sup>

Fjóra Evans’s *In Bruniquel Cave* is inspired by the mysterious ring-like assemblages of stalagmites found in Bruniquel Cave in France. Discovered in 1989, these formations were created by Neanderthals around 176,000 years ago and are believed to be the first evidence of Neanderthal art-making. The music evokes these structures through a circular musical structure and creates a reverberant cave-like atmosphere through the magnified, reverberant layering of delicate violin textures.<sup>15</sup>

I commissioned Fjóra Evans to compose a new work for solo violin in 2021. The work was to be featured on my debut solo album *DESCRIBE YOURSELF*, which was

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<sup>14</sup> Fjóra Evans “About,” *Fjóra Evans*, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://www.fjolaevans.com/about>.

<sup>15</sup> Fjóra Evans, “Describe Yourself,” liner notes for *Describe Yourself*, Christopher Whitley, recorded June 2022, Redshift Records TK529, 8.

released in 2023. The compositional process for *In Bruniquel Cave* was highly collaborative, with Fjóla and me developing and recording the piece together over three days in June 2022. Rather than sending me a completed score, Fjóla arrived at our recording sessions with a series of four-part chord progressions that were edited and re-arranged before the final version of the piece was recorded. The resulting piece, and its debut recording, exists as a four-part, multi-track piece for solo violin.

A cellist by training, Fjóla has composed a number of works for solo cello and electronics.<sup>16</sup> These works, like *In Bruniquel Cave*, can be performed by an ensemble of string players, but have been historically performed live by a soloist with fixed media, and recorded by an individual performer using multi-tracking. In many ways, the recorded version of the piece is the definitive one and is the purest realization of Fjóla's artificial polyphony. By recording a single instrumentalist performing four parts, there is an inherent unity of timbre, instrumental approach, and musical sensibility that, for better or worse, cannot be achieved by an ensemble of multiple performers. The recorded version of *In Bruniquel Cave* benefits from extremely close mic'ing, allowing the listener to experience extremely subtle timbral nuances. Given the realities of a concert hall, these subtleties are difficult to recreate in a live setting.

The version of *In Bruniquel Cave* featured on this program is scored for solo violin and pre-recorded backing track. The track features three out of four parts and the soloist performs the fourth part with amplification, in an effort to create a balance between performer and playback, while additionally amplifying the subtle gestures

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<sup>16</sup> Fjóla Evans, "List of Works," *Fjóla Evans*, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://www.fjolaevans.com/about>.

highlighted in the recorded version. In this performance the work is accompanied by projected visuals featuring a slowly evolving sketch of Bruniquel Cave, created for this performance by Canadian artist Susan Sakamoto.

**Christopher Whitley—*vlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvln... (2023)***

I composed *vlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvln...* to accompany the works of Bach, Matteis Jr., and Evans featured on this program. I conceived the work as an explicit exploration of artificial polyphony in an effort to expand upon the compositional techniques featured on *A CHORUS OF ONE*. Like *In Bruniquel Cave*, the piece is scored for four violins and could, theoretically, be performed by a multi-violin ensemble. That being said, I believe an ensemble performance of the work would detract from the theatrical, almost comedic, interactions between the violin and fixed media.

*vlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvln...* makes use of multi-tracking, stereo panning, and digital signal processing to create a variety of polyphonic textures. The piece begins with a short percussive figure punctuated by long silences. The performer initially plays alone, with no appearance from the fixed media. By m. 9, the percussive triplet figure in the solo part is responded to in the track and, as the opening section unfolds, the triplets begins to appear at different points in the stereo field, creating the impression of four distinct violinists.<sup>17</sup> These gestures fly around the space as the four parts interact with one another, building in intensity before suddenly shifting into a percussive, beat-driven section comprising of scratches, plucks, and left hand tapping gestures that move amongst the four violin voices. This middle section is accompanied by technicolor video

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Whitley, *vlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvlnvln...* (Riverdale Park: self-published, 2023), 2.



## ***BODIES IN MOTION***

The violin has maintained a close relationship to dance since the instrument emerged in the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> From the seventeenth century dance bands to the fiddle tunes of Appalachia, the violin has served the function of inspiring dancers to move. The development of Western art music over the last four centuries, and the progression of the violin repertoire within that tradition, has seen a widening gulf between the violin's formative role accompanying dance music and its more common contemporary role as a classical concert instrument. Despite this fact, the influence of dance forms has been present in the solo violin repertoire since its earliest iterations. This program explores this historical tension. On this program, the music of Johann Joseph Vilsmayr and Johann Sebastian Bach explores the influence of dance forms on Baroque violin repertoire composed for concert settings. The music of Kirsten Azan and myself consider the violin's contemporary relationship with dance, and asks whether the instrument, in the context of Western art music, can still make bodies move.

### **Christopher Whitley—*18* (2018, rev. 2024)**

I composed *18* in 2018 as the final track of my debut release of original electronic compositions, *hecca autre*. This collection of pieces, released on the Belgian label Audio.Visuals.Atmosphere., reflected on a variety of styles of electronic music, including noise music, ambient music, and modular synthesis. A number of the pieces were abstract reinterpretations of electronic dance music built from samples of pre-recorded violin

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<sup>18</sup> Boyden, *History of Violin Playing*, 11.

improvisations. Of all the works featured on this album, *18* is most directly indebted to dance music. With its driving beats, glitchy digital synths, and off-kilter rhythms, the work nods towards popular dance tropes while being, at times, almost “undanceable.”

Just as composers of the 18th century paid tribute to dance forms established in an earlier era, I see *18* as a nod to dance forms and sounds from the late 20th century.

Inspired by early electronic house and techno music, *18* includes percussive sounds found on the Roland TR-909, an iconic drum machine featured in the music of Larry Heard, Technotronic, and Madonna.

*18* opens with a wash of overlapping strings. The violin texture gradually fades to the background and a synthetic rhythm begins to emerge. Constructed from cut-up clips of the overdubbed violin, this synthetic rhythm gives way to a heavy electronic beat featuring a pulsing kick drum and sampled clap. The beat becomes increasingly complex, ending suddenly with a short repetitive kick drum pattern.

### **Johann Joseph Vilsmayr—Partita No. 1 (1715)**

Johann Joseph Vilsmayr serves as the “trailblazer” on this program. The Austrian court violinist, and likely student of Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, laid the groundwork for the future innovations of J.S. Bach in the realm of dance suites for solo violin.

Johann Vilsmayr’s sole surviving compositions is a set of six partitas titled *Artificiosus Conventus pro Camera*. These partitas present a blend of geographic styles, from the influence of the French dance suite to the virtuosic violin writing of fellow Austrian composer Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber. Biber appears to be a significant influence on the set of partitas, particularly in Vilsmayr’s use of *scordatura* in partitas 2–

5. Partita No. 1 in A major, featured on this program, is one of two works written in standard tuning.

The *Artificiosus Conventus pro Camera* features a number traditional dance forms, many of which would have been danced to in social settings. Despite this influence, the polyphonic writing, occasionally unexpected forms, and solo violin texture featured in the work marks Vilsmayr's Partitas as a concert piece, rather than a piece for actual dancing.<sup>19</sup>

Partita No. 1 features many of the common dance movements featured in the 17th century French dance suite. The sarabande and gigue make an appearance, as do three minuets. The Partita also contains a prelude, three arias of varying character and structure, and ends in an improvisatory finale.

The Partita's opening movement, marked Adagio, begins with a lyrical passage of double stops. Rich in harmony, the phrase extends for four measures before petering out into two halting motives. The relaxed opening mood is suddenly broken by a rapid succession of sixteenth notes, marked Allegro, slurred two notes at a time. A slightly elaborated version of m. 4 appears, marked Adagio, before an extended passage of sixteenth notes, marked Presto. The movement ends with a long chordal passage of arpeggiated triads. The Prelude is one of the more formally exploratory of the ten movements.

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<sup>19</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 98.

The first Aria has no explicit relationship to a specific dance style but has many hallmarks of a dance movement.<sup>20</sup> The two-part form, repeated codetta, and gentle lilt give the piece a folksy, dance-like feel.

The Saraband movement features rich harmonies and lyricism, suggesting a slower, more serious affect. This suggests the influence of the eighteenth-century French style of sarabande, rather than the quick sarabande of the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup>

The Gavott forgoes the typical two quartet-note pick-up and begins on the downbeat. It is presented in an AB form with a short codetta, followed by a formally identical Variatio made up of constant eighth notes.

The first of the three minuets is simple and beautiful, featuring extensive use of notated trills and hemiola. The following Aria, the first in the relative key of F# minor, echoes the Prelude, with sudden shifts of tempi between Adagio and Allegro. The movement contrasts dramatic registral leaps in quarter notes with florid, ornamental passages.

The second minuet also appears in F# minor and features far less polyphonic writing than the preceding movements. The movement is in three repeated sections, rather than the AB form of the other two minuet movements.

The third and final Aria, marked Allegro, is characterized by constant forward momentum. Streams of eighth notes move in scalar patterns, accompanied by canonical entrances in thirds and sixths. The eighth notes are eventually replaced by cascading sixteenth notes that tumble towards the final chord.

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<sup>20</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 119.

The final Menuett movement features a lilting dotted eighth and sixteenth rhythm before the final movement takes off in a folksy gigue, marked Presto. The short-lived dance ends with a final held A that unexpectedly carries into the Final, a florid improvisatory fantasia that brings the piece to a peaceful ending.

**Kirsten Azan—*for chris* (2024)**

Kirsten Azan, also known as Bambii, is an award-winning Canadian DJ and producer. Celebrated for her genre-agnostic sets that draw on a variety of global dance cultures, Bambii uses her unique blend of club music to forge relationships between individuals, cultures, and spaces.<sup>22</sup>

Kirsten and I attended high school together in Toronto and when I was seeking out a “futurist” for this program I immediately thought of her. It has been thrilling to watch Kirsten’s global reputation skyrocket over the last ten years and I was excited to see the results of a collaborative commission.

Kirsten and I created the piece remotely. After sending each other a number of reference tracks, including pieces by Cookiee Kawaii, Brent Faiyaz, Björk, and Mica Levi, I recorded a handful of violin sounds for Kirsten to incorporate into a fixed media track. Upon receiving Kirsten’s completed track I composed a solo violin part for live performance.

This piece was created for the concert stage, not for the club, and I am under no illusion that this piece will be featured in one of Bambii’s global DJ sets. I do feel,

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<sup>22</sup> “Bambii,” Resident Advisor, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://ra.co/dj/bambii/biography>.

however, that this piece is a humble attempt at reconnecting the violin with its roots in dance music, albeit the modern dance sounds of the twenty-first century.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach—Partita No. 1 in B Minor, BWV 1002 (1720)**

Johann Sebastian Bach again serves as the “innovator” of the program. Drawing on styles popular in his time, Bach’s Partita No. 1 is harmonically and formally expansive, highly virtuosic, and rhythmically intricate. While the piece is deeply rooted in dance forms, it is nearly impossible to imagine anyone dancing to this particular work. In innovating upon the eighteenth-century dance suite, Bach creates a wondrous work that nevertheless alienates the violin from its roots in the literal act of dancing.

J.S. Bach’s Partita No. 1 shares many of the attributes of a typical eighteenth-century French dance suite, particularly the form favored by German composers of the time.<sup>23</sup> A key characteristic of this Partita is Bach’s use of doubles: virtuosic variations on the main dance movements that maintain their harmonic framework while presenting new technical challenges.

The Allemanda movement makes extensive use of dotted rhythms commonly associated with the French overture.<sup>24</sup> The opening two measures in B minor present an air of seriousness but by the third measure Bach has already introduced the relative major key, suggesting a tenderness that remains in conflict with the dissonance and drama of the home key. The movement makes use of large registral leaps, rolling triplet rhythms,

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<sup>23</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> George Now Waterman, “French Overture,” rev. James R. Anthony, *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.10210>.

and four-note chords, presenting the performer with a number of challenges with regard to bow control and string crossings. The first Double comprises almost entirely of sixteenth notes slurred into groups of two. While Bach forgoes the French overture rhythm he maintains the large registral leaps that were hallmarks of the Allemanda.

The Corrente is comprised of running eighth notes in 3/4 time, though the small bar lines in the manuscript suggest two-measure groupings.<sup>25</sup> The motion throughout the movement is largely triadic, though Bach again makes use of large registral leaps, often outlining chords over three strings but just as often highlighting dissonant intervals in open voicings. The movement is harmonically rich and dissonant. The tempo of the Corrente is largely determined by the following Double, a fiendishly challenging movement full of rapid-fire scalar passages in sixteenth notes. The scales are frequently interrupted by arpeggiated chords, similar to the Corrente but much more treacherous in the Double for the sheer speed of their execution.

Relief from the relentless Double is found in the Sarabande. A slower, more spacious movement full of pathos and longing, this Sarabande is characteristic of the 18th-century French sarabande style.<sup>26</sup> The movement features rich polyphonic writing that accompanies a beautiful, simple melody. The 3/4 time signature of the Sarabande is transformed to 9/8 in the Double, giving the movement a gentle lilt. This variation gives the impression of simplicity while losing none of the emotional power of the Sarabande.

The fourth main movement, marked *Tempo di Borea*, initially forgoes the typically relaxed nature of the eighteenth-century dance, announcing itself with a series

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<sup>25</sup> Bach, *Drei Sonaten und drei Partiten*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Tarling, *Baroque String Playing*, 119.

of martial chords that dispel the gentle atmosphere of the preceding Double. Like the opening Allemanda, the severity of the opening measures quickly gives way to a gentler, more folksy spirit with the introduction of the relative major key in the A section. The opening motive undergoes a variety of transformations throughout the B section, cycling through key areas before unravelling into an episodic passage of continuous eighth notes. Bach ratchets up the harmonic tension through a series of dissonant harmonies accentuated with registral leaps before finally returning to the home key of B minor in the final four measures. The Double reflects the play between the serious and folk-infused music of the Tempo di Borea, never reaching the virtuosic heights of previous doubles but allowing the listener another opportunity to traverse the harmonic developments of the movement previous. While not as dramatic as the other variation movements, the final Double serves as an appropriate end to this large-scale suite.

### ***OUTCOMES***

This project resulted in a number of outcomes that will continue to impact my artistic, violinistic, and curatorial identity moving forward. First and foremost, this project

allowed me to further develop a strongly personal curatorial voice. By incorporating a variety of repertoire, performance practices, and compositional approaches, I was able to gain confidence in developing unique concert programs for public performance. The extensive use of technology on these programs led to a new confidence incorporating electronics, projections, and concert lighting, elements I will continue to make use of in future performances. I also gained more experience with the Baroque bow and plan to further experiment with a historical setup in my study of Baroque and Classical period repertoire both as a performer and as a teacher. The study and performance of the repertoire on these three programs resulted in significant technical, expressive, and interpretive growth in my violin-playing and artistry. And finally, the materials compiled for my dissertation will serve as effective materials for my personal portfolio, future applications, and social media content.

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