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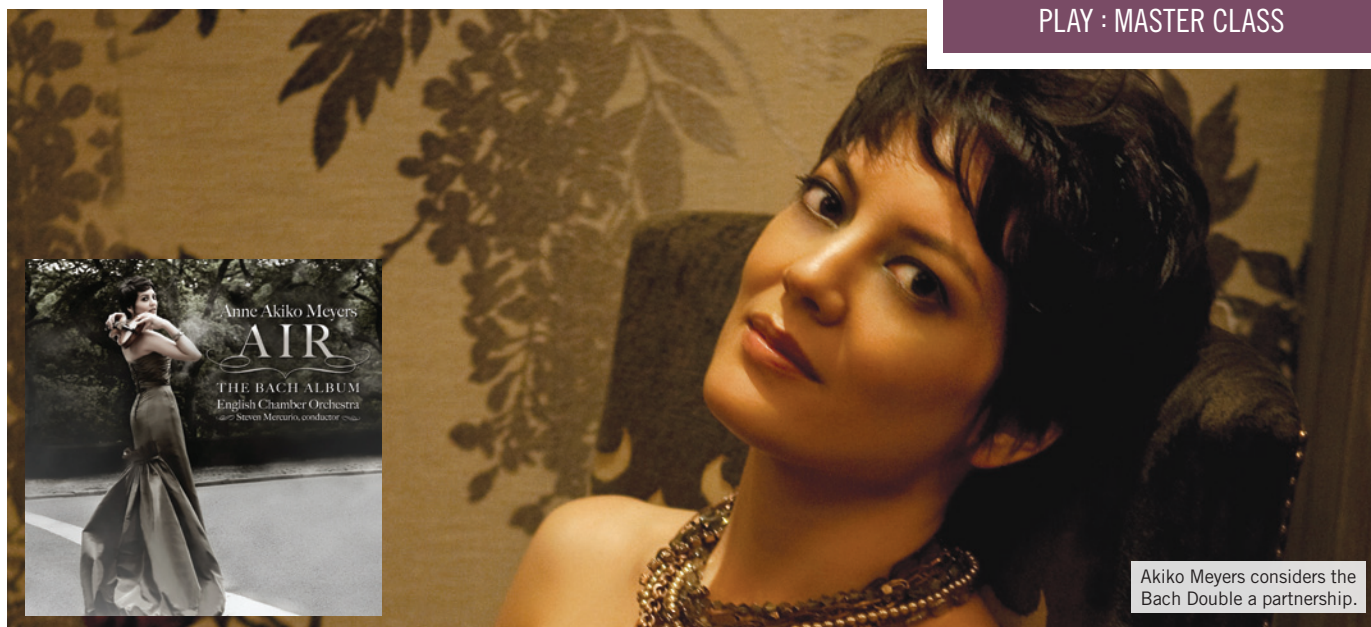
Anne Akiko Meyers

On playing the
Bach Double, with or
without a pair of Strads

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Concert violinist **Anne Akiko Meyers** recorded both parts of the Bach Double on her chart-topping recent CD 'Air: The Bach Album' (eOne).

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ANNE AKIKO MEYERS LOOKS AT BOTH PARTS OF THE BACH DOUBLE

Capturing the rich dialogue within the Concerto for Two Violins in D minor

By Anne Akiko Meyers, as told to Corinne Ramey

The Concerto for Two Violins in D minor (BWV 1043) is one of Bach's most beloved works. There's a reason it's played so much: it's so well written, so beautiful, and exquisite. It carries an emotional weight that is unrivaled. Playing the Bach Double is similar to doing yoga. In yoga, you are taught to never compete with whoever is standing beside you, but to create a deeper union and presence within yourself. I think this philosophy resonates deeply with the Bach and makes it very profound and personal.

This is not true of all works for two violins. With the Prokofiev Sonata, for instance, you feel like you're Mike Tyson, trying to knock out your opponent in a punching ring. But in the Bach, you're not trying to knock out your partner—you're trying to bring out both the melodic parts and the rich dialogue that's there in an intimate style.

I like both parts, the first and second violin—they're so evenly written. The second violin provides the foundation, like a rock, and first violin floats above in a higher

register. Playing this piece is a rich interplay of dialogue instead of a competition.

CAPTURE THE SPONTANEITY

Scholars disagree about whether J.S. Bach lived in Cöthen or Leipzig, Germany, when he wrote the Double Concerto. Although the manuscript dates from 1730 or 1731, during Bach's Leipzig years, he may have written it earlier, while living in Cöthen, from 1717 to 1723. But regardless, Bach likely performed the concerto with Leipzig's Collegium Musicum, a group of local university students, professional and amateur musicians.

The Collegium Musicum was a young, hip group at the time, and they played Bach's

recently written music in a local coffee shop. In performing the concerto, I try to replicate the freshness and spontaneity of that time.

The concerto is comprised of three movements: Vivace, Largo ma non tanto, and Allegro. Each of the three movements is contrapuntal, with the two parts constantly imitating each other. In the first two movements, the second part starts, followed by the first part entering with the same material a fifth higher. In the third, the first violin begins with the melodic material, and the second violin enters a beat later on the same pitch.

FEEL THE PULSE

Learning Bach can feel intimidating, but once

WHAT'S THE BEST EDITION?

I started out with the usual International edition, but when I started to peer underneath the surface, there were way too many alterations that obscured the music. I then looked at the Bärenreiter urtext and the Henle editions. The Bärenreiter felt too scarce for my taste, so I used that as a template, but played from the Henle, which has some added fingerings and bowings.

—A.A.M.

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you get a little deeper inside, there's so much passion, sadness, tenderness, and beauty. There's also a pulse in there that cannot be ignored, or else the music becomes completely limp. Violinists play this piece at many different tempos. In the first movement, marked *Vivace*, or lively, I find the music's pulse by feeling the dance-like tempo.

PARTNERED DYNAMICS

It's key, with any piece—whether solo, chamber music, or when you're playing a concerto—that you listen [to the music]. In the Bach Double, you have to remember not only to listen to your partner, but the orchestra, too. On the cover of the manuscript, Bach wrote "Concerto a 6," referring not only to the two solo violins, but the two orchestral violin parts, viola, and continuo as well, so he definitely thought the orchestral material was a key part of the dialogue. When you think about phrasing in this piece, you need to collaborate with and listen to all parts involved.

I think the key to dynamics is getting out of the way when it's not your turn. When you're playing a doubles tennis match, you're helping your partner. You're not in the way, blocking the ball. It's the same with the concerto. You have to support your partner and get out of the way when you don't have the melody, but also know when you can go for an overhead slam and belt it out.

Bach didn't often write in too many dynamics, so the key is really just listening to one another. When you don't have the melody, you're trying to pad what the other performer is doing by giving her a strong foundation rhythmically.

FOCUS ON THE DANCING UP BOWS

Bowings can really change the sound, and help to produce that dance-like feel. In bar 8, in the second violin part, I use an up bow on the quarter note A, then down on the eighth note G# and up on the following A. The sound of that timing with the up-bow stroke is so much better than the down-bow stroke, and gives it so much more rhythmic freedom. I did the same thing with the first violin part in bar 13, with an up bow on the D.

I used bowings to help shape the phrasing. In the first violin part in the beginning of bar 28, I wanted to create a terracing effect. In the Henle edition, each of those high notes—the B, A, G and D—is marked with a down bow. I'm always leery of sounding the same, and I didn't like the sound it created to have all those down bows in a row, so I played the high A on an up, then the high G on a down, and the D on an up. The up bow creates a swiftness and a top speed that really made those notes sing, and helps to bring out the higher notes.

GO EASY ON THE ORNAMENTS

I didn't add any ornamentation beyond what was written in the score. When you add extra trills and ornaments, it ends up sounding fussy, like too much frosting on a beautiful cake. My mantra is to keep it simple and clean. The trills all start from the upper note. I never count the number of notes in a trill, or get caught up in the scientific nitty-gritty. It's better to follow the line, because it's the line that's speaking to you. That's the beauty of Bach.

Find free downloadable score and parts of the Bach Concerto for Two Violins in D minor (BWV 1043) at the Petrucci Music Library at imslp.org.

RECORDING THE BACH DOUBLE

Recording this piece was so much fun! I recorded the first violin part in May 2011 in London, with the English Chamber Orchestra and conductor Steven Mercurio. It was so odd to have this incredible orchestra behind me and just play the first violin part—I felt pretty naked. Then I recorded the second violin part by myself about three months later, in Purchase, New York. Once I heard the playback with the two parts together, I was floored by how cool it was. Rock musicians have been recording multiple tracks of themselves for ages, yet for a classical musician to put on headphones and play multiple tracks is considered revolutionary, which is incredible to me.

I recorded the first violin part on my 1697 "ex-Molitor/Napoleon" Strad and the second part on the 1730 "Royal Spanish" Strad. Heifetz recorded the Bach Double with himself, too. But I think the mistake that he made was that he used the same violin. Both parts sound exactly the same, so it's not that interesting to me. I don't know of any other recordings that have used two violins.

—A.A.M.