

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE EXECUTION TECHNIQUE AND THE STYLISTICS OF INTERPRETATION IN CIACCONA FOR SOLO VIOLIN BY J. S. BACH

Ana Bianca Badea

“Augustin Bena” Gymnazium School of Music, Cluj-Napoca
biancabadea@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The Chaconne in D minor for solo violin by J. S. Bach is one of the most famous and both one of the most complex works in the violin repertoire. In order to master the chaconne both technical and especially interpretive challenges, based on the specific stylistics of the Baroque era, must be considered. Given its importance, there are countless controversies, differences of opinion among musicians regarding the treatment of various aspects of stylistic nature, which can sometimes mislead a novice violinist training. This paper consists of an outline of the necessary aspects that need to be taken into account in order to obtain the best quality interpretation. Starting from general data taken from the specialized literature, an analysis of the chaconne's form was carried out, as well as an analysis of the main technical and interpretive challenges. The last one includes examples and comparisons from famous violinists, as well as my own interpretive position.

Keywords: chaconne, technical and interpretive challenges, violin, Baroque style

INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the emblematic personalities of the Baroque in music, J. S. Bach was primarily known during his lifetime, as an organist and organ technician rather than as a composer. Only future generations recognized the value of his creations, whom discovered in Bach a new style, bright in individuality, based on the synthesis of the musical developments of the entire era. He enriched the musical art through a completely innovative harmonic language, also managing through the work "The Art of Fugue" to lead to the highest peak, the counterpoint (Schonberg, 1997). One of the outstanding features will remain the free polyphony, which knew perfection through the music of Bach (Hubov, 1960).

The composer's creation was delineated in four periods, which largely correspond to the positions occupied by him (Wang, 2005). The period spent at the Ducal Court in Cöthen (1717-1723) impacted the most his career and personal life. Here he composed some of his most important works, including the orchestral suites, the 6 Brandenburg Concertos, the Well-tempered Clavier, the Suites for solo cello and especially the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin.

His music for solo stringed instruments has never been surpassed in ingenuity, complexity and difficulty (Schonberg, 1997), the works for solo violin- true masterpieces of the varied polyphonic style, should be in the repertoire of any violinist. The 3 sonatas and 3 partitas were composed by Bach in 1720 (the sonata retains the national basis, although

new elements are introduced in terms of the dramatic and contrasting development of the themes, while the partita is a genre suite, built on the contrasting alternation of several dances). The Chaconne (the 5th movement of the 2nd Partita in D minor) is well known and also one of the most complex works ever written for solo violin, due to its structure and interpretation challenges.

THE CHACONNE FROM PARTITA NO.2 IN D MINOR

General data

Chaconne was originally a lively dance, which later became within the instrumental suite a rather slow dance in ternary rhythm, characterized by continuous variations of a short theme, which was initially presented in the bass and then resumed by the other voices with contrapuntal changes (The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2001). Along with the passacaglia, the chaconne represents a variational form generated by the polyphonic thinking, on an ostinato plan, which often appears in the form of a Cantus Firmus that gradually descends from the tonic to the dominant (Timaru, 2003). Some musicologists believe that Heinrich von Biber's Passacaglia was a source of inspiration for Bach's Chaconne, from the standpoint of the variational procedures and technical problems found in both works (Lucktenberg, 1983).

Analysis of the Chaconne's form

Bach's composition consists of three sections (two in the basic minor tonality interspersed with another one in the major homonym) which are preceded by an 8-measure theme. These include 36 variations (according to the musical structures that emerge from the logic of the musical discourse), respectively 62 (if they are notated strictly from 4 to 4 measures). The variations were arranged proportionally according to the law of organic growth, so that the point of the "golden ratio" coincide with the minor's reprise. Speaking of proportionality, Rolf Dammann states that the work was composed on the principle of "the theme to the power of the theme", if the theme has four measures (Timaru, 2003 : 156). It is also interesting that each four-measure phrase ends with a tonic chord.



Fig. 1. J. S. Bach - *Chaconne* (the first measures of the main theme)

Five variations can be identified as a direct allusion to the original descant (fig.1), which through their arrangement, gives the work an additional note of symmetry. Starting from the first measures of the theme, the gradual descend from the tonic to the dominant, of the chaconne bass (fig. 1.), will mostly be maintained until the end of the work.

Regarding the two harmonic plans, the ostinato plan is totally dependent on the variational one, sometimes even disappearing in favor of the second one (in section II). Also, there are passages where the melody appears subordinate to the ostinato plan and

especially to the tonal framework, thus offering freedom to rhythmic variations (Lester, 1999:154-155).

Analysis of technical and interpretive issues from the perspective of stylistic differences between musical periods

The Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin by J. S. Bach were composed in the same year as the death of his first wife (Maria Barbara), so it's considered a last tribute to her, through which the composer expresses both pain and terror, and also hope. The work abounds in elements of German folk art ("the vigorous force of imagination, the dramatic pathos of great human turmoil, the philosophical depth of thought", Hubov, 1960: 95). Its interpretation must have a sad character rather than lively and optimistic (as presented in some cases), regardless of the dancing origins.

From 1802 (the first publication of the works for solo violin) more than 50 editions have been published (Santos, 2004 :11). I chose to follow Flesch's, which represents a middle ground between F. David's romantic edition (it offers fingerings and bowings according to Romanticism) and J. Joachim's and A. Moser's, which is closest to the baroque style (based on Bach's manuscript, thus giving more importance to the original articulation and simplifying the fingering) (Santos, 2004:13).

The Chaconne was presented to the public for the first time by David (Leipzig, 1840), who was accompanied on the piano by Schumann. Currently there are many interpretive visions, stylistic differences giving rise to numerous disputes regarding tempo, articulation and fingering, or in the execution of chords, arpeggios, ornaments, vibrato, etc. The interpretations of Arthur Grumiaux and Henryk Szeryng, regarded by many critics as the most representative, served as my model.

Choosing the tempo

One of the most controversial aspects of performing Baroque music is the pulsation. Some representatives of the Baroque, as well as C. Flesch, thought that a beat per second indicated a balanced tempo (Flesch, 2010: 149), but not be rigid, in order to differentiate the variations. This was a fact also emphasized in the following musical periods (Santos, 2004: 9). Most editions contain few indications of tempo (Allargando or Molto Allargando - noted by Flesch at the end of each variational segment), but the generally accepted idea at the moment is that there should be no large variations of it, thus maintaining unity in time.

Faster tempos were observed generally in the recordings on baroque violins (Santos, 2004: 28-31), but also an acceleration of the tempo was noticed in the last century's interpretations (Fabian, 2005). Regarding the use of rubato, the greatest fluctuations in tempo were observed in Heifetz recordings (although he starts in a Grave tempo according to Auer's indications (Auer, 1925: 23). Szigeti's and Tetzlaff's (with romantic influences) had a wider range of rhythmic fluctuations, the tempo hasten as the short values came in. Szeryng's and Grumiaux's interpretations were steadier in terms of tempo, the difference being that the second violin player adopts a much slower one (vision that I adopted).

Dynamic issues

In many editions the noticeable total absence of dynamic indications, means that the task falls on the performer's shoulders. Flesch's edition, however, includes both nuances and certain indications regarding the character of the melody (*deciso, calando, tranquillo*), which together with the recordings studied, contributed to a better understanding of the composition. The dynamics must be done in accordance with the form, the structure of the work, highlighting the moments of tension and relaxation in the melodic line, regardless of the voice that contains the melody. Also, the sudden alternation of nuances must be taken into account (baroque dynamics admit the *crescendo*, but less often the *diminuendo* (Hubov, 1960: 95). Schweitzer emphasized the importance of preserving the sonority of the phrase also in the cadence (Auer, 1925: 62)

The vibrato

David advises the vibrato to be used sparingly, Auer even forbidding his students to apply it to notes that aren't sustained, although in the recordings (like most performers), Heifetz used a continuous vibrato. Many conclude that not using vibrato as a mean of expression in the modern conception of baroque music is considered to be a mistake (Santos, 2004: 28-30).

The execution of trills

During the Baroque period, cadential trills were indispensable. Although Bach did not note such indications in the original Chaconne score, they were included by most editions at the end of the main sections. There are also other places in the score where the interpretation of the trill was indicated (Santos, 2004: 31). As for their execution, the trills can be started both on the higher note (if it is the higher note that creates a dissonant effect) as well as on the base note.

Among the analyzed recordings, Grumiaux's is the only one that doesn't contain any trills, while Tetzlaff's counts six cadential trills. Perlman uses upper trills and based of baroque mindset changes the bow at the end of the section.

Choosing the fingerings

In the Baroque, owing to the particularities of the instrument, open strings and low positions were used as much as possible. This facilitated the perception of voices and also contributed to an increase of resonance. Grumiaux used low positions in his interpretation, but avoided free strings.

In the romantic style interpretations, there was a tendency to play as many notes as possible on the same string, in order to achieve a better melodic uniformity, although this is provided by the technique of linear counterpoint used by Bach. The interpretations of Heifetz and Szigeti can be viewed upon as examples.

Although I used Flesch's edition which contains romantic influences, I chose with my mentor the simplest and most comfortable fingerings, without avoiding free strings.

The execution of chords

Most of the technical challenges are owing to the polyphonic writing, which involves the simultaneous singing of 3 or even 4 voices as well as highlighting the melodic line. In Bach's time, it is assumed that the shape of the bow and the bridge used facilitated the execution of these chords, although there are indications that they were arpeggiated. Only earlier in the 19th century they were executed as compacted as possible. Nowadays the chords of 3 or 4 sounds are executed both according to the "2+2" method adopted by Heifetz, Grumiaux, Perlman and Tetzlaff in their interpretations, and as compacted as possible according to the example given by Szigeti and Szeryng.

Depending on the voice that needed emphasizing (bass, soprano or middle one), in the chaconne there were identified three types of chords (fig.2).

Executarea acordului de 3 sunete

↑
↑
↓

Tema se află în **vocea superioară** **vocea mediană** **vocea inferioară**

four-part:

↑
↑
↓
↓

Tema se află în **sopran** **alto** **tenor** **bas**

Fig. 2. The Execution of 3-note Chords According to Szeryng`s Edition

When the soprano line contains the melody, in the main theme, there are several ways to execute the chords (Santos, 2004: 41-51).

In this case I chose to follow Flesch's notation, performing the chords as unbroken as possible (in Szeryng`s style), in order to maintain the sound`s intensity and not diminish the theme`s depth. For highlighting the melody from the bass and middle voices (chords of the first variation), I made use of Szeryng's technique again (fig.2). To emphasize it, I also applied vibrato.

The execution of arpeggios

The arpeggio indication used by Bach twice in the original manuscript has given rise to many different opinions and discussions regarding the interpretation of these passages (Santos,

2004: 67-86). Flesch provided a long explanation of the interpretation manner of arpeggiated variations (Flesch, 2010: 153), which I adopted in my interpretation.

As far as recordings are concerned, each performer brings their own personality into them. Perlman uses some bowings proposed by Flesch, while Szigeti ricochets certain passages according to David's model, which is also the basis of Heifetz's and Szeryng's performances. Grumiaux is the only one who plays the entire arpeggiated passage in the first section in thirty-second notes. The final passage of the second section, is played arpeggiated only by Szeryng. It's worth noting that all performers using baroque violins arpeggiate these passages as well (Santos, 2004: 86).

CONCLUSION

The study of a musical work implies along with the practice of the violinist, a sequence of research: in order to acquire a stable theoretical base, which will contribute to the analysis of the technical and interpretative aspects necessary for the development of the artistic mindset. An advantage of the 21st century for musicians is the accessibility of information, the possibility to connect more easily with leading experts on music theory and pedagogy, and to reach to interpretations of the great violin masters of all times.

The work has caused countless disputes, because of the complexity of Bach's Chaconne architectural construction and musical interpretation- regarding the choice of tempo, articulation, fingering, the execution of chords, arpeggios, the use of vibrato as a mean of expression etc. Each study and interpretation analyzed in this article has enriched the interpretive field, contributing to a better understanding of the work.

As a generally accepted idea at the moment of the interpretation of the chaconne, it is necessary to approach a constant tempo; in order to maintain the unity in time and to adopt all the solutions regarding the violin technique based on highlighting the voices, especially the depth of the theme. Many doctoral theses and studies have been written about all the technical details, and those many nuances of interpretation in the chaconne : the matter remains a subject for debate.

REFERENCES

- [1] * * * (2001). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, Macmillan Publishers.
- [2] Auer, L. (1925). *Violin Master Works and Their Interpretation*. New York: Carl Fischer Publisher.
- [3] Fabian D. (2005). Towards a performance history of Bach's Sonatas and partitas for violin solo: Preliminary investigations. *Essays in honor of László Somfai: Studies in the sources and interpretation of music*. Edition I. Scarecrow Press.
- [4] Flesch, C. (1930). *The Art of Violin Playing*. Vol. II. New York: Carl Fischer Publisher.
- [5] Hubov, G. (1960). *Johann Sebastian Bach*. București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din R.P.R.
- [6] Lester, J. (1999). *Bach's Works for Solo Violin- Style, Structure, Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Lucktenberg, J.C. (1983). *Unaccompanied violin music of the 17th and 18th centuries: Precursors of Bach's works for violin solo*. DMA thesis. University of South Carolina
- [8] Santos, C.D.L. (2004). *Performance- practice issues of the Chaconne from partita II, BWV 1004, by Johann Sebastian Bach*. DMA thesis. Georgia: University of Georgia.

- ^[9] Schonberg H.C. (1997). *Viețile marilor compozitori*. București: Editura Lider.
- Timaru, V. (2003). *Analiza muzicală între conștiința de gen și conștiința de formă*. Oradea : Editura Universității.
- ^[10] Wang, Y.C. (2005). *A survey of the unaccompanied violin repertoire, centering on works by J.S. Bach and Eugene Ysaÿe*. DMA thesis. Baltimore: University of Maryland.