

From Listening to Understanding

Approaches to Historical Performance Practice based on the *Allemanda* in D Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach

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This essay examines four different recordings of Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) *Allemanda* in D minor (*Partita No. 2/1*, BWV 1004) from the *Sei Solo* cycle (BWV 1001–1006), focusing on how each performer approaches the piece. It compares aspects such as the instruments and bows used, articulation, phrasing, and interpretative choices. At the same time, it shows that despite their differences, the recordings also share some common points. The work looks at how violinists from different cultural and musical backgrounds develop their understanding of historically informed performance (HIP)—some through formal education, others through personal interest later in their careers. The study reflects on how musicians combine historical knowledge with personal experience when interpreting works of Bach. It also discusses the role of curiosity, education, and listening in shaping musical identity. The essay emphasizes that tradition is not something fixed but something each musician helps to shape. It also points out that historical sources can guide but not dictate how to play. In today's digital landscape, where many recordings are available online, it becomes even more important to listen critically and carefully choose what to learn from. In the end, this essay encourages musicians to listen deeply and ask questions rather than copy existing interpretations. It suggests that the most meaningful performances come from combining knowledge with personal sensitivity and creativity. Moreover, Bach's music offers many possibilities to achieve that. This essay invites readers to think more deeply about how we listen, learn, and interpret music today.

Introduction

This essay aims to use different recordings of a piece from Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) *Six Sonatas and Partitas* for solo violin (*Sei Solo*) (BWV 1001–1006), in particular the *Allemanda* in D minor (*Partita No. 2/1*, BWV 1004),¹ as a lens to investigate the performance practice of Baroque music nowadays.

Different trends have evolved over the past few decades, and violinist Julia Fischer (b. 1983) captures this sentiment well, expressing that one of the things she loves most about Bach, in particular, is

1 See Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin BWV 1001–1006*, ed. by Klaus Rönna, Urtext Edition, HN 356, Munich: G. Henle Verlag 1981.

that “you can have absolutely your own view—there is no unbroken performing tradition that you could be up against.”² Is this right? Is there not a single accurate way to interpret Bach? Is there truly no tradition at all? Are there any conventions or rules that every informed musician would agree upon?

This perspective and these questions are the foundations of my research, which investigates the diverse interpretative choices musicians make when performing Bach’s works. Understanding that the lack of a rigid, unbroken tradition is key for allowing a wide spectrum of artistic expression that makes exploring these interpretations both fascinating and complex. Indeed, tradition in the arts is not a static construct but rather a process of continuous development. While tradition provides a framework that can guide and influence artists, it also allows for reinterpretation and innovation, enabling artists to connect with the past while contributing their own perspectives and advancements.

The comparative analysis of recordings in this essay provides a balanced and informative perspective, highlighting the interpretative choices of Midori Seiler (b. 1969), Leila Schayegh (b. 1975), Shunske Sato (b. 1984), and Augustin Hadelich (b. 1984). It further examines their respective contributions to the Baroque tradition and considers how their differing circumstances have shaped the individuality of their performance.

Comparison of recordings: Seiler, Schayegh, Sato, and Hadelich

There are many strikingly different interpretations of Bach’s *Six Sonatas and Partitas* and there is relatively little primary information regarding how to play them, at least compared to other periods in the history of music, so that choosing only four recordings was a challenging task. The first requirement was that it had to be a relatively recent complete recording of all six *Sonatas and Partitas*. This would allow more freedom and a greater selection when choosing the movements to be compared; also, I thought, the fact that the musicians saw the need and made the effort of an integral recording implied that they deeply committed to such a big project, probably meaning that they believed their respective interpretation represents them in a unique way. The second part of the selection process consisted of carefully listening to every recording and trying, already in the first listening, to identify some major differences among them that would warrant further analysis.

The biographical details and relevant specifications of the four violinists selected for this study will be presented below to provide some contextual background on the recordings. Regarding the parameters of comparison, general aspects of the violinists’ backgrounds and their relationship to HIP will be discussed first, followed by an in-depth analysis and comparison of the recordings, regarding pitch, tempo, articulation, phrasing, and ornamentation.

General aspects: background, relationship to HIP, and interviews

Midori Seiler was born in 1969 in Osaka but grew up in Salzburg. She continued her studies in Switzerland, where she began her baroque path guided by Thomas Hengelbrock (b. 1958) at the Schola

2 Harriet Smith, “Interview: Julia Fischer”, in: *Gramophone* 83/993 (2005), p. 19.

Cantorum Basiliensis. She continued her studies in London with David Takeno (b. 1947) and in Berlin with Eberhard Feltz (b. 1937).

Seiler released the three *Partitas* in 2011 but recorded them from 9 to 11 November 2009 in Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Saal in Schloss Köthen, Germany.³ The second CD that includes the three *Sonatas* was published in 2016 and recorded from 26 to 28 September 2015 at the same place.⁴ In a very informative review Birgit Schlinger writes about Seiler's second album:

"Seiler dares to perform the almost impossible balancing act of playing a clear, emotional and powerful-sounding version of these partitas on the otherwise rather quiet gut strings with her Guarneri violin. The pieces accompany "her life as a violinist" and are like a common thread in her musical development, she says. [...] Recorded in Köthen, where Bach also composed the partitas, Midori Seiler creates spatial proximity to the composer by choosing the concert hall. She emphasizes that she only works on the music from the notes and does not use reference recordings from other violinists."⁵

As written in the booklet of the CD *Bach. The Violin Partitas* and also in several reviews for the *Sonata*-CD, Midori plays an Andrea Guarneri (1626–1698) violin from 1680 and a baroque bow. She exceptionally masters following the individual voices and their melodic lines "with incomparable subtlety and tenderness, power and singing",⁶ while at the same time integrating them into the structural framework of the composition itself.

Leila Schayegh was born in 1975 in Winterthur and released her album of the *Sei Solo* in 2021.⁷ However, she recorded them before the pandemic, between 9 and 11 September 2019, and from 21 to 23 January 2020 in Salle de Musique, La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland). In these recordings, she plays a violin made by Andrea Guarneri in Cremona in 1675, *sub titulo Sanctæ Teresiæ*, and a bow by Eduardo Angel Gorr (b. 1965), Cremona, model c1730. Schayegh currently works as a violin professor for old and baroque music at *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis* and has recently won the Swiss Music Award 2024.⁸

Shunske Sato was born in 1984 in Tokyo and recorded the *Sonatas and Partitas* in 2019 as part of the project "All of Bach"⁹ playing an original baroque Cornelius Kleynman (ca. 1670–1699) violin, ca. 1684. In fact, he recorded the *Partita no. 2* in D minor twice: The first recording dates to November 2015, Oude Dorpskerk, Bunnik, Utrecht, and was conceived as a small concert with only six people in the

3 See Midori Seiler, *J.S. Bach: Partitas for Violin*, CD, catalogue no. 0016722BC, Edel:Kultur, Berlin: Berlin Classics 2011.

4 See Midori Seiler, *J.S. Bach: The Violin Sonatas*, CD, catalogue no. 0300721BC, Edel:Kultur, Berlin: Berlin Classics 2016.

5 Birgit Schlinger, "Review" [2011], <<https://www.orellfuessli.ch/shop/home/artikelDETAILS/A1016579233>> (02.07.2024).

6 [Unknown Author], "Produktbeschreibungen" [2016], <<https://www.amazon.de/Solo-Violin-Sonatas-Midori-Seiler/dp/B00GX8LN18>> (14.10.2025).

7 Leila Schayegh, *Sonatas and Partitas*, CD, catalogue no. GCD 924205, Glossa, Heidelberg: note 1 music 2021.

8 Read more on her website: Leila Schayegh [2025], <<https://www.leilaschayegh.com/>> (08.10.2025).

9 For more information on this project see Netherlands Bach Society, "All of Bach" [2025], <<https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/allobach>> (08.10.2025).

audience, sitting very close to him. The second – used for the analysis in this article – is part of the “All of Bach” project released in 2019.¹⁰

Sato’s interest in HIP deepened during his studies in Europe. He first moved to Cologne to study with Richard Gwilt (b. 1958) and later studied in Amsterdam with Lucy van Dael (b. 1946), both renowned specialists in baroque performance practice. During his time in Europe, Sato collaborated with various musicians and ensembles dedicated to HIP, which broadened his knowledge and refined his appreciation of baroque music. This immersion established him as one of the most respected soloists and directors in the field. Since 2017, he has served as the artistic director of the Netherlands Bach Society.¹¹

Augustin Hadelich was born in 1984 in Tuscany, Italy and released his album *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* in 2021.¹² On the back cover, Hadelich is cited: “The early pandemic period of 2020, with its difficult emotions and sense of uncertainty, was the perfect time to take out my baroque bow and undertake the enormous project of recording these masterpieces”.¹³ He is currently playing a violin by Guarneri del Gesù (1698–1744) from 1744, once owned by Henryk Szeryng (1918–1988), and a baroque bow by Rüdiger Pfau when performing baroque music. Hadelich shares many insights into his latest and ongoing projects on the internet, so to see in a series of videos on his official YouTube-channel.¹⁴

Comparative analysis of the four recordings of the *Allemanda in D minor*

Comparisons of recordings by different artists (as in other artistic disciplines) should always be taken “with a grain of salt”. This is not only because artists are in a continuous development—meaning that the recording of a piece of music does not necessarily represent the artist in a fixed and definitive way—but also because recordings are shaped by various external factors, such as sound engineering, the acoustics of the recording room, and the characteristics of the instrument itself. Nevertheless, noticing the differences between expert performers remains instructive as it highlights the interpretive freedom musicians have when making performative decisions and developing a unique and authentic artistic identity.

As violinist Daniel Sepec (b. 1965) emphasized in an interview, developing a personal vision of the music requires both heightened awareness and informed knowledge. Ultimately, so Sepec, it is authenticity and honesty that enable a performance to communicate its interpretation convincingly and to persuade the audience:

10 See Shunske Sato, “Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor. BWV 1004 performed by Shunske Sato. Lichtfabriek, Haarlem” [2019], <<https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/bwv/bwv-1004>> (09.10.2025).

11 Read more on Sato’s website: Shunske Sato [2025], <<https://www.shunksesato.com/>> (08.10.2025).

12 See Augustin Hadelich, *Sonatas & Partitas for Solo Violin*, CD, catalogue no. 9029504874, Warner Classics Boston: Parlophone Records 2021.

13 Ibid., CD back cover.

14 See Augustin Hadelich’s YouTube series “Ask Augustin”: Augustin Hadelich, “Ask Augustin” [2020–2025], <<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9yWS3VwScTxZszicRFeUyoPQA5Qb-zF&si=IpT-BQbr3EiVoTfk>> (03.10.2025).

"I always want to connect with the audience but I also want the people persuaded by the piece, and give the piece the best I can [...]. That's the main point in all of this... authenticity and honesty. And on the other hand, you can't play it so everyone is happy. You can't simply do it because they [the audience] will all have different and determined tastes. Professional musicians who have studied and played the piece you are playing their whole lives are very clear on what they want, but each interpretation can be very different from the other... I think sometimes these people (like us musicians and also music-listeners/lovers) can be difficult to change their views, but if you are strong and the audience is open-minded... You can offer a fresh perspective. In the end, I decide to interpret in a way that feels authentic to me. I present a piece as good as I am with it and then it's up to the audience if they like it or not."¹⁵

Other important decisions made by the performers are the choice of instrument and bow. Seiler, Schayegh, and Sato perform with a fully baroque setup, this means employing baroque-shaped violins with gut strings and a baroque bow (characterized by a convex curve). By contrast, as explained in the previous section, Hadelich performs on a modern setup, with the sole exception of using a baroque bow crafted by Pfau. The pitch therefore only differs markedly in Hadelich's recording, as pure gut strings are often tuned around A=415 Hz due to their lower tension-bearing capacity compared to synthetic strings, which are usually tuned around A=440 Hz. Also, the widely used pitch level in the 18th century was around A=415 Hz. Using *Sonic Visualiser*,¹⁶ it was possible to confirm my initial auditory impression: Each of the four violinists tuned their instruments to different reference frequencies (Seiler at A=417 Hz, Schayegh at 415 Hz, Sato at 407 Hz, and Hadelich at 443 Hz). The divergences among Seiler, Schayegh, and Sato reflect not only individual preferences but also the characteristics of the strings and the anatomical idiosyncrasies of their respective instruments, as well as practical considerations such as the necessity of aligning with an ensemble's pitch on the days of their recording sessions.

Another significant factor at the beginning of the recording process is the choice of location. Seiler decided to record in Köthen, the place where Bach is believed to have composed this cycle, thereby trying to immerse herself in Bach's creative environment. Sato, on the other hand, pursued a different approach, shaped by the audiovisual nature of his project: He chose to record "in a former power station in Haarlem, which used to supply the city with power and light. This explains its nickname 'Lichtfabriek' (Light Factory). Inspired by this special setting, the director chose to give lighting a prominent role in the performance."¹⁷ As the images below (figure 1) suggest, Sato's project adopts a distinctly modern character, incorporating a contemporary stage design that seeks to build a connection with today's audiences through the use of eye-catching, multicoloured lighting effects. On a more speculative interpretative level, these visual elements could be understood as a metaphor for divine grandeur, analogous to the stained-glass windows in Gothic ecclesiastic architecture.

15 Daniel Sepec, Exclusive interview, Arâches-la-Frasse Flaine (France), 20 August 2023. The interview was conducted by the author. Quotation with kind permission by Daniel Sepec.

16 More details on this software and on the comparison methods are provided in the chapter *Timing*. See also fn. 19.

17 Eline Eestermans, "Almost the most beautiful key" [2021], <<https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/bwv/bwv-1001>> (02.07.2024).

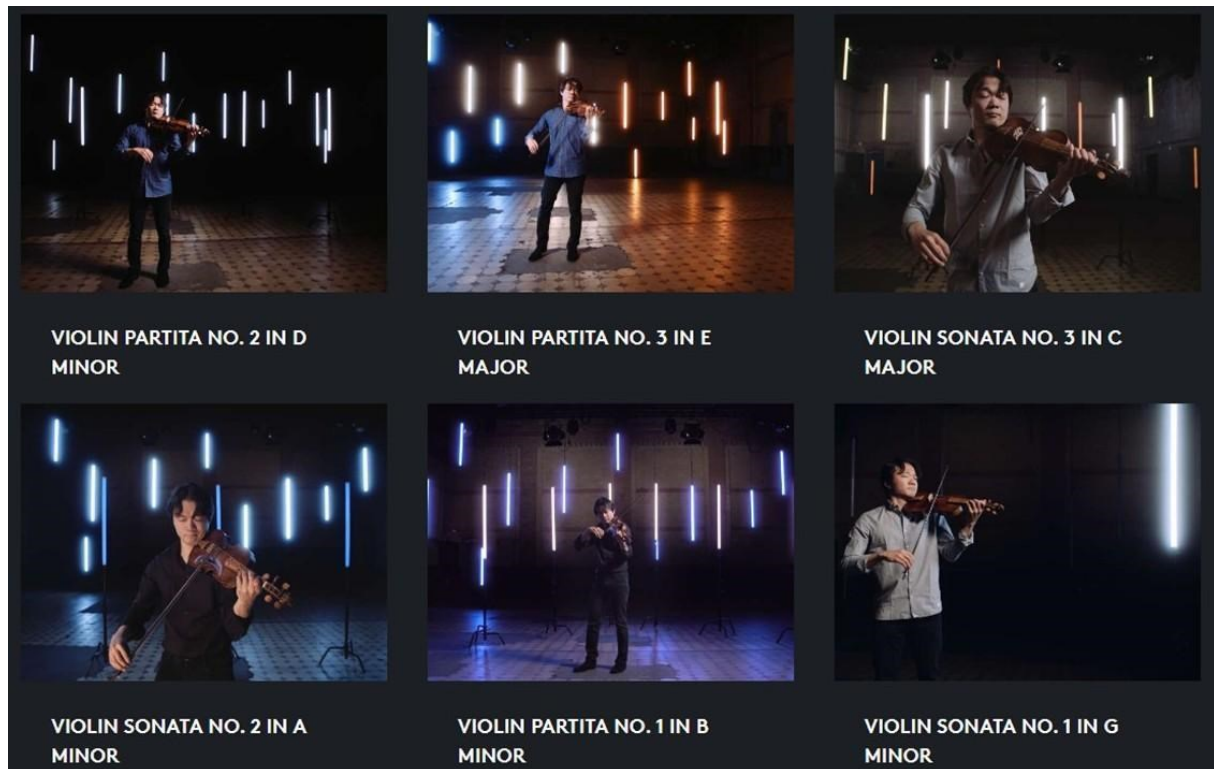


Figure 1: Sato performing Bach's *Six Sonatas and Partitas* at Lichtfabriek, Harlem (2019).¹⁸

Timing: tempo choices and rhythm accuracy

In my research I used *Sonic Visualiser*¹⁹ not only to verify the tuning pitches of the respective performers but also as an analytic tool for examining their tempo choices, tempo stability, and use of *rubato*.

To compare the general tempo choices and their fluctuations among the different violinists, the *Allemanda* in D minor was selected because of its monophonic texture and its moderate pace, which allowed me to track the beats with precision. The piece contains two major sections that all four violinists chose to repeat, as prescribed in the manuscript for most dances of the second *Partita*.²⁰ These repeated sections can be identified in the following illustrations (figures 2a–d) generated with *Sonic Visualiser*. The yellow-green spectrogram represents the violin's harmonic spectrum, while the waveform is displayed in a butterfly format corresponding to the two channels of the stereo audio source. The purple lines indicate the beats (quavers) tracked aurally.

Time fluctuations can also be examined in more detail by analysing different subdivisions (semi-quavers) or longer beat units (half notes). This approach reveals that the *rubato* appears more pronounced when looking at finer subdivisions, whereas on a broader temporal scale (longer beats) the

¹⁸ See Netherlands Bach Society, "All of Bach" (like fn. 9).

¹⁹ See Chris Cannam, Christian Landone, and Mark Sandler, "Sonic Visualiser. An Open Source Application for Viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files", in: *MM '10. Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference*, New York: Association for Computing Machinery 2010, p. 1467f.

²⁰ Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (autograph manuscript, 1720, Mus. ms. Bach P 968), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

tempo remains stable. This reflects the nature of the *rubato*, which involves “borrowing” time at one point only to “return” it later. It is this balance that sustains the musical discourse, making it more coherent and easier for the listener to follow.

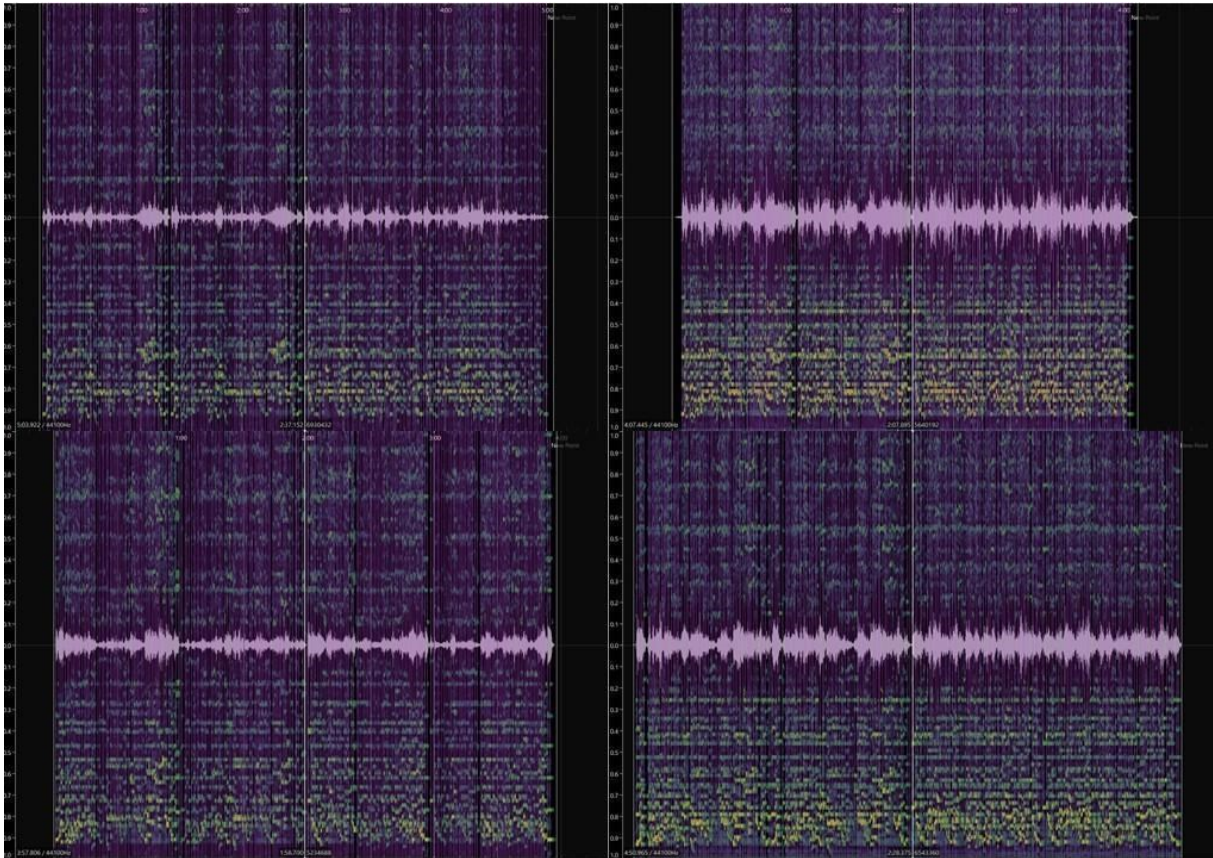


Figure 2a–d: Seiler’s (up left), Schayegh’s (up right), Sato’s (down left), and Hadelich’s (down right) performance of the *Allemanda* in D Minor in *Sonic Visualiser*.

To analyse the tempo variations in each recording, the following visualisations (figures 3a–d) were created. In these graphs, the dots represent the tempo between the beats, while the line indicates a trend how the overall tempo evolves and varies from the beginning to the end of the *Allemanda*.

Interestingly, the tendency appears to accelerate in the performances of Seiler, Schayegh, and Hadelich, whereas Sato remains strikingly stable. This might suggest that he relied on some metronomic reference during his recording—if not for the special situation that his rendition is the only one captured as a video recording among the four included in this comparison. Sato’s larger deviations also occur with more regularity, making both his overall tempo and his tempo deviations the most consistent of the recordings.

As shown in table 1, Seiler’s and Sato’s tempo choices are very close, while Schayegh’s is likewise very similar to Hadelich’s. However, the perception of the tempo differs considerably. This divergence is tied to the fundamentally different characteristics of their sound. Schayegh performs on natural gut strings, whereas Hadelich uses a set of synthetic Evah Pirazzi strings. In an interview marking the 20th anniversary of Evah Pirazzi strings, Hadelich explained his preference: “I chose them for their power and projection and fullness of tone, rather than the color of the sound—I just wanted strings that would

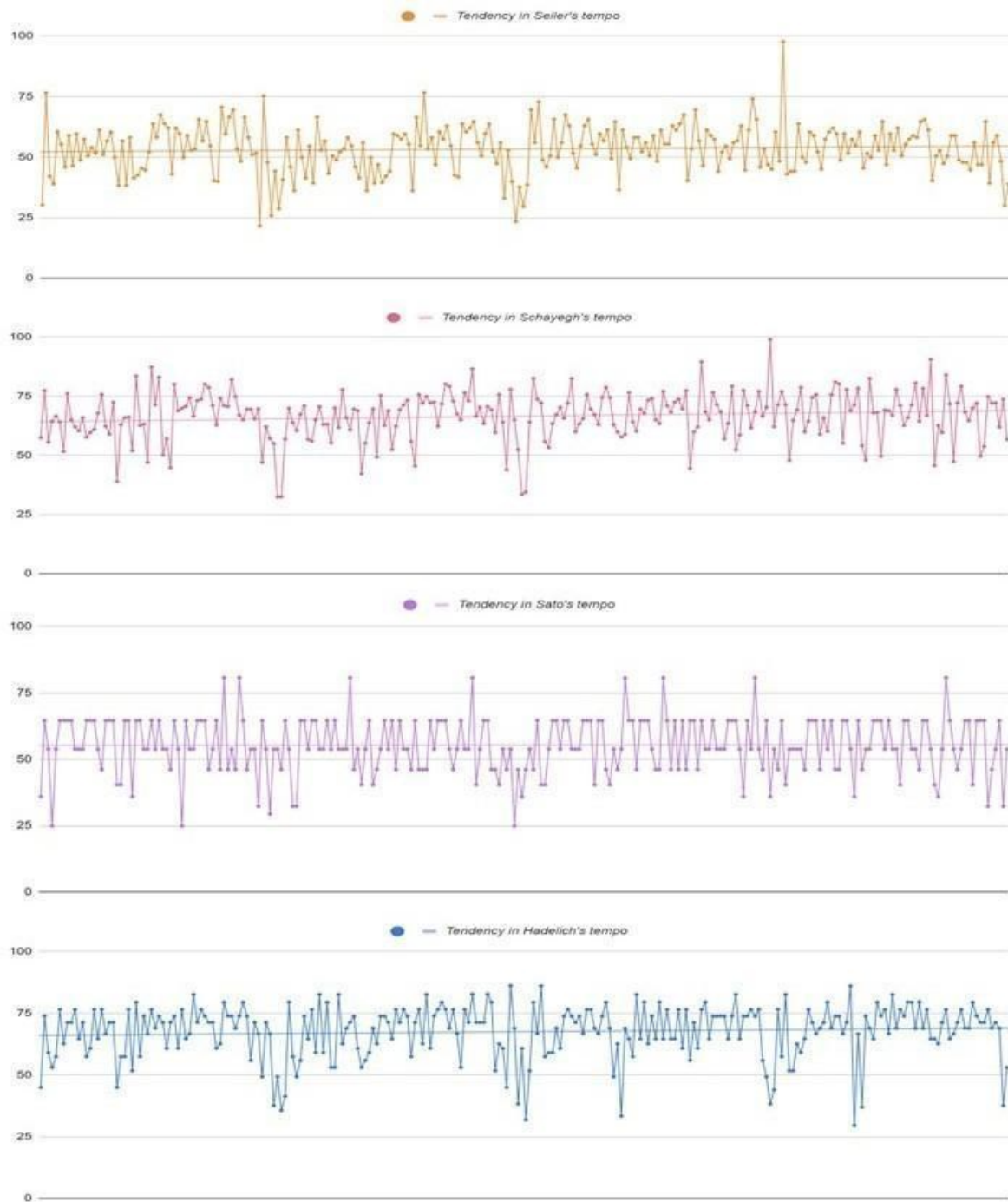


Figure 3a–d: Tempo graphs of the four performances of the *Allemanda* in D minor created after collecting data containing the beats on each performance in *Sonic Visualiser*.

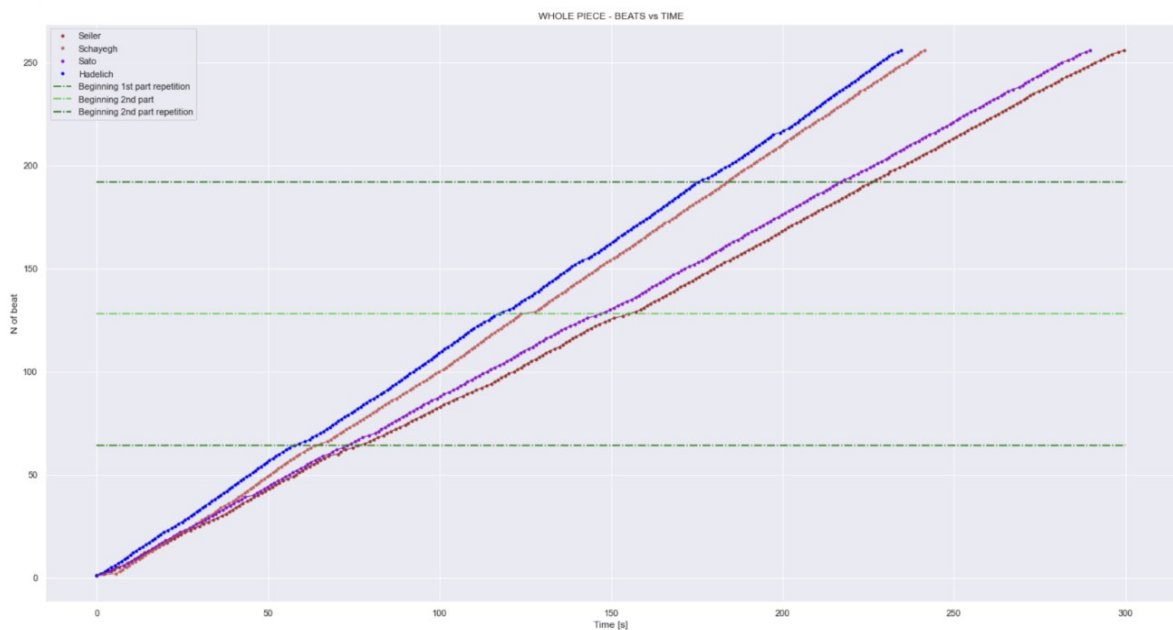
	Seiler	Schayegh	Sato	Hadelich
average tempi	53,40 bpm	66,57 bpm	55,37 bpm	67,54 bpm
standard deviation	9,98 bpm	10,36 bpm	10,68 bpm	10,86 bpm

Table 1: Average tempi and standard deviation in the four performances of the *Allemanda* in D Minor.

project powerfully without having to force the sound.”²¹ By contrast, Schayegh’s sound is defined by its richness of colour and depth, qualities shaped by the employment of gut strings and baroque bows, which demand a heightened awareness of sound production and the different possibilities of affecting the sound.²² Spanish violinist Pablo Hernán Benedí (b. 1991) describes how when using this baroque setup “each note becomes more detailed while at the same time being very sensitive, demanding from the player a higher awareness of its life”.²³ This explains, at least in part, the audience’s different perception of the tempo in Schayegh’s recording.

It is also noteworthy that the standard deviation consistently remains around 10 bpm, which may be interpreted as the degree of interpretive freedom permitted by the musical text. This suggests that each performer’s *rubati* occupy a comparable amount of time (for both accelerations and decelerations), relative to their chosen tempo.

To render the tempo data more meaningful (in terms of beats-to-time comparison) and easily interpretable, all values were plotted on a graph with time (x-axis) and beats (y-axis). To ensure the comparability of the data, it was mandatory to recalculate the beat times of the four recordings so that their first beats aligned precisely. However, one compilation that occurred here was that the *Allemanda* begins with an upbeat, which means that beat 1 is absent and the performance time effectively starts at 0.



Graph 1: *Allemanda* Comparison with Seiler, Schayegh, Sato and Hadelich

With the excerpt of the first section of the *Allemanda* (graph 1) I want to illustrate how to read the subsequent graphs (2–6). In this guide graph, the green line corresponds to beat 30, while the stars

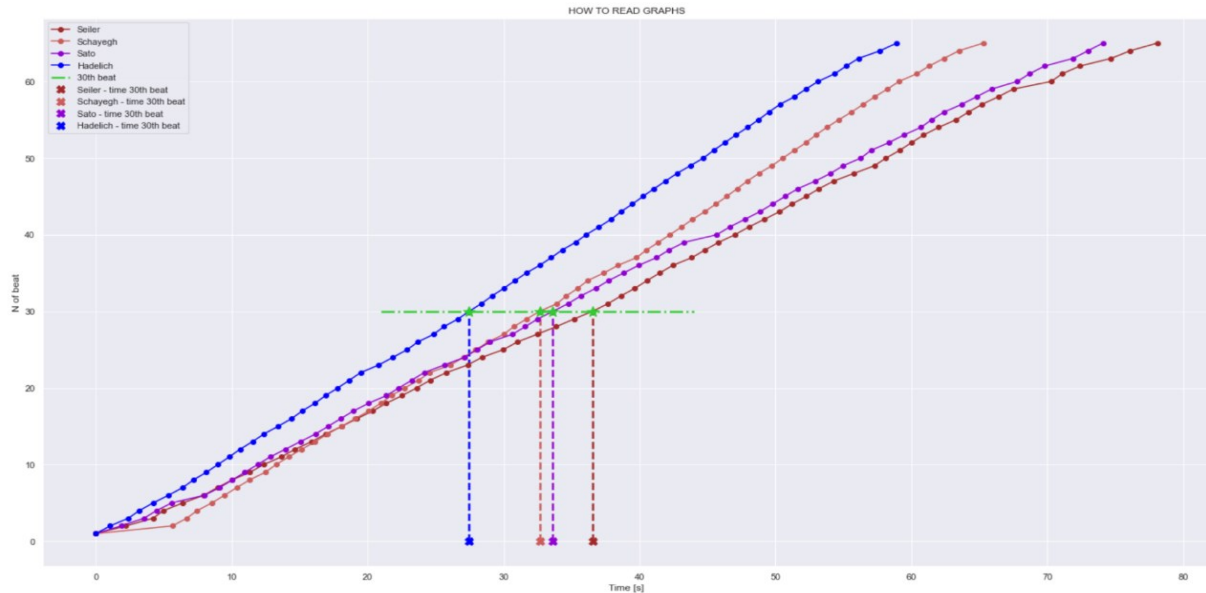
21 Laurie Niles, “Pirastro’s Evah Pirazzi Strings Celebrate 20th Anniversary” [2020], <<https://www.violinist.com>> (02.07. 2024).

22 See The Strad Playing Hub, “9 thoughts about playing on gut strings” [2021], <<https://www.thestrاد.com/playing-hub/9-thoughts-about-playing-on-gut-strings/7174.article>> (02.07.2024).

23 Ibid.

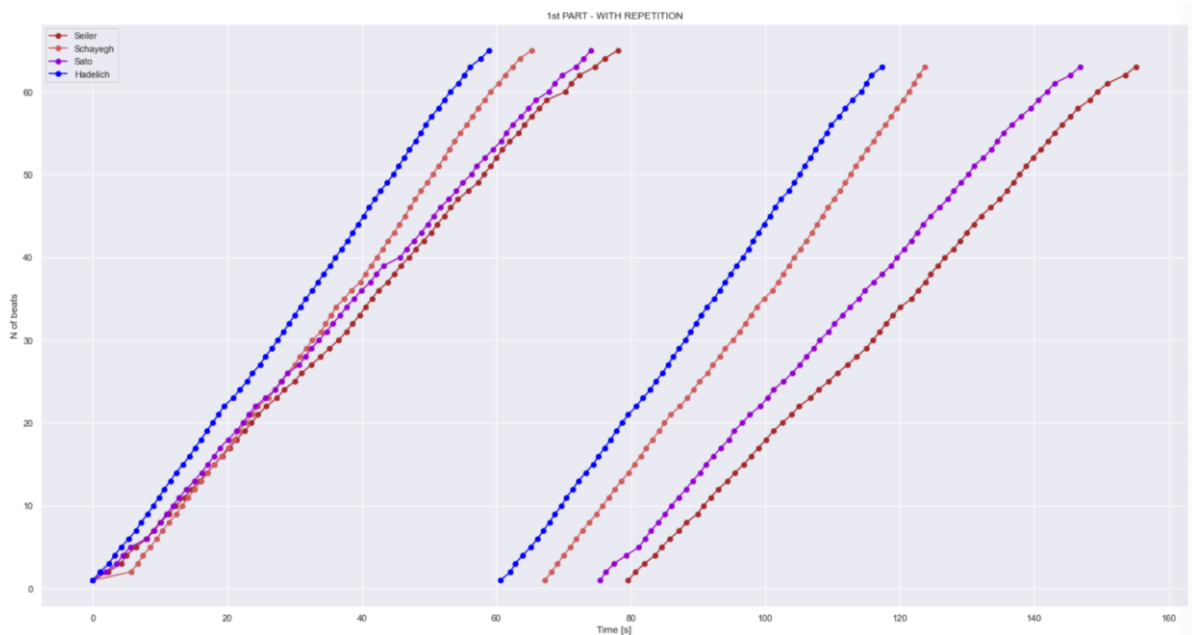
indicate the time at which each violinist performs that note. Thus, when Hadelich reaches beat 30 in 27 seconds, Seiler requires 36 seconds due to her slower tempo. Consequently, the steeper the dotted line, the faster the performer's tempo.

The comparative analysis of the four *Allemanda* recordings is presented in the following graph 2. The green horizontal lines indicate the sectional divisions and the repetitions.



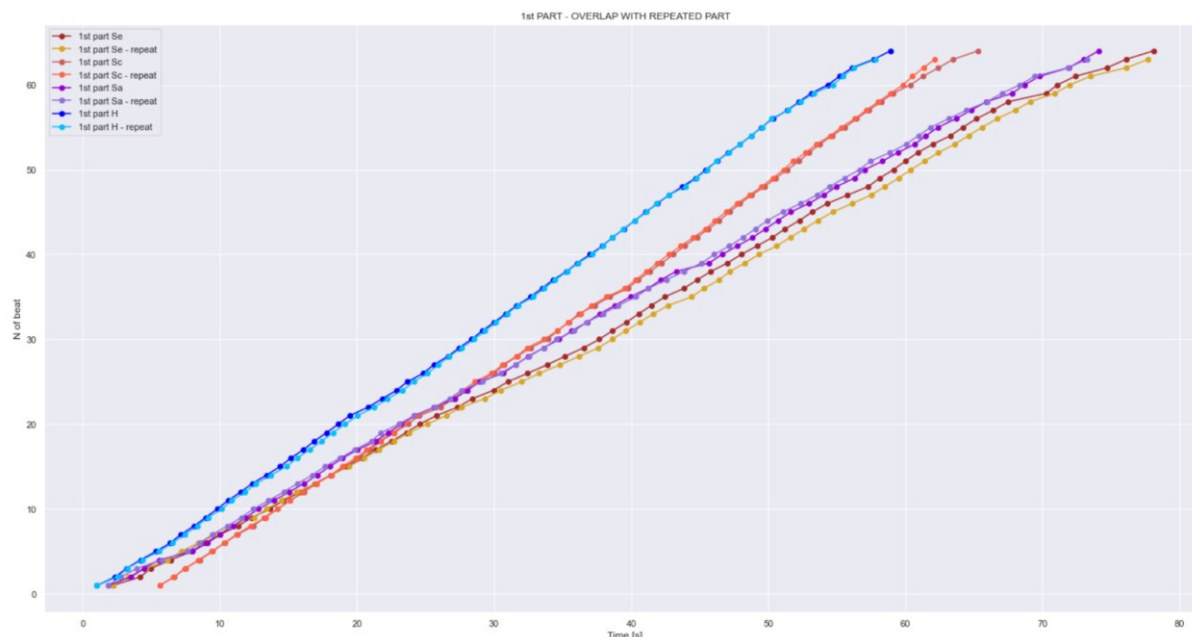
Graph 2 Example on how to read the following graphs, based on the first part of the *Allemanda*. These graphs were realised using the *Matplotlib* library in *Python*.

To compare the *rubato* variations and tempo changes between the first and second rendition of each section, the data were superimposed in two separate graphs—one (graph 3 and 4) for the first section and its repetition, and another (5 and 6) for the second section and its repetition. The following graphs 3 and 4 illustrate the repetitions of the first part.



Graph 3: First section compared to its repetition (real time values).

The comparison becomes clearer when aligning the first and second rendition at the same (fictional) starting point, thereby allowing to compare the differences between each violinist's first and second performance of the same passage.

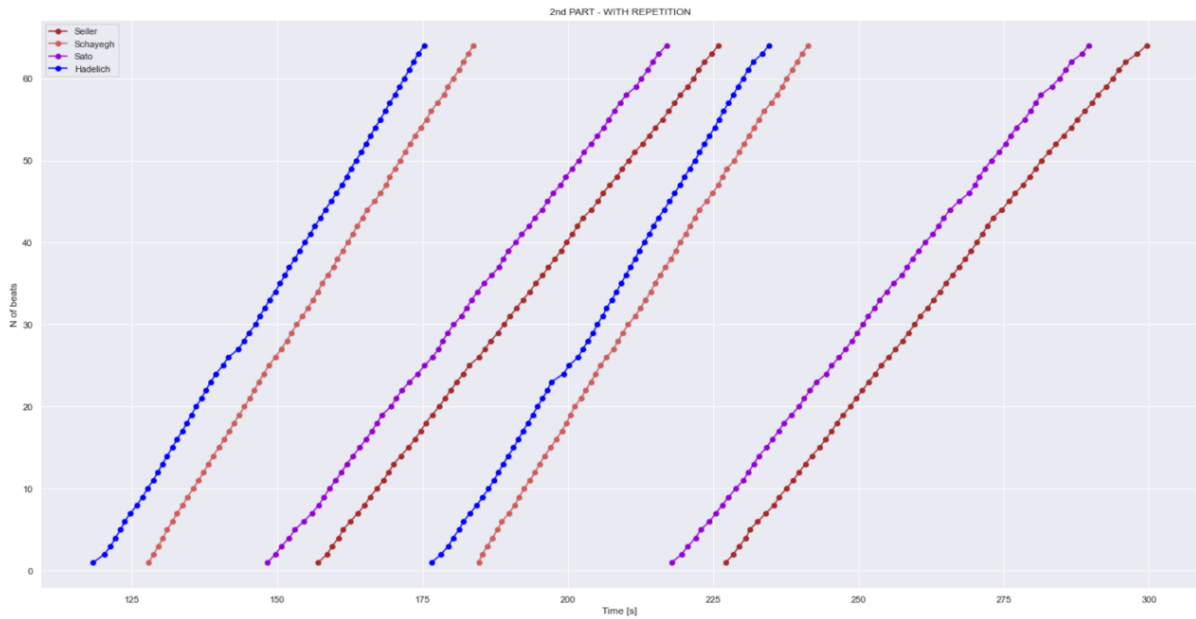


Graph 4: First section compared to its repetition (superimposed with the repeated part).

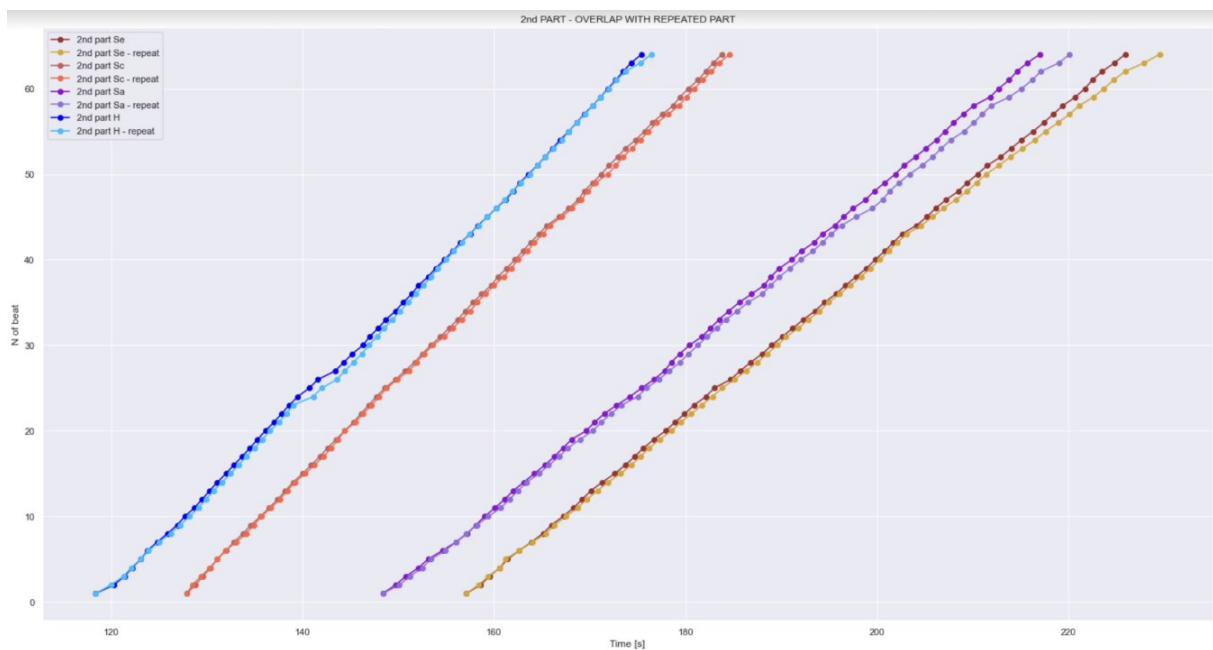
Turning to the analysis of the graphs, the following observations can be made for the first section. Seiler begins at a slower tempo but accelerates from beat 14 (equivalent to bar 4 in the score), after which her average tempo remains consistently faster than in the repetition. The start of the repetition, however, is slightly faster than the very beginning of the piece. She also employs *rubato* in different ways. The most pronounced *ritardando* occurs at the end of both the first part and its repetition, but it always starts earlier than in the other violinists' performances and is more progressive. Among the four recordings, Seiler exhibits the greatest tempo contrast between the first rendition of the passage and its repetition. Schayegh, by contrast, plays the repetition slightly faster than the original, resulting in only minimal difference between the two renditions. The most notable divergence appears at the end of the section where she plays a *ritardando* at the first time, whereas in the repetition she avoids the *rubato* altogether, directly moving on into the second section.

Sato's rhythm remains relatively stable, though—like Seiler—his use of *rubato* is always strongly pronounced when it occurs. From the beginning until beat 28, and again from beat 39 to the end, the first rendition is slower than the repetition. In contrast, the middle portion of the section is almost identical in both renditions. Hadelich adopts the fastest tempo, shaping his interpretation with continuous and fluid *rubati* that produce subtle tempo shifts. In this section, his initial tempo is quaver=58, but he soon accelerates, reaching as high as quaver=76 within the first section. In the repetition, he is more stable, fluctuating between 65 and 72 bpm. The *rubato* is mainly employed to emphasize the beginnings and endings of phrases—for instance in bar 6 and the middle of bar 12. He also applies *rubato* within the large slur spanning bars 9–10 to accentuate the inherent agogic within the legato articulation.

The following graphs 5 and 6 illustrate the two repetitions of the second section, along with the superimposed values of both renditions, as in the previous analysis of the first section.



Graph 5: *Allemanda* second section compared to its repetition (real time values).



Graph 6: *Allemanda* second section compared to its repetition (overlap with repeated part).

While the detailed analysis of timing differences within a single movement is very informative, it is equally instructive to consider expert commentary on the general sense of tempo across the entire recording. For example, Rob Cowan describes the tempo and character of various pieces in Hadelich's album as follows:

"Quite aside from the broader pace (4'08"), the mood is solemn, reflective and aria-like. His approach to the faster movements stresses the music's proneness to caper and in the Chaconne from the Second Partita, after the wildly arpeggiating passage and the recap of the principal theme, in other words, the midway point (at 6'51"), we switch from precipitous flight to hushed prayer, while the arpeggios

soon afterwards take off at a reckless speed. It's an exciting rendition, whereas the Fugue and inversion from the Third Sonata prefers to dance, quite an unusual option."²⁴

Shifting to Seiler's recordings, *Körniger Klang* offers the following reflections on her interpretative style in the *Ciaccona*, but also more broadly on her *Partitas* album:

"[In the *Ciaccona*] as a product of Midori's rubato, rather than the note values Bach wrote into the music, the tempi are constantly ebbing and flowing. The result is that the music is somewhat under siege rather than subject to the sort of non-prescriptive interpretation that will allow the listener to find his or her own way through it."²⁵

Phrasing, articulation, and ornamentation

Phrasing is closely linked to the tempo fluctuations analysed above. Articulation, on the other hand, is primarily determined by technical aspects that have to do with the bow, while ornamentation reflects, at least in principle, the performer's capacity for improvisation, adding individuality to Bach's melodies and contrapuntal textures. To document all these features systematically, different colours were used to mark them in the score.²⁶

Among the four violinists, Sato improvises the most, both in the *Allemanda* and across the other movements. He shows considerable ease with the art of embellishment, introducing scales, *mordents*, and even changing Bach's written melodies and rhythms—e. g. in bars 3, 4, 5, 7, 13, 18, 23, 26, 29, and 30—though only in the repeated sections of the *Allemanda*. Sato also employs a variety of articulations and tends to mix long and short sixteenths to highlight the interplay of two voices—as in bars 24–27—as well as gradually shorten longer sixteenths to shape progressions, such as in bars 11–12. Christina Volz-Stomackin describes Sato's approach to Bach as rich in character and ornamentation, allowing for narrative expressivity.

"Sato masterfully establishes different characters and sounds for different variations in this recording. His storytelling through the music is well planned, like a collection of different voices all telling the same story through a different lens. Sato's strengths lie in his improvisatory spirit with ornamentation, arpeggiation and his interpretation of the rhythmic values, giving the impression he is simply using the Chaconne as a means to tell a story much bigger than what the music offers at face value."²⁷

In contrast, Hadelich introduces only very few improvisations to Bach's music in the *Allemanda*. His additions are limited to a small number of trills—e. g., on the penultimate note of bar 7 and the third G in bar 27. Instead, his interpretation is distinguished by an intellectual use of dynamics, as well as articulations and *vibrato*. Cowan summarises Hadelich's broader approach across the album:

24 Rob Cowan: "JS BACH Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, BWV1001-1006 (Augustin Hadelich)" [2021], <<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/js-bach-sonatas-and-partitas-for-solo-violin-bwv1001-1006-augustin-hadelich>> (02.07.2024).

25 Körniger Klang, „Midori Seiler spielt Bach“, in: *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 18 January 2011.

26 See Figure 4.

27 Christina Volz-Stomackin, *Bach's Chaconne, BWV 1004: A Guide To Historically Informed Performance*, Dissertation, University of Memphis 2023, p. 30.

"Hadelich's approach makes listening to the cycle at a single sitting relatively easy: sleight of hand and a strong musical imagination keep you hooked for the duration. [...] Other fugues are direct, no-nonsense affairs, with plenty of light and shade; and because of the bow used, largely free of unpleasant chordal 'scrunching'. The fast finales also benefit from informed virtuosity, the First Partita with its alternately mirroring Doubles full of variety, the Second Sonata's finale replete with echo effects."²⁸

When varying repeated material, Hadelich adopts a subtler approach. His variations might even pass unnoticed were it not for the carefully chosen moments of application. By expanding time at strategically significant points, he helps the audience to perceive the intended contrasts—as mentioned in the previous section. More generally, he ensures that larger structural sections are delineated and pronounces parallelisms very clearly, particularly through dynamic contrasts.

Section 1: 1st time	Section 1: 2nd time	Section 2: 1st time	Section 2: 2nd time
starts forte —subito piano in bar 6 —ends forte	starts piano —subito forte in bar 6 —ends mezzoforte	starts fortissimo —subito piano in bar 23 —ends forte	starts piano —mezzoforte in bar 23 —ends forte

Table 2: Hadelich's dynamics

Turning back to Seiler, Birgit Schlinger describes the sound, dynamics, vibrato, and phrasing in her interpretation of Bach's *Partitas* as follows:

"This personal perspective has resulted in sparkling, vibrato-free partitas that find their own voice through the targeted change of dynamics between pianissimo and fortissimo. These works certainly push the boundaries of what is technically possible on the violin, especially since Bach tried to make the solo instrument appear polyphonic. But anyone who pauses and allows themselves to be enchanted by the 15-minute-long 'Ciaccona' from the Partita II in D minor, for example, will discover an enormous musical density that Midori Seiler celebrates here with concentrated virtuosity and attention to every single note."²⁹

In the *Allemanda*, Seiler does not employ embellishments when repeating sections. She does, however, introduce articulation changes similar to those of Sato, for instance in bars 24–26. Characteristically she tends to conclude the phrases with a subtle *rubato* combined with a *diminuendo*, only to then move on with a renewed burst of energy to the subsequent musical idea, as exemplified in bar 6 and 30. In a review on NDRadio Kultur, Seiler's recording was described as with "[m]uch elegance—little exuberance: Seiler uses vibrato very carefully and with a wide range of expression: Sometimes she lets the tone bloom slightly, sometimes she colors it dark and soft with a slow oscillation or lets it flash cheekily with a faster, shorter one."³⁰ And in the booklet of Seiler's *Partitas* album, Seiler shares this interpretative vision in her

²⁸ Cowan, "JS Bach Sonatas and Partitas" (like fn. 24).

²⁹ Schlinger, "Review" (like fn. 5).

³⁰ [Unknown Author], "Review on Seiler's Partitas CD", NDR Kultur (January 2011), <<https://www.amazon.de/Partitas-Violin-Midori-Seiler/dp/B004DR8Q52>> (08.10.2025).

interview with Bernd Kussin: "What ultimately emerges is what essentially defines us as humans: the experience of beauty, the constant contact with our own limitations, and the great longing for redemption."³¹

Conclusions

This essay has examined four recordings of Bach's *Allemanda* from the *Partita II* for solo violin, compiling detailed data and uncovering significant insights that suggest promising directions for further research. The differences among the selected recordings are striking, beginning with the performers' choice of instruments and bows, extending to recording locations and environments, and culminating in the countless interpretive decisions the musicians made, first in study and later in performance. These contrasts reveal that performance tradition is not a static framework but a constantly evolving concept that both reflects and reshapes each performer's artistic identity.

The empirical data highlighted not only pronounced disparities among the recordings but also underlying unifying elements—shared interpretative decisions that align with Bach's musical intentions, such as the treatment of repetitions or adherence to his original bowings. These findings show that historically informed approaches can be identified not merely through aesthetic discourse but through tangible musical outcomes. HIP thus emerges as a living practice that bridges analysis and artistry, theory, and sound.

It is equally revealing that violinists from vastly different cultural and educational backgrounds converge in certain interpretative tendencies. These variations stem not only from formal training—such as exposure to Historical Performance Practice at institutions like the *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis* in the case of Seiler—but also from less formal influences like listening to recordings or attending concerts. Some performers embraced HIP early under specialised guidance, while others approached it later as established soloists, rediscovering Bach's works through personal and professional maturity. In every case, however, curiosity proved decisive in forging individuality and in transforming historical awareness into creative freedom.

In summary, this study demonstrates that a historically informed approach gains significance only when it interacts with the performer's own interpretative insight. Authenticity and originality emerge as complementary values: knowledge of past practices enables musicians to create performances that are both historically grounded and emotionally resonant with today's audiences.

Furthermore, historical sources offer guidance rather than prescription. They invite interpretation, not imitation. A rigorous study of these sources, combined with analytical listening to diverse recordings, provides the foundation for a thoughtful, authentic approach to Bach's music. In today's digital landscape—where platforms like YouTube have democratised access while blurring standards of quality—critical discernment remains essential for identifying reliable artistic models.

Ultimately, knowledge of music serves as a foundation for musical experience, that transcends the knowledge itself and becomes something deeper. This is why close listening remains instructive and

31 Midori Seiler, *J.S. Bach: Partitas for Violin*, CD-booklet, catalogue no. 0016722BC, Edel:Kultur, Berlin: Berlin Classics 2011, p. 14–17, here p. 16. The interview was conducted by Bernd Kussin and translated by Janet and Michael Berridge.

invaluable. A balance must be struck between ungrounded subjectivity, which is increasingly prevalent in today's digital landscape, and a historically informed research-based approach. Objectivity without the subject is meaningless, as it is the performer and the listener who feels and shapes the experience. Yet, strict historical objectivity is equally unattainable in interpretive "grey zones". I argue that we should strive for a realm of intersubjectivity—a shared search for meaning in which the performer takes the responsibility of asking questions and going on a search for the traces of what is essential in the music.

In answering the questions posed in the introduction, the essence of interpreting Bach's music in a historically informed way lies in immersing oneself as fully as possible in his unique musical language. The *Sei Solo* cycle incorporates various layers of beauty that demand both solid knowledge and heightened sensitivity. In this essay I not only wanted to document and analyse but also to provoke a thoughtful reflection on these issues, in the hope of inspiring further introspection into the art of interpretation.

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