

When Johanna Martzy recorded Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin in 1954 and 1955 she was not yet thirty-one, yet already the possessor of an artistic identity of striking certainty. Born in Romanian Timișoara, formerly Temesvár, in 1924, and trained in Budapest, Martzy had made her debut at thirteen and won first prize at the Geneva Competition in 1947. Her international career was brilliant but her commercial discography remained small. In later decades that scarcity helped create the Martzy legend: her records became objects of intense collector devotion, with the three original Columbia Bach LPs among the most coveted of all post-war violin recordings.

This Bach set deserves that reputation. It was issued by Columbia on three mono LPs, 33CX 1286, 1287 and 1288, and recorded at Abbey Road Studios between 1954 and 1955. It also holds a special historical place as the first complete recording of the Sonatas and Partitas by a woman violinist. More importantly, it remains one of the great individual readings of these works: grave, concentrated, inward and intensely human, but never indulgent.

The Sonatas and Partitas are not merely a monument of the violin repertoire. They are a test of musical imagination under extreme conditions. One player must suggest harmony, counterpoint, architecture, dance, rhetoric and prayer without the aid of accompaniment. In the fugues, Bach asks the violin to imply an organ loft. In the dance movements, he asks it to sing and move without becoming decorative. In the *Chaconne*, he builds a spiritual drama of near symphonic weight from a single instrument. The challenge is as much moral as technical: how much personality may the performer bring before the music begins to bend out of shape?

Martzy's answer is compelling because it is so disciplined. She does not present Bach as a vehicle for display, nor as a field for scholarly caution. Her playing belongs to an older central European violin tradition, with a full tone, expressive vibrato and a firm sense of line, yet it is remarkably free from self-regarding gesture. The beauty of the sound is not cosmetic. It gives the music continuity, warmth and inward force. The slow movements unfold with a rapt stillness, while the fugues are built with exceptional steadiness. The dance movements have dignity rather than rustic bounce, and the Chaconne is shaped with a long view of its structure, its tension accumulating not by theatrical means but through control, proportion and stamina.

The original critics heard much of this immediately. Reviewing the first LP in October 1955, *The Gramophone* praised Martzy's sustained beauty of tone, clean technique and "poetry of high order." A month later the continuation of the series drew admiration for the same qualities of tone and style, as well as for the sweep of the D minor Partita. When the final disc appeared in March 1956, completing the cycle, the reviewer found Martzy's playing marked by unflinching beauty of tone, unflinching regard for shaping, and a technical command that allowed the most outrageous demands to appear almost effortless. The completed set was judged an "entirely winning" achievement.

The recordings have not always been easy to hear at their best. The original LPs could convey remarkable presence, but surviving copies and later transfers have often left the sound dull, grey and obstructed, with hum, clicks, thumps and surface intrusions blunting the very qualities that matter most in Martzy's playing: the grain of the bow, the purity of intonation, the resonance around the violin, and the subtle dynamic life within long phrases.

This Pristine restoration has therefore aimed not to modernise the recording, but to release it. The transformation is substantial. Persistent hum has been tackled, intrusive clicks and knocks removed or reduced, and the tonal picture opened out. The result is clearer, cleaner and far more vivid, without sacrificing the essential mono character of the Abbey Road sound. Martzy's violin now has body, focus and bloom; the music breathes with far less obstruction. What once could seem forbidding or veiled now emerges with renewed immediacy.

These are not comfortable background performances. They ask for attention, and reward it richly. Martzy's Bach is poised between severity and tenderness, between architectural strength and private confession. Heard in this restored sound, the set regains its rightful stature: not merely a famous rarity, but one of the great recorded journeys through Bach's solo violin works.



PRISTINE AUDIO  
XR  
AMBIENT STEREO  
PACM134

# BACH

## Sonatas & Partitas

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### JOHANNA MARTZY

*The complete 1954-55 English  
Columbia recordings*

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XR REMASTERED

## J. S. BACH Sonatas &amp; Partitas for Solo Violin

## disc one (66:33)

**BACH Violin Sonata No. 1**

in G minor, BWV1001

1. 1st mvt. - Adagio (5:03)
2. 2nd mvt. - Fuga. Allegro (6:03)
3. 3rd mvt. - Siciliana (4:14)
4. 4th mvt. - Presto (2:47)

**BACH Violin Partita No. 1**

in B minor, BWV1002

5. 1st mvt. - Allemande (6:21)
6. 2nd mvt. - Double (3:20)
7. 3rd mvt. - Corrente (3:22)
8. 4th mvt. - Double. Presto (2:48)
9. 5th mvt. - Sarabande (2:14)
10. 6th mvt. - Double (1:40)
11. 7th mvt. - Tempo di Bourrée (2:36)
12. 8th mvt. - Double (2:43)

**BACH Violin Sonata No. 2**

in A minor, BWV1003

13. 1st mvt. - Grave (5:11)
14. 2nd mvt. - Fuga (8:42)
15. 3rd mvt. - Andante (4:54)
16. 4th mvt. - Allegro (4:36)

Johanna Martzy, violin

## disc two (73:42)

**BACH Violin Partita No. 2**

in D minor, BWV1004

1. 1st mvt. - Allemande (4:22)
2. 2nd mvt. - Courante (2:55)
3. 3rd mvt. - Sarabande (2:54)
4. 4th mvt. - Gigue (3:19)
5. 5th mvt. - Chaconne (15:24)

**BACH Violin Sonata No. 3**

in C major, BWV1005

6. 1st mvt. - Adagio (5:47)
7. 2nd mvt. - Fuga (11:19)
8. 3rd mvt. - Largo (4:01)
9. 4th mvt. - Allegro assai (4:15)

**BACH Violin Partita No. 3**

in E major, BWV1006

10. 1st mvt. - Preludio (3:51)
11. 2nd mvt. - Loure (4:24)
12. 3rd mvt. - Gavotte en Rondeau (3:12)
13. 4th mvt. - Menuets I & II (4:28)
14. 5th mvt. - Bourrée (1:41)
15. 6th mvt. - Gigue (1:51)

Violin Sonata No. 3  
rec. 1 May & 1-3 June 1954Violin Partita No. 2  
rec. 24-26 July 1954Violin Sonata No. 1  
rec. 26-27 March 1955Violin Sonata No. 2  
rec. 27-31 March & 1-2 April 1955Violin Partita No. 1  
rec. 27-30 April 1955Violin Partita No. 3  
rec. 15-18 May 1955Recordings made at Abbey  
Road Studios, London

Total duration: 2hr 20:15