

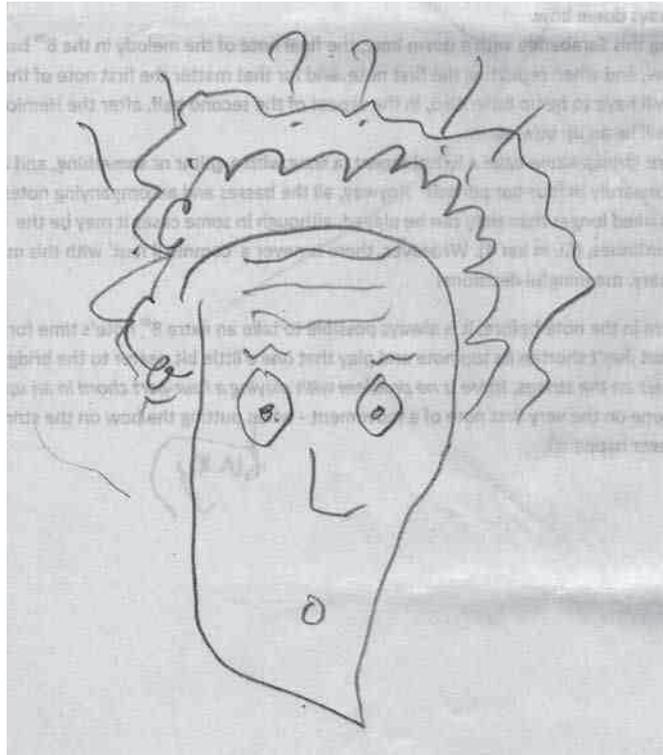
**Grumbler's Bach**

**About Bach's B Minor Solo  
for Violino Senza Basso**

by  
**Anner Bylsma**

**Amsterdam  
The Fencing Mail, 2016**

With endless gratitude to Michael Feves and his son Ephraim,  
and to my brother, Henk Bijlsma and his dear wife Ties van Roosendaal  
for their selfless interest and all of their work!



## COLOPHON

Grumbler's Bach  
by Anner Bylsma  
© Amsterdam, 2016

*Layout, musical examples and editing:* Michael Feves  
*Copy editor,* Ephraim Feves  
*Published and distributed by:* Bylsma's Fencing Mail, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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*To VERA, my amazing wife*

## **Grumbler's Bach**

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**2016**

## About Bach's B Minor Solo for Violin Senza Basso

After so many years of trying to teach him a lesson (over two hundred by now), our great violinists seem to have begun to give up on the man. He's too stubborn! And it is no longer a matter of principle or taken for granted that his compositions are the preferred choice as encores.

Achievements of modern violin playing do not seem to apply to his works:

–'the healthy organ sound' – all notes should be equally loud except organ-terraces;

–'solfège' – all bars should be metronomically rhythmical;

–'equality' – there should be no difference between up-bow or down-bow playing.

Furthermore, to try to make a solo piece sound like more than one person speaking is definitely considered to be a thing of the past. A Napoleon or Cleopatra expounding on his or her own importance is more what one is bound to get nowadays.

The Allemande of the 1st Partita is, no doubt, a piece in three voices (a bass and two upper voices). The 4th note in four-part chords therefore is not part of a voice here: it is a technical necessity on a violin when crossing strings.

For the bass of those chords one often needs a little extra time – an extra 16th or 32nd – due to the form of our violin bridges. Their top notes should nevertheless sound as if 'on the beat' and not be shortened.

Little ruses sometimes have to be used to hear the voices as separate entities. For instance, the E on the third beat of bar 1 should be alone at the end: it is the second voice speaking up.

Top notes of chords should be played a little nearer the bridge, so that they stand out.

There is something special about the dots in dotted notes. Like final syllables in words in spoken language, they are usually soft – *father*, *mother*, *modulation* (unless the harmony becomes dissonant underneath).

And how wonderful is the idea of *senza basso*: the listener helps the composer to compose!

In bar two the bass on the third beat would have been F#; the bassline from the beginning being B - A# - b-a - G - F# (if there had been an F# on the violin). As it is, the listener will have to imagine it himself.

*Senza basso* is meant to enhance the communication between player and listener, just as counterpoint – the thinking in voices – is meant to seduce the listener to become a partaker.

In bar 2 the long dotted scale can also be heard as two people speaking. Until the A#, halfway through the bar, undoubtedly the first voice is speaking, and after that it becomes really intriguing to know who is who.

Good spots for uncertainty or bias are triplets with their little threes over two or three notes (see, for example, the first bar of the 8th line). We moderns, in our computer era, tend to consider the quill pen to be a primitive instrument, but is it? And, for that matter, the last little three of this 8th line... could that have been a slur over two in the sketchbook?

The 32nds in this piece are separated most of the time, but not always. Here is a man who spoke with his right arm!

Partia *à* Violino Solo senza Basso.

*Allemanda*

A handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Allemanda" for Violino Solo. The score is written on ten staves. The first staff begins with the word "Allemanda" in a cursive hand. The music is written in a single system, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked with a quarter note and the number "120". The notation is dense, featuring many sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often beamed together. There are several slurs and accents throughout the piece. The handwriting is elegant and characteristic of the 18th or 19th century.

## What is the fun of a DOUBLE?

A Double is a kind of talkative variation on the ‘single.’ One might even start to wonder if this whole Partita is not secretly a set of variations on its first piece, the Allemande.

There is a singular, plagal (subdominant) unity in the harmonies that all movements start with, and F#, G, F#... might that be Trinity, with God-the-father in the middle?

Do we need another hoax?

It is a very special pleasure in these Doubles to find and relish little traits which seem to convey the same quality of the original motives in the Allemande.

The wonderfully ‘honest’ moment of D major in the third bar from the beginning, for instance, seems to have a parallel emotion at the same spot in the Double – for the man who is looking for it. This Double is marked *Alla breve*, and I think that is exactly what it means: in two, but not twice as fast; more like a kind of explanation of what just happened in the Allemande. The really fast piece in this Partita is the Double of the Courante: Presto.

A long string of two-and-two slurs, as found here in the Double of this Allemande, doesn’t happen often. To slur consonants and dissonants in the same way is a rarity.

The French tradition of *inégalité* comes to mind, although it mostly pertains to scale-like passages. What about a bit of *dynamic inégalité* – the second note much softer than the first one, a bit like very lazy double stops: LA-zy, LA-zy?

Separately bowed though, and *égale*, are the notes which cross over three strings.

What about the impossible slur in bar 12? Do we see here a correction made later in order to make the repeat ready for ‘mirroring’? (See page 12 and the 2nd commentary on the Sarabande, page 20.)

Thanks to the missing slur on the second beat of bar 11 , the first beat of bar 12 is up-bow. My guess is that Bach’s last word for the third beat of bar 12 is . In the last bar there is another problem in the second beat. Personally I would opt for the faint slur over three, for the same reason that I did at the end of the first half of this Double: the bowings do not change for the opposite in the repeat.

Thus, in bar 24, second beat, my guess is  and not .

*Double*

This image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for a double bass instrument. The word "Double" is written in a cursive script at the beginning of the first staff. The music is written on ten staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation is dense and complex, featuring a variety of note values including eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second notes, as well as rests and slurs. The handwriting is fluid and characteristic of a composer's manuscript. The page is numbered "7" in the top right corner.

## The CORRENTE of the B minor Partita

'ENTE' is a grammatical way of describing something that is in the course of happening.

In Correntes, which are usually written in three quarter bars, there is, unlike in other dances, but little difference between the individual eighth notes. It is more a matter of peacefully running along like a horse trotting home. On every first of six notes, one feels the urge to give a small tap on the floor, six apparently being an important number here.

However, the Corrente of this B minor Partita does not run in six eighths - but in six quarters. The bar-lines alternate between smaller and larger ones to make two bars into a kind of one.

Bach already had this idea a little bit earlier in the Presto of the previous Sonata in G minor as a means to make himself think in a double 3/8th bar instead of a single one. When the next Double arrives, another Presto, he seems to think better of it all and crosses out the small, second-bar barline (see page 10, bar 2).

The function of a slur often is to underline something, a syllable or a word, just like one would do in normal writing. Most fourth beats out of six in the first half of this Corrente have a slur (always colloquially over three notes). In the second half there is more variety in that respect ('We'll do anything not to bore our customer!'), but it is still very much the same thing. Those slurs of three are **always down-bow**, as well, and you will also find two slurs of nine in the down-bow here.

Germans, and Bach was a true one, tend to love things that are difficult. I can hear my dear friend Jürgen say, "*Das Stück ist ja schwierig, aber Angenehm – angenehm Schwer!*" (The piece is difficult, but pleasant – pleasantly difficult!)

But WHY do all of those slurs have to be played down-bow?

Well, Bach was also a genuine violinist and he must have had to practise. As down-bows normally make diminuendo, what is one to do when a last note of some slur should be clearly heard?

ONE PRACTICES...

In this Corrente we can see Bach practicing and stretching the fingers of his right hand just before the last note of a slur. What we don't see, is Bach changing slurs with a grim, know-it-all face.

*Corrente*

A handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Corrente". The score is written on ten staves, organized into two systems of five staves each. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings. The first staff begins with the word "Corrente" written in a cursive hand. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and includes some triplet markings. The overall style is characteristic of 18th or 19th-century manuscript notation.

## The DOUBLE of the Corrente

This is another movement exclusively in equal notes, and, as usual, there are no dynamic markings. Easily we can imagine our 'sorcerer's apprentices' in action. Oh! All those horrible Vivaldi performances we have to endure! May we assume that this piece starts with a little down bow?

Unlike the first Corrente with its *parlando* syllables in quarters, this Double seems, together with its given pace of six eighths, to run in more spun-out words. The first bars of the second half, in 3/4, might sound like this: o|x . x|x . . |x x x|x . x|x x x|x . x|x . . |. x . |x x x|x x . |x x x|x . . | . . . |x x x|x . x|x

This piece is marked Presto and I am sure that Mr. Bach had to pocket his pride when writing that small word because the word Corrente alone should have been enough. But now in a 3/4 bar with 6 eighth-notes and all of those boring scales, a little warning might be better. One speaks softly and, keeping the first finger snugly with the others, smilingly prepares vicious little kicks with a loose wrist while the scales are fleeting by, looking adventurously forward.

In the last bar of the Coda see how the Master deals with that extra bar which has its origin in the half bar-lines in the Corrente proper.

It is nice to have the 'Single' in mind and to discuss things with it while performing its Double.

A handwritten musical score consisting of 11 staves. The notation is dense and complex, featuring a variety of note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The first ten staves are filled with intricate musical notation, including many slurs and ties. The eleventh staff is shorter and includes the handwritten annotation "V.S. volk" in a cursive script. The paper shows signs of age, with some staining and a slightly yellowed tone.

## About the SARABANDE of the B minor Partita

The notation of slurs is always very precise in these works. There are never two consecutive up-bows or down-bows in the works of Bach: **never**, you may count on it.

Often the repeats of sections come out opposite in the bowing. This '**mirroring**' is very much like repeating a spoken sentence with a new diction: 'Five is more than *ten*', and 'Five is *more* than ten' (read about this matter in the works of Muffat and Geminiani).

A modern player, in his naïve routine of workmanship, is bound to immediately change slurs to make them the same both times, and as a result many beautiful things will never be known to him.

One thing: final notes of movements, with the exception of the Gigue of the second cello suite, are always **down-bow**. However, if you start this Sarabande with a down-bow, the final note of the melody in the 8th bar will be an up-bow, and when repeating, thanks to the three notes in the first ending, the first note of the piece (and for that matter, the first note of the second half) will have to be up-bow. Also, in the repeat of the second half, after the hemiola, the first note will be an up-bow again but the very last note will be down.

It seems that the rather uncomfortable chords have to be played as an appoggiatura accompaniment, like on a guitar, and most of the time without lengthening the bar. I say 'seems', I don't know.

Anyway, many of those basses and accompanying notes have been written longer than they can be played, although in some cases it may be the bass which continues (see bar 4).

Of course, in these times of solfège we are taught that eighth notes written above quarters will have to be slurred, but in times of counterpoint the independence of voices gave people more pleasure and special slurs had to be used to make clear that one should play these notes on one bow (see bars 20, 21, 23, and 28 of this Sarabande).

As the bow always rests on the strings, it is quite possible to play four-part chords in an up-bow, except for an up-bow on a chord on the very first note of a movement when one is still busy putting the thing on the strings. A chord there will be down-bow the first time.

Geminiani rarely uses *su* and *giù* for up-bow and down-bow and Bach doesn't use symbols at all. Up-bow and down-bow, like man and wife, are for him different but equal.



## The DOUBLE of the Sarabande of the B minor Partita

As the last note of the Sarabande is a down-bow, the first note of the Double starts up, which is nice, as the heavier moment thus is on the beginning of the second bar. However, in the second half of this Double, after the four-note second-ending of the first half, it starts down-bow and the two-bar logic rests more now on the first bar of the two. Our down-bows are by nature more definite, and up-bows tend to be more questioning...

Also, in the course of the second half of this Double, there are little moments of homecoming (down-bow at the frog). It starts down-bow, and eight bars later, after the E minor bar, the high A feels like a new beginning, and 8 bars after that, on the low D, the same satisfaction oozes through the body. In the very last bar the main down-bow is on the fourth note... elegant!

Ps. In my commentary on the Sarabande, I say something to this effect: up-bows on final notes never happen. Well, here is another one...



*Tempo di Borea.*

A handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Tempo di Borea". The score is written on 12 staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The music is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a fermata. Below the final staff, the words "Finis" are written in a decorative, cursive script.

## The DOUBLE of the Tempo di Borea

Small, intelligent and playful differences are what makes Bach a greater artist than the dutiful teacher who busies himself changing the bowings. Hard to understand them – those differences – you may think. Not really, it's just where you stubbed your toe on a wrong note.

The basic rhythm of a Borea is of course a quick-quick-slow, plus extensions - bar-long waiting games to keep the listener on his toes – and occasionally the opposite idea: slow-quick-quick, starting with the heavy moment (bars 12 and 13 in both Boreas).

Here is what I hope to be an accurate correction of a slur:

Bar 42: D C# is asking for trouble – proposed: an additional slur of two in bar 45: A# B (?)

Try to find a better one, dear reader.

The slurs in bar 57 are on the notes: C B A and G F#.

As usual, there are no dynamic markings in this Double.

The four last bars are not just a wistful memory of the words of the first Borea, but will remind one of all of the other movements as well.

To conclude, here are a few more thoughts on the Allemande and the Sarabande, after more close reading.

The two slow movements of this Partita are like spoken texts, *Klangreden*, and it is easy to see in the score how skillful Bach was at making himself clear.

For instance, by writing Allemandas in a slow four-quarter bar with hard to decipher little notes, he knew he could count on the performer to think with him in this slow bar. Although we are bound to speak Bach's language with a heavy accent after three hundred years (an accent which we are unable to hear ourselves), we are all fascinated with trying to play his music honestly in the way it was conceived.

A good musician is two things at the same time: an excellent handyman and an artist; the latter develops from quite often heated discussions with friends: "*Du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité.*" (From the clash of opinions the truth leaps up!)

Here we go:

Allemande, bar 1: play E and A together when starting the trill on the second beat.

In the second chord it is the E which stays, but otherwise, very often – like final syllables in words – dotted notes should be soft in the dots. (Just try it out for yourself, please.)

Do note the genius of Bach's bow strokes in this first bar, and take a moment to throw your modern editions of his works out the window.

Bar 2: the A# is the last note of the top voice – for the moment.

Bar 5: the rhythm in the first beat is Lombardic, the 2nd and 4th notes are held out stiffly, and the following high A in the up-bow is an expressive, inhaling note.

When the note before a chord allows no time to place the bass note of the next chord, an additional 16th is added, but the top note will not be shortened as a result, which is something quite surprising. I call it accoustical perspective, which makes for many 4-and-a-half quarter bars in the course of a piece. Yet nobody seems to be annoyed!

A slur in this music is never just 'a technical matter'; it underlines a 'word' or helps to give expression to it, and the length of the two notes in a double stop will hardly ever be the same.

'Half-endings' like those in bars 17 and 24 may be in an up-bow. Is that to convey a feeling of 'not yet' ... of 'unfinished business?'

Please, do also have a look at the score of the Allemande without playing it.

Double.

A handwritten musical score for a double instrument, consisting of 13 staves of music. The notation is dense and includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and phrasing slurs. The music is written in a single system across the page. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 3/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a fermata over the final note.

Partia *à* <sup>me</sup> Violino Solo senza Basso.

Alleganda

3

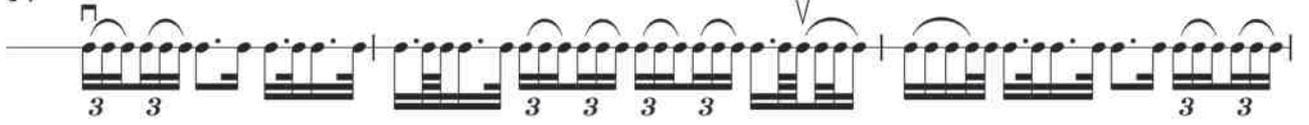
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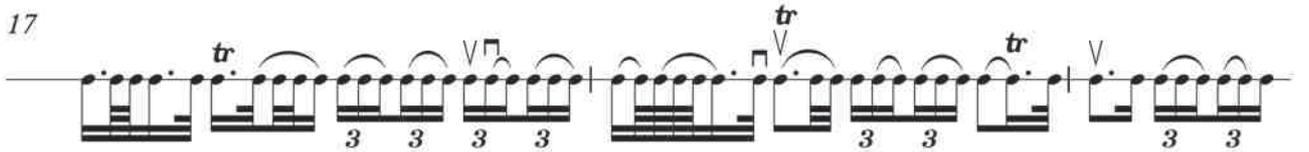
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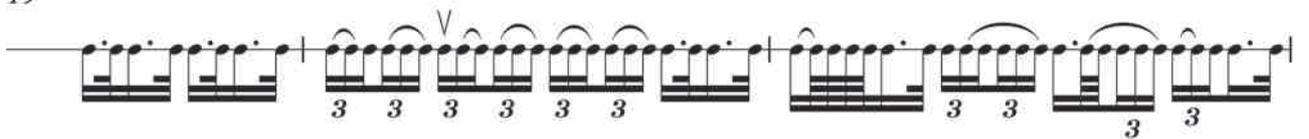
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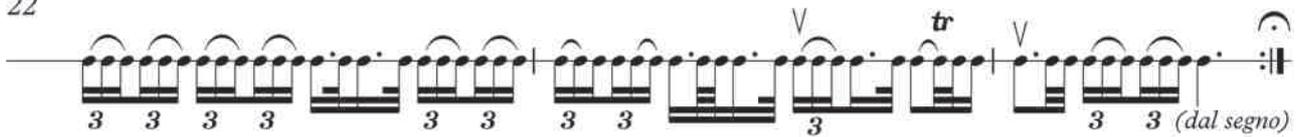
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## SARABANDE

‘Staunch’ is a good word for Sarabandes, and on second beats, especially when there is nothing happening at that moment, one may feel proud enough to give a tap on the floor (in bar 2). But not all bars in a Sarabande have this very special ‘mentality’ in which the second beat may be even louder than the first one. Often three equal quarters seem to act like a simple up-beat (bar 9).

In the first half of this piece the bowings are ‘mirrored’ in the repeat, thanks to the first ending and set into motion by a funny slur in bar 5. This kind of reversal is a technique that, lively as it is, has often passed by unnoticed in our day, due to primitive changing of slurs and uncalled-for embellishments by colleagues who should know better...

As the chords are rather awkward here, might they have been meant to be played as short appoggiaturas only, like a kind of drum-roll before the beats so that the top line becomes a voice with an accompaniment: the first time more like a dance, and the second time maybe more lyrical – Bach the contrapuntist: quite a homophonist now...?

Aided by the listeners’ own memory, however, those short accompanying notes still register as a bass and a middle voice. In bar 8 the two upper voices change places, the C# is the ‘melody’ now and the top F# is the second voice. Luckily we have left behind the times in which repeats always were ordained to be an ‘echo’.

The written length of a note is its playing field, but the duration can be influenced by other musical factors. In chords or in double-stops the two strings will hardly ever sound equally long; their notes have different functions in the fabric of the music.

Thanks to old records and tapes we know a little more about how players of genius inspired their audiences in their day. We still feel impressed listening to them, even when we realize that we would never pass our exams playing that way!

Written accounts of contemporaries are harder to judge. The words they used may have quite a different meaning to us now, although blowing your horn for somebody sporting an executioner at his elbow cannot be much different from doing it for somebody who governs the strings of your purse. And what to think of this description of Corelli’s playing in the English translation of Ragueneau’s *A Comparison Between the French and Italian Musick and Operas*: “When Corelli played he was not the same man. He rocked his body to and fro...” etc, etc. For a moment, imagine yourself listening to Bach when you play the repeat of the first half of this Sarabande. By the way, the hemiola – the big 3/2 bar in the last bars – is only meant for the top line.

The modern listener is not really overindulged in matters of musical imagination. An organ sound is particularly lacking, the conductor’s means are slim, and the layers of fat, sold as ‘feeling’ on the piano turns music into a harmony lesson instead of a conversation between reasonable beings.

Long live the intelligence of our hearers who, mostly in retrospect, still know how to make order.

With Grumbler’s Greetings,

Anner Bylsma

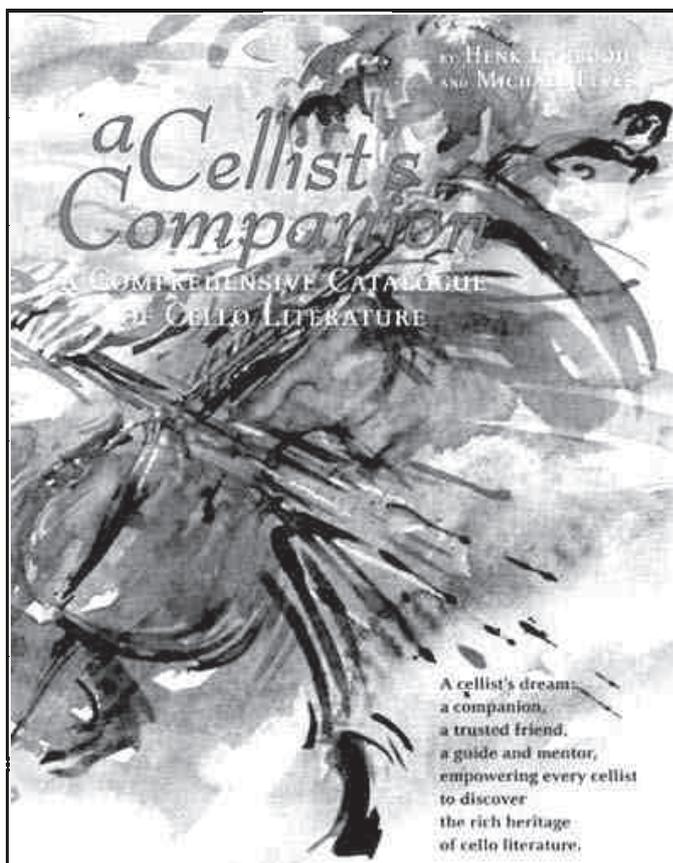
*Sarabande.*

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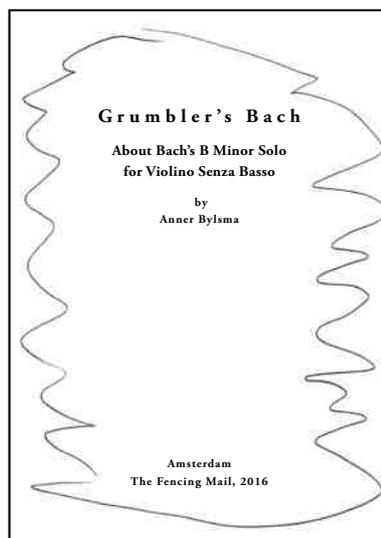
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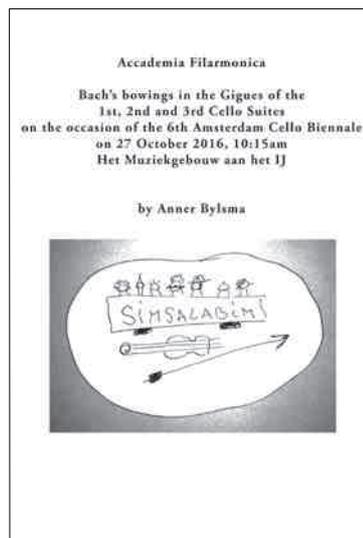
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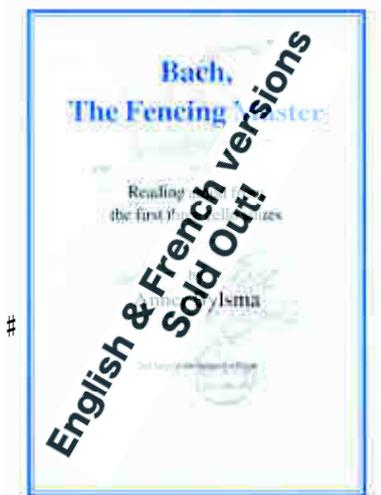
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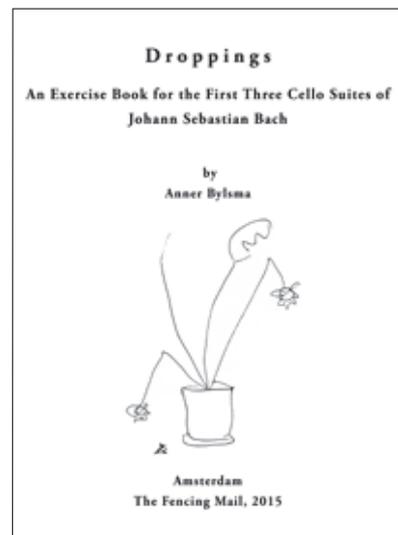
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