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Performance Practice Issues in Piano Transcriptions of J. S. Bach's Unaccompanied
Violin Chaconne by Brahms and Busoni

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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J. S. Bach's Chaconne for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1004, was revived in 1840 after having been forgotten for almost 120 years. Since this revival, it has appeared in various guises: as violin solo with and without piano accompaniment; in transcription for different instruments and ensembles. Among many piano transcriptions, those by Johannes Brahms and Ferruccio Busoni demonstrate opposite styles and philosophies of arrangement. Brahms' intention was to be faithful to the original music. In order to imitate violin playing, he arranged the Chaconne for left hand alone. In contrast, Busoni considered Bach's conception of the work to be compromised by its medium, the solo violin. When transcribing for concert performance on the piano, Busoni first imagined

and mentally arranged the original piece for organ, and then transferred this sonic vision to the piano, hence the sonorous effect of the transcription.

Although the two transcriptions originate from one and the same composition, the performer should approach them in different manners. In this study, various issues of performance practice are examined, among them structure, editions, notation, arpeggiation, polyphony, pedaling, tone color, dynamics, and tempo. Various recordings, including historical recordings by Busoni and his pupil, are also analyzed. To provide context, the origin and development of the chaconne and its musical effect, the significance of arrangements in music history, and the Bach Revival, particularly the revival of the Chaconne, are studied.

1. Introduction

J. S. Bach's Chaconne for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1004, was revived in 1840 after having been forgotten for almost 120 years. Since this revival, it has appeared in various guises: as violin solo with and without piano accompaniment; in transcription for different instruments and ensembles. The Chaconne has thus become one of the best-known and beloved pieces in musical literature. Among many piano transcriptions, those by Johannes Brahms and Ferruccio Busoni demonstrate opposite styles and philosophies of arrangement.

When performing a piano transcription, one must consider its original medium. A key question always challenges the pianist: can the piece sound better on the piano than in its original form? When I performed Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, it was almost impossible not to think about Maurice Ravel's orchestration of the keyboard original. Some listeners confessed: "But the piano version cannot compete with the orchestra version!" My conclusion was, however, the original piano version has its own unique expression and beauty. A pianist should not try merely to imitate orchestral sounds but should strive for an independent approach to the piece. Likewise, in playing transcriptions of the Chaconne, the violinist and pianist should interpret it differently. Something may be lost in a new medium; something may be gained. If the performance is successful, the performer and listener will experience profound emotion through the music no matter which medium is employed.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine the different possibilities of expression between the violin, organ, and piano and to present a method by which one may create

the most effective performance from Busoni's and Brahms' piano transcriptions. In Part I, I will study the history of the chaconne in general, transcriptions, the "Bach Revival," and background of the Chaconne transcriptions by these two composers. In Part II, I will discuss issues of performance practice and present possible interpretations to realize the original composer's and the transcribers' intentions on the piano.

PART I: Background of the Chaconne

2. Chaconne—Its History and Musical Effect

Modern dictionaries define the chaconne as a Baroque dance in triple meter with continuous variations on a ground bass of four or eight measures.¹ The first European chaconne was composed in Spain around 1600; the origin of the dance is older. It apparently came from Peru in South America when the country was a Spanish colony. Spain imported New World culture, including the chaconne, which became popular in the early seventeenth century. Seen as exotic, the chaconne soon spread to other European countries such as Italy, France, England, and Germany, where the dance developed in various, individual manners. When the chaconne first appeared in Spain and Italy, it was a dance-song of a brisk, joyful character, suggestive of humorous and obscene contents. It was accompanied by castanets and five-course guitar repeating harmonic formulae that were later converted into melodic bass lines. The vocal line was originally improvised; subsequently it became rather more compositional in nature. As a result, the dance-like feeling was reduced and the chaconne evolved into a long, complex and artistic work.²

The chaconne is often confused with the passacaglia because they share common features: employment of triple meter, a ground bass, and continuous variations. The two sound so similar that it is hard to distinguish them unless the composer has labeled them. Originally, however, the chaconne and the passacaglia were clearly distinct. The most fundamental difference is that the origin of the chaconne is a dance, while the passacaglia

¹ Georg Reichert, "Chaconne," *MGG* (1989), 2: 1007-1011; Richard Hudson, "Chaconne," *NG* (1980), 4: 100-102; Alexander Silbiger, "Chaconne," *NG2* (2001), 5: 410-415.

² Hudson, *NG* (1980); Silbiger, *NG 2* (2001); Meredith Little, "The Chaconne and the Passacaglia," *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 199-203.

comes from *passacalle* and *paseo*, terms which in Italian mean “promenade.” Compared to the chaconne, the passacaglia usually unfolded in a slower tempo and in a minor key; it had smooth melodic motion and a restrained character. In the first half of the seventeenth century in Italy, however, each composer started to define the chaconne and the passacaglia in his own way; the two merged and their distinction blurred. This blurring was pushed even further by Frescobaldi. By the time the chaconne and passacaglia spread to France and Germany, their usage was becoming interchangeable, sometimes completely contradicting earlier practice.³

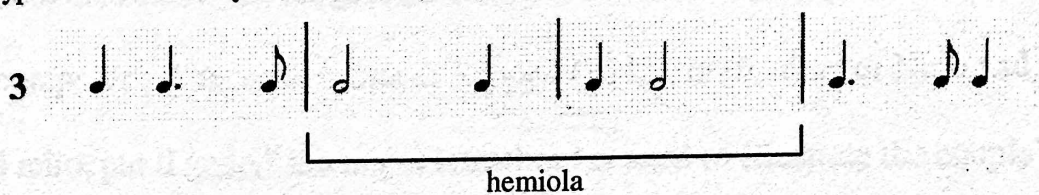
There is another dance type which closely relates to the chaconne: the sarabande. The sarabande has an identical meter and is accompanied by castanets and five-course guitar strumming continuous variations of a short phrase; compared to the chaconne, it is slower. The close relationship of the two dances is seen in several writings of the seventeenth century; for example, Spanish writers such as Cervantes and Lope de Vega linked these two dances, describing them as manifestations of an exotic New World culture. Jacques Ozanam, author of one of the earliest French dictionaries, wrote, “The chaconne is a sarabande composed of several couplets almost always developed upon the same subject, which is normally found in the bass” (Paris, 1691).⁴ Some of the typical sarabande rhythms are often found in the chaconne, such as the syncopation module and the hemiola, which result in an anacrusic rhythm (see Ex.1).⁵

³ Hudson, “Passacaglia,” *NG* (1980), 14: 267-270; Little, 199-203; Silbiger “Passacaglia,” *NG2* (2001), 19: 191-194.

⁴ Little, 202.

⁵ Hudson, “Sarabande,” *NG2* (2001), 22: 273-277; Little, 93-113 & 202.

Ex. 1 Typical sarabande rhythm with the syncopation module and hemiola



When the sarabande and the chaconne became popular in Spain and Italy from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, they were both banned from the stage because of their perceived obscenity and immorality. Their continuous variations on the ground bass and their repetitive rhythms produce an extraordinarily strong, almost hypnotic impact. Their gradual and persistent increase in complexity leads the music to an intense climax, evoking an obsessive and lascivious character and a series of strong emotions such as passion, depression and profound sorrow. In the Baroque period, composers exploited the chaconne's dramatic effect, often locating it at the climax of a multi-movement theatrical work. In an ensemble, the ground is played by the bass instruments, serving as a building block; in this way the listener's attention is brought rather to the melodic lines composed above it. The melody, changing in length and contour over the ground, results in different moments of tension and resolution. Hence, the genius of the composer lies in presenting the ground in several diverse disguises, although it is in fact always the same.

Striking examples of the dramatic use of the ground bass are seen in theatrical works from various countries. In Italy, for instance, in Monteverdi's *Lamento della Ninfa* (1638), the nymph's bewailing madness due to her lost love is expressed by her obsessive

crying out of “*Amor!*” on the ground bass, the minor descending tetrachord.⁶ From the same composer’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642), in the duet of Nero and Poppea, “*Pur ti miro, pur ti godo,*” the major tetrachord is used to illustrate the couple’s lustfulness and ecstasy.⁷ In France, the *Grande Passacaille* from Jean-Baptiste Lully’s *Armide* (1658) is an orchestral work, a remarkable and glorious dance scene. In England, in Dido’s beautiful aria from Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), the descending chromatic ground bass musically depicts its text, “When I am laid in Earth,” above which the abandoned Dido, who is facing death, expresses her grief. In 1714, in Germany, J. S. Bach composed the cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (Weeping, lamenting, worrying, fearing) (BWV 12), the first chorus of which is a chaconne. Its chromatically descending ground bass suggests profound sorrow and death. Bach recycled the chorus in 1748 for the “Crucifixus” of his B minor Mass. Here, the ground bass pattern repeats thirteen times, instead of the twelve statements in BWV 12, the number evoking Jesus’ fate. Another work of seminal importance is Bach’s Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582, written for organ.

The piece that represents the pinnacle of ground bass compositions is the Chaconne for solo violin, the last and climactic piece from Bach’s Violin Partita BWV 1004. This chaconne is a hybrid of traditions drawn from French, Italian, and German styles: its dotted rhythm on the second beat derives from the French sarabande; its virtuosic and cantabile quality stems from Italy; its complex and dense polyphonic style

⁶ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86-89.

⁷ Controversy still rages about who composed this duet.

originates in Germany. Achieving the highest level of all these traditions, Bach succeeded in writing an innovative chaconne with great variety and unity and also a monumental, heroic quality.

3. Arrangement

In music history, the art of arrangement has been common practice for centuries since the rise of instrumental music, which began as imitations of vocal models.

Arrangements comprise various levels: the simplest is literal transfer from one medium to another; the more complex is elaborate re-creation, some of which is equivalent to or better than the original. A study of arrangement shows its diverse purposes and roles in music literature throughout history.

In the Baroque, arrangement occurred as a matter of convention. Composers arranged existing music, both vocal and instrumental, by others as well as their own. They borrowed musical materials— theme, section, movement, or an entire work. Since music in the period was written for a particular circumstance, sometimes for a single specific occasion, it would not reappear unless it was recast to be suitable to another occasion. Instead of inventing a new melody for every different situation, composers felt free to revive existing notes, giving them another chance to be heard. The most important factor for composers of the period was not originality but craftsmanship, the skills needed to manipulate existing music.⁸

⁸ Malcolm Boyd, "Arrangement," *NG 2* (2001), 2: 65-71; J. Peter Burkholder, "Borrowing, § 8: The Baroque Era & § 9: Reworking and issues of originality," *NG2* (2001), 4: 22-26.

As in all other matters musical, Bach was a great arranger. He wrote numerous arrangements of all kinds of music for the sake of saving time, for his compositional study, and for his never-ending quest for perfection.⁹ For example, by arranging Vivaldi's violin concertos for organ, Bach solved problems of keyboard composition.¹⁰ He also re-worked several of his own compositions; for example, the Fugue in G minor from his solo violin sonata, BWV 1001, which was transcribed for organ, BWV 539. In the organ transcription, various possibilities of the organ are taken into account: a new key (D minor) because of the range of the pedals, textures fully realized by the addition of new voices, and more complex harmonies attained by sustaining pitches that create more dissonance-resolution.

It seems that it was customary for Bach and his colleagues to transfer music to the keyboards, as seen in the recollection of Johann Friedrich Agricola, a student of Bach's, "The composer played them [= partitas and sonatas for solo violin] often himself on the clavichord, and added as much harmony to them, as he found necessary."¹¹ In his recent recording, Robert Hill attempts convincingly to demonstrate the possibilities suggested by this provocative statement.¹² Surviving evidence seems to support that a Baroque composition was not cast in stone. Rather, the performer was free to vary,

⁹ For comments on all of Bach's arrangements, see Norman Carrell, *Bach the Borrower* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹¹ Johann Friedrich Agricola, *Bach-Dokumente* III, Nr. 808, 1775, quoted in brochure notes for Robert Hill, *Original & Transcription* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler-Classic, 1999), 11.

¹² Hill, *ibid.*, recorded in 1999, LC 06047 No 92 100 CD.

embellish and improvise as well as choose the medium of performance.¹³ In short, while the composer indicated the medium that he considered most suitable, his musical ideas were not restricted to the limitations of the given instrument.

As time passed, the focus of composers changed. Skill at arranging existing materials was replaced by originality, the inspiration of inventing something new. Through notation, they began to convey their musical intentions more precisely. Although arrangements were still common in the nineteenth century, their aim was different: as a forerunner of recordings. Music was no longer written for a specific circumstance but for any place, occasion, and audience. People became familiar with and enjoyed playing their favorite music at home on the piano.

The piano became so well developed and so popular that it took control of musical life in the nineteenth century. The instrument was able to produce more colorful and powerful sounds, and its manufacture became relatively inexpensive. Music literacy having increased, a market for sheet music grew. As a result, amateurs enjoyed playing the piano at home, performing original compositions as well as arrangements of all kinds of music, to include orchestra works, opera, chamber music, and songs. The custom became so fashionable that, without a piano part in a score, a composition could survive in the music market only with difficulty. Consequently, piano arrangements became a source of basic income for composers.¹⁴

¹³ Evelyn Howard-Jones, "Arrangements and Transcriptions," *Music and Letters* 16 (October 1935): 305-311.

¹⁴ Howard-Jones, 305-311; James Parakilas, ed. *Piano Roles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 150-162.

Piano arrangements also played a role in the pursuit of an important musical philosophy of pianists in the nineteenth century: virtuosity. Pianists presented their own arrangements in their concerts, mainly at the end of the program, showcasing their talents and entertaining their audience. Some arrangements were simply flashy, lacking substance; others, like those of Franz Liszt, had genuine artistic merit. Arranging orchestral works, Liszt succeeded in capturing their complex textures without losing their dynamic effect, thereby positively captivating the audience, even immediately following performance of the same work by an orchestra.¹⁵ He assigned arrangements to two categories: transcriptions as “a faithful re-creation to the original” (for example, Schubert’s songs and Beethoven’s symphonies) and paraphrases as a free fantasy (for example, paraphrase of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and Réminiscence of Mozart’s *Don Juan*).¹⁶

In the twentieth century, arrangement became less esteemed due to the invention of the phonograph and the enforcement of copyright. The popularization of research on performance accuracy also helped diminish the value of arrangement, thereby reducing arrangements to second-class status. On the other hand, while piano arrangements declined in popularity, arrangements for orchestra, symphonic band, and large ensembles seemed to gain a new status. For example, Maurice Ravel transcribed for orchestra his own piano works as well as others (the best-known example is Modest Musorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*). Arnold Schoenberg transcribed J. S. Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 552, “St. Anne,” from organ to orchestra. These

¹⁵ Parakilas, 159.

¹⁶ Alan Walker, “Franz Liszt, § 10. Arrangements,” *NG 2* (2001), 14: 767-768.

arrangements merit attention, as they represent more than mere transfers of notes to a different medium; rather, they reflect the interpretation of the arranger. The arrangement could be drastically different than the original composer's intention, yet still repay close study.

4. The Bach Revival

"The Bach Revival" is the term used to designate the rediscovery of J. S. Bach, a historical movement that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. This movement developed through the filter of Romantic qualities such as retrospection and sentimentality, a longing for the past. German nationalism further fueled this movement's progress. Together with Beethoven, Bach was perceived as a genius and viewed with great pride in Germany. These composers lived for the pursuit of divine music, fighting an unappreciative public and bearing tragic handicaps.¹⁷

The pioneering leader of the movement was Felix Mendelssohn. His performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at the Berlin Sing-Akademie in 1829 was a milestone in the revival. The audience was deeply moved. Performances of this work, as well as Bach's other choral works, took place in many other cities. The key to the success of the concerts was not only the greatness of the works but also the genius of Mendelssohn's presentation. In the 1829 performance, Mendelssohn, seated at the piano, conducted a choir of 158 members and a large orchestra. Replacing the oboe d'amore with clarinets, he enhanced the work with additional melodies, dynamic marks, and tempo indications.

¹⁷ George B. Stauffer, "Changing Issues of Performance Practice," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 206-207.