As Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich writes in his liner notes to this disc, “Electrical sparks are flying fast and furiously between the past and the future” in this recital by Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos and Hungarian pianist Péter Nagy, which brings together music of Igor Stravinsky and Johann Sebastian Bach: “a dramaturgical element unfolding…acting to suspend the works in a state of balance.”

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach was a touchstone for Igor Stravinsky, throughout his life (Robert Craft reported that he was working on Bach transcriptions even on his deathbed). He revered Bach’s music not for its religious or spiritual underpinnings but for its clarity, vigour and motoric energy, above all its sheer craftsmanship. Liberal in his borrowings from classical models, Stravinsky said “I repeat in my own accent” and argued that in submitting to the demands of a given style a composer could find new freedoms of expression. The artist’s personality, he said, “is more detached and stands out better when it moves within the definite limits of a convention”. The impulse was a progressive one: “A composer can use the past and move forward”.

Leonidas Kavakos addressed the same issue in a recent interview with Strings magazine: “I’m totally against this idea that what is composed today should be like nothing that has ever been composed before…While you are looking for something absolutely new, are you sure you have exhausted all the possibilities of what you have?”

The Duo Concertant of 1932 and Suite Italienne of the following year derive from the inspired friendship between Stravinsky and American violinist Samuel Dushkin that led to the formation of their touring duo. From Dushkin, Stravinsky became acquainted with a performing manner that “rejected heavy-handed ‘expression’ and rhetorical clichés and instead radiated crystal clear lucidity.” The composer had at last found a performer whose concept of “interpretation” was faithfulness to the score rather than imposition of his own personality. (Kavakos: “None of us as performers are bigger than the people who wrote the music, I tell you that.”)

The Duo Concertant is frequently cited as one of Stravinsky’s finest and most original compositions. Jungheinrich: “Stravinsky achieves something like an ideal balance between figurative elements and melody, gestural articulateness and insistent tonal magic…J.S. Bach can be heard as a tacit reference point in all five movements, without ever being quoted literally.”

The Suite Italienne, meanwhile, reworks material from the ballet music Pulcinella (1919/20) which in turns took much of its melodic impetus from Pergolesi and other composers of the pre-classical period. In its way Bach’s B minor Partita is also “dance music”, its stylized dances, as Jungheinrich observes, “presenting a structurally rather relaxed variant of Bach’s solo violin poetics”. The G Minor Sonata meanwhile presents Bach’s “musical science” in its most concentrated form. Kavakos meets the challenge of Bach’s music in both its austere and playful modes.
Leonidas Kavakos was born in Athens in 1967. After studies in Greece and the USA (on a stipend from the Onassis Foundation), Kavakos swept to international recognition in the late 1980s, taking first prizes in the Paganini, Sibelius and Naumberg competitions - all before he was 21. Since then, he’s been invited to play with most of the world’s leading orchestras and has worked with numerous conductors and with chamber music partners including Mstislav Rostropovich and Kim Kashkashian. Kavakos most recently appeared on “Monodia” the double album of music by Armenian composer Tigran Mansurian, a project curated by Kashkashian: “Kavakos is simply electrifying, delivering the searingly expressive soloistic part with warm-toned brilliance,” wrote Christopher Ballantine in International Record Review.

Hungarian pianist Péter Nagy has also played chamber music with Kim Kashkashian, and played as a soloist with the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the Hungarian State Symphony Orchestra and many other world-class orchestras. In 2001, Péter Nagy received the prestigious Liszt Award.

The ECM debut recording of Kavakos and Nagy, performing music of Ravel and Enescu received unanimous international praise on its release in 2003.

“A CD that has everything: fascinating repertoire, exceptional sound production and playing of genius…Greek virtuoso Leonidas Kavakos transforms his instrument into more than just a violin. Together with Péter Nagy, he creates entire universes of atmosphere that most others don’t even imagine.” – Jessica Duchen, Classic FM Magazine

“Kavakos’s virtuosity is stunning but not showy. His tone is gorgeous: dark, pure, intense, focused, variable with bow and vibrato. Playing with passion and floating delicacy, he identifies naturally with the music’s idiomatic rhythms, harmonies and character…And Nagy, a splendid partner throughout, sounds almost like an orchestra.” – Edith Eisler, Strings

“Kavakos’s fine-honed, chameleon-like sensitivity to colour and atmosphere ensure that no emotional stone is left unturned. A highly distinguished release.” – Julian Haylock, The Strad

CD package includes 28-page German/English booklet with liner notes by Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich.