

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Breathtaking Bach at Columbia

By ADAM BAER

If you happened to be lucky enough to have snagged a ticket to violinist Gidon Kremer's presentation of Bach's six solo violin works Wednesday night at Columbia University's St. Paul's Cathedral, you may well have fallen victim to the affliction that struck a good many of the evening's audience: the inability to breathe.

Performing one of these knotty, multi-voice works (three four-movement sonatas, and three multi-movement partitas, or dance suites) is a genuine feat; performing all six of them at once is simply unfathomable. Yet Mr. Kremer pulled it off. He went two-by-two — sonata, partita, intermission — and displayed throughout the three-and-a-half hour ordeal pleasure, lack of inhibition, and deep emotional involvement.

Each Bach violin work is a polyphonic world unto itself, a map to an entirely original emotional universe, written for an instrument traditionally used to simply sing a soprano line. The first sonata in G minor opens with a broad, tragic chord and spins off into scale-like elaborations, which arrive at new tonal landings and continue, until returning home. Then, as in the other sonatas, comes a fugue subject of the utmost simplicity — four eighth notes of the same pitch that lead to a simple cadence — which is eventually put through the ringer: arpeggios, modulations, and technical magic tricks that show Beethoven was far from the first

Presto whizzed by at a frightening pace, powered by nonstop 16th notes articulated just slightly off the string so that each one came to a blunt-tipped point.

Mr. Kremer, like many of the 20th century's finest violinists, is a product of the Russian violin school: a group of soloists (think Jascha Heifetz), taught mainly by the very late Leopold Auer, to allow their inner klezmers to sing, show off, emote, and most important, to carry with them

still. You knew not what to expect next: At one moment in the brusque A minor fugue Mr. Kremer offered steady staccatoed planks of sound from the lower quarter of his bow, the next moment, he played improvisatory-sounding legato notes, grouped in rather unconventional hiccup bowings so that off-beats and dissonances were emphasized, not downbeats and harmonic arrivals.

While each moment was a highlight, it is impossible to ignore Mr. Kremer's performance of the famous D minor Chaconne, the devilish theme and variations that's added a notch to the belt of every professional violinist. Kremer's rendition was life-affirming: Unlike other musicians who take each variation at a different tempo, Mr. Kremer kept the lines moving from section to section, endlessly altering his characters and colors, but never allowing the piece more than a moment or two to breathe.

The mournful placidness of the piece's middle D major section, performed with a long, slow bow and without ornamentation, caught everyone by surprise: It sounded like children of the Baroque singing a hopeful mass. And the piece's virtuosic arpeggios offered just a little bit of magic. The inner harmonic lines sang while the upper ones danced, like four eccentric lovers romancing each other at once, the tension increasing bar by bar until a final release.



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composer to do a lot with a little.

Dressed in long, black, loose-fitting shirt and bespectacled with college-professor frames, Mr. Kremer took to a Persian-rug-draped performer's pedestal, and drew a stately blueprint of the sonata's tonal structure. His sound in the domed, booming space was immediately warm and tender, his rhythm relaxed like that of a 20th-century fantasia without a time signature or tempo marking.

The fugue, famous among violinists for its difficult four-voice chords, enunciated by vertically dropping the bow and then horizontally thrusting it across all four strings of the violin at once, came off brisk, determined, and, surprisingly enough, linear; the slow Sicilienne movement sang with mixture of nostalgia and affection; and the last-movement

the emotional weight of their forefather's cultural turmoil and collective anxiety. But unlike some of today's finer violinists, Mr. Kremer eschews any adherence to a school of playing, despite his Latvian background and history as one of violin aristocrat David Oistrakh's prized Moscow Conservatory students.

Mr. Kremer is thinker first, musician second, violinist third. And that is nothing if not the model for what today's performing artist should be. Take his interpretation of the first B minor partita. He attacked certain singular notes and chords with powerfully wide vibrato and uncompromising commitment, only to then relax his right hand so that the following notes could whisper to one another as the hair of his bow slid over the violin's fingerboard, making the timbre fuzzy and soft, the spirit, innocent and whimsical, and the sound unadorned with vibrato —

The violinist's eccentricities seemed honest at all times. And it was hard not to notice a certain fatherly approach to the repertoire. It was rather like eavesdropping on a violinist playing the music closest to his heart in a private Sunday morning practice session. Except, of course, that it was all there: highly artistic use of contrasting bow speeds, an endless palette of colors, and six groundbreaking interpretations that made each piece more like a singular statement in a long, sentence than a separate entity.

At one point, Robert Harth, the CEO of Carnegie Hall, and Robert Mann, former first violinist of the Julliard Quartet, both chuckled in amazement at once while sitting but one row away from each other. Everyone in attendance knew something very special was happening before him.