

# Sonata-Song

Milan  
Milisavljević  
solo viola



Bach • Penderecki • Carter • Harbison • Khachaturian • Britten • Silvestrov



DE 3519





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solo viola

J.S. Bach: Chaconne

(from the Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004, transcribed for viola)

Penderecki: Sarabanda

(J. S. Bach in memoriam)

Carter: Figment IV

Harbison: Sonata for Viola Alone (premiere recording)

Khachaturian: Sonata-Song

Britten: Elegy

Silvestrov: Lacrimosa

Total Playing Time: 58:22

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solo viola

1. **Johann Sebastian Bach:** *Chaconne* from the *Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004* for Solo Violin (transcribed for viola) (14:36)
2. **Krzysztof Penderecki:** *Sarabanda (J. S. Bach in memoriam)* for Solo Viola (3:52)
3. **Elliott Carter:** *Figment IV* for Solo Viola (3:14)
- John Harbison:** *Sonata for Viola Alone* (premiere recording) (12:38)
  4. Allegro moderato (2:20)
  5. Andante (3:09)
  6. Scherzo (2:36)
  7. Adagio (4:32)
8. **Aram Khachaturian:** *Sonata-Song* for Solo Viola (12:16)
9. **Benjamin Britten:** *Elegy* for Solo Viola (6:39)
10. **Valentin Silvestrov:** *Lacrimosa* for Solo Viola (5:07)

Total Playing Time: 58:22

Dear Listener,

My debut album represents a selection of some of my favorite viola music. My personal subtitle for the album is *The Storyteller*, as – broadly speaking – storytelling is what I aspire to do in art and what I have aspired to do here through my choice of music. The somber and introverted sound of the viola is perfect for relaying deeply personal feelings, ideas, and dreams – both those of the composer and the performer. Every note I have played here is intended to serve that purpose.

When I set out to record this album, I knew that I wanted to record mostly modern music, and I was looking for pieces that had good chemistry as a group. I decided not to record music by Paul Hindemith or Max Reger, two prolific and widely performed composers of solo viola works, as I was interested in exploring more obscure repertoire. I went through about a hundred compositions before choosing those on this album, and I am truly excited to share them with you. As time went on, however, I kept thinking of the unique voice the unaccompanied viola gives to the music of J.S. Bach, and decided to include one of his works as well. Juxtaposing Bach's music with more recent works is always an enlightening way to appreciate the paths of art music through the centuries. Enjoy!

The output of **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) is astonishing for its size and expressive genius, but the *Chaconne* for solo violin from his *Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004* stands out

even among his finest works. Its raw emotional narrative is expressed through the ascetic medium of unaccompanied violin, through some fourteen minutes of unforgettably powerful music. The *Chaconne* is emotionally staggering and structurally perfect. It goes from deeply mystical to indescribably pained and from gloriously hopeful to wearily grieving. Much has been written about the possible meanings of the *Chaconne*. Among recent hypotheses is the idea that the work represents a musical tombstone for Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara. This is supposedly evident in hidden bits and pieces of tunes from several of Bach's sacred works meditating on death, as well as numerical relationships between certain phrases conveying religious messages or even names. Whatever the case, the *Chaconne* will always remain unique in its expressive power, in stark contrast with the tiny instrument for which it is written. The *Chaconne* is played on the viola without any changes from the original, just a perfect fifth lower. I've especially come to appreciate the differences in vocal character among the strings of the viola, the baritone-like low C, the tenor-like G, the alto-like D, and the soprano-like A, and how those uniquely underline Bach's multi-voiced writing.

**Krzysztof Penderecki** (b. 1933) is Poland's greatest living composer. He started out as the Eastern Bloc's most prominent avant-garde composer and a bit of an *enfant terrible*, but by the 1980s, his style had morphed into something much more traditional. His *Sarabande* (*J.S. Bach in memoriam*) was originally written

for cello as part of his *Divertimento* from 1994, which includes four other movements. Penderecki himself arranged *Sarabande* for viola in 2000 and dedicated it to the Russian violist Yuri Bashmet. The piece carries no allusions to Bach, nor is it formally reminiscent of the saraband, a medieval Spanish dance in triple meter. Its intimate and thoughtful character, combining warmth and remembrance, is what connects us metaphysically with Bach's works for solo strings as well as with Bach the person. To me, the *Sarabande* seemed a perfect commentary on the *Chaconne* that precedes it.

The music of **Elliot Carter** (1908-2012) combines an unflinching devotion to modernism with warmth and even humor. Carter died at the age of 103 and composed especially prolifically toward the end of his life. *Figment IV* was written in 2007 and was premiered by Samuel Rhodes, himself a composer and also longtime violist of the Juilliard String Quartet. It is the fourth in a series of pieces for solo instruments, the others being for cello, double bass, marimba, and oboe. *Figment's* drive and passion strike us from the first note, and its string of ideas goes from strident to thoughtful and from aggressive to lyrical, all within moments. Carter's writing is reminiscent of jazz or popular music in its spiky rhythms, and I love that it gives us a few "head-banging" moments near the end, where the expressive tension is at its height. While the language is unapologetically contemporary, Carter's music speaks directly to the audience.

The composer **John Harbison** (b. 1938) also plays viola, and he has premiered some of his own pieces for it, such as those in his *Violist's Notebook* from 2001. His *Sonata for Viola Alone* was written when he was 22 and studying composition at Princeton. The piece has not been published, and my recording of it is the first ever. I heard about the *Sonata* from a colleague, who lent me a copy of the manuscript. The piece intrigued me, and I proceeded to learn it and work on it with John, who expressed unequivocal approval of my idea to record this early work. The *Sonata's* four movements go in very different directions; the first is majestic, the second is introverted and searching, with its end mirroring the notes of the beginning. The third movement is a starkly brilliant and edgy *Scherzo*, while the fourth alternates between sections of pensive rumination and sections of agitation. Its beginning is especially poignant, "...a little like Brahms in its warmth," Judith Sherman, this album's producer, has observed, and I agree.

**Aram Khachaturian** (1903-1978) is among the composers who wrote their only piece for viola at the very end of their lives, other notables being Dmitry Shostakovich and Béla Bartók. Khachaturian reached early fame with his trilogy of concertos for violin, piano, and cello; and most of his works were written by the late 1940s. At the end of his life, he wrote another trilogy — this time, of solo sonatas for violin, viola, and cello respectively — and I was always curious about the one for viola. The *Sonata-Song* is little known, and obtaining the sheet



music for it was difficult. Once I began to study it, I found the piece fascinating, and my love for it has only increased. It is rare that a performer can achieve total fusion with a piece of music, but I was lucky to find that fusion in my journey with the *Sonata-Song*. Its honesty and directness resonate with me, and I absolutely love the writing. The piece is fiendishly difficult, yet very well written for the viola, and the composer mostly avoids a typical melancholic character that is typical of a lot of viola music. I find the *Sonata-Song's* eclectic mix of Armenian folksong with elements of officially sanctioned Soviet modernism, within a classical form, to be characteristics of both who Khachaturian was as a person and what he was trying to achieve as an artist. I have cherished some of the sonorities Khachaturian finds in this piece: for instance, at the end, where the melody suddenly turns very poignant, lifts up and leaves us without warning, or in the section with the pizzicati in the viola's high register, where the contrast between the two textures is unusually arresting.

The English composer **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) also played the viola and wrote several pieces for it. *Elegy*, his earliest work for the instrument, was lost until the early 1980s. Britten wrote the piece at the age of sixteen, the day after he left boarding school, having spent two years there. "I didn't think I should be so sorry to leave," he wrote, and the work strikes us as not just elegiac, but downright gloomy and even angry at times, perhaps unsurprisingly for an adolescent dealing with difficult feelings. Britten was already a developed instrumentalist

and composer at this age and would perform Beethoven's sonatas for cello and piano in his own viola transcriptions, so he almost certainly played the piece himself. While an early work, *Elegy* is maturely put together; it is compact in form and intriguing in its finely tuned emotional buildup and release. Britten explores the viola's sonorities intelligently, and figuring out different textures of sound for the various sections was especially rewarding—from fuzzy to steely, from roundly warm to otherworldly distant, such as at the end.

**Valentin Silvestrov** (b. 1937) is now one of Ukraine's leading composers, but during Soviet times, he was largely banished from public view because of avant-garde tendencies in his earlier works. Like Penderecki, Arvo Pärt, and many other composers, his style underwent change as the Cold War was nearing the end and the shadow of World War II was receding. He then began to adopt more neo-romantic and traditional elements in his music. Silvestrov can be described as a post-modernist in that his music is, as he says, "an echo of what already exists." I immediately liked *Lacrimosa* for its delicacy of texture and expression, reminiscent of Anton Webern's music, and the transparency of sound required. Just like Penderecki's *Sarabande*, *Lacrimosa* (Latin for "weeping") is intended by the composer to be played on either viola or cello. It is performed in its entirety with a mute, which gives its sonorities a veil of distance and mystery. The intervals between adjacent strings make for simple yet jarringly clashing harmonies, the mostly low dynamics are indicated

with utmost care and precision, and the long pauses only serve to increase the tension. In *Lacrimosa*, Silvestrov creates a powerful, understated composition.

– Milan Milisavljević

**Milan Milisavljević** (pronounced MEE-lahn Mee-lee-SAHV-yeh-vitch) is considered one of the leading violists of his generation. *The Strad* magazine has described his playing as “very imaginative, with a fine, cultured tone.” Currently Assistant Principal Viola with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York, Milan has been heard on countless Metropolitan Opera recordings and broadcasts, including the Grammy Award-winning Wagner’s “Ring” cycle in 2013. He has won prizes at competitions such as the Lionel Tertis and Aspen Lower Strings and has performed at the Marlboro, Cascade Head, Grand Teton, and Classical Tahoe music festivals. Prior to joining the Met, he was a member of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Milan has appeared worldwide as soloist with orchestras such as the Munich Chamber Orchestra, the Belgrade Philharmonic, Aspen Sin-

fonia, Classical Tahoe, and Orquesta Filarmónica de Boca del Río. As a chamber musician, he has collaborated with members of the Guarneri and Mendelssohn String Quartets, as well as with Joseph Kalichstein, Sergiu Luca, Robert McDuffie, Stefan Milenković, and others. In addition to his activities as a violist, he is increasingly in demand as a conductor.

Milan started playing the violin at a very young age in his native Serbia and entered the Faculty of Music at the University of Belgrade at age 16, where he studied with Dejan Mihailović. After immigrating to Canada, he studied violin with Vladimir Landsman and viola with Jutta Puchhammer at the Université de Montréal. He continued his studies in the United States, receiving a master’s degree from Indiana University and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Rice University, both in viola performance. His major viola teachers include Atar Arad, James Dunham, Nobuko Imai, and Samuel Rhodes. Passionate about education, Milan has taught at Indiana University as a visiting lecturer, at Verbier Music Festival, and as a volunteer at Ecole de musique Sainte Trinité in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

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Recorded at SUNY Purchase Recital Hall, June 2-3, 2014

Producer: Judith Sherman  
Engineer: Jeanne Valonis  
Photo credit: Caroline M. Johnston  
Viola by Joseph Curtin, 1983  
Bow by Charles Espey, 2007

Special Thanks to James Dunham, Michael Ouzounian, Samuel Rhodes, Dov Scheindlin, John Harbison

Dedicated to my mother, Silvija Milisavljević