

Bach, or Busoni? - How insightful fingering options may enlighten the original spirit of the *Chaconne* in D minor by Luís Pipa

Johann Sebastian Bach's "*Ciaccona*" from the second partita for solo violin BWV 1004 stands today still as one of the peak moments of the instrument's repertoire, having the French violinist Serge Blanc, a disciple of the legendary Georges Enescu, even labelled it as "the Everest of violinists".¹ The piece has been transcribed for countless instruments, many of them having more than one version. Such is the case of the piano, where a number of celebrated figures embraced the task of making sure that this awe-inspiring musical work would become part of the "King of Instrument's" repertoire. Brahms wrote for the left hand alone, Mendelssohn and Schumann for piano and violin, and there is a two piano version by Fortunato Luzzatto. Still, and even if names such as Joachim Raff, Ernst Pauer or Hans Hartmann attempted their own solo piano version, it is Ferruccio Busoni's monumental transcription that has remained consistently in the catalogue since it was completed in around 1897.

Busoni's pianistic qualities were widely acknowledged by his contemporaries, and his interpretations of Bach were particularly praised. He was also deeply committed as an editor of Bach's music, having issued revised and annotated editions of the *Two and Three-Part Inventions* and of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Busoni was also active as a composer, with numerous works for the piano. Still, and notwithstanding the merit of his own compositions, it was with the piano transcriptions of music for other instruments of the great baroque master that Busoni gained full recognition. Although the great majority of them had been originally written for the organ, and therefore, being close to the idiomatic treatment of the keyboard, it is the one which emanated from an essentially melodic instrument that reached the peak of his creativeness: The *Chaconne* in D minor for violin solo, which integrates a series of Busoni's transcriptions of Bach's works "arranged for concert performance on the piano"²

Finding a performance philosophy

Performing Busoni's version of the *Chaconne* is not an easy undertaking: to begin with, due to the technical demands of the work; additionally, in view of the decisions involving the interpretative posture of the performer. In fact, two fundamental primary questions need to be placed when approaching this piece:

¹ Blanc, Serge: *J. S. Bach 6 Sonatas and Partitas. Educational Edition with technical indications and comments by Georges Enescu*, p. 52. Author's edition available at www.sergeblanc.com.

² Publisher's Note to the Dover edition of *Bach Transcriptions by Busoni* (1996). The text quotes Busoni's own note to the Breitkopf edition, in which he describes the transcriptions of the *Organ Choral Preludes* as arrangements in "chamber style", in contrast with the "concert arrangements", which include the preludes, fugues, toccatas and the *Chaconne*.

- 1) Is it supposed to be chiefly regarded as an early eighteenth-century work (Bach's composition dates from 1720) or a late nineteenth-century (around 1897) one?
- 2) Are Busoni's indications and enlargements compatible with the original spirit of Bach's music?

Following these two essential interrogations, fundamentally concerning the interpretative philosophy of the work, one particular aspect emerged amongst the numerous performance-related issues laid bare in this piece:

- 3) In which way may thoughtful and ingenious fingering options applied to specific passages contribute to an efficient intermediation between the spirit of the original text and Busoni's pianistic writing?

Busoni's transcription of Bach's *Chaconne* was never an appeasing one: the dedicatee of the *Ten Choral Preludes* transcription, José Vianna da Motta³ confided to his friend that when one of his students played the *Chaconne* (Da Motta was teaching at the time at the Geneva Conservatoire) a critic wrote that she had played a "deplorable [*facheuse*] transcription where the pianist Busoni disfigured in a sacrilegious way this marvelous page" (the underscores are Vianna da Motta's).⁴ Of course, the Portuguese pianist and composer, being a fervent admirer of the Italian, could not disagree more with the verdict of that "frustrated pianist", as he called him, but this demonstration is symptomatic of the controversy around the work, one that has remained until the present day.

Fingering and hand-splitting options

From the numerous challenges placed by this work, a few examples were selected, which are representative of the type of performing solutions concerning fingering, and, most specifically, hand splitting options. The very beginning of the piece places the performer before an important decision: are the initial bars to be played with the left hand alone, implicating a right-hand crossing in bars 3 and 4 to play the four lower bass notes, as is inferred by Busoni's writing, or should one, on the contrary, take on the upper voice of the chords as a melody line and play it with the right hand, leaving the bass notes for the left hand, as is commonly expectable? Unless the hand is large enough to reach comfortably the tenths, in particular the interval between B flat and D, most pianists will be forced either to roll those extended chords, or to catch the upper notes with the right hand. Busoni, like Brahms in his version for the left hand alone, writes these first bars one octave lower than how it stands in the original writing. In fact, the opening bars of both versions are very similar and, if in Brahms'

³ José Vianna da Motta (1868-1948). Portuguese pianist and composer, he is one of the prominent figures of the last generation of Liszt's pupils. He lived in Berlin for thirty two years and became a close friend of Busoni.

⁴ Beirão, Christine Wassermann, *et al. Vianna da Motta e Ferruccio Busoni: Correspondência – 1898-1921* Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 2003, p. 154 (free translation from the Portuguese version).

case the *Chaconne* was conceived as an *Etude* for the left hand, Busoni's purpose is not so evident, unless one detects a pedagogical quest aimed at the tonal independence of the left hand, grounded on the composer's understanding of his Bach transcriptions as constituting an "educational building", a sort of "Advanced School of Playing".⁵ It does not appear plausible that Busoni tried to emulate the violin and assume the simultaneous playing of the lower notes before the melody, in which case, to be credible, the performer would have to do it throughout the whole passage, and not only when required by the intervallic distance. Still, the effect could sound too artificial and, if it really would have been Busoni's intention not to play the notes together, there would be no need to indicate the four lower notes of bars 3 and 4 in the right hand, as they could easily be played in this manner with the left hand. However, in the last appearance of the theme at the end of the piece, this allusion to a bow-stringed instrument chord technique is present, due to the extreme expansion of the harmonies, in which the lower notes of the left hand have unescapably to be played before the rest of chords.⁶ A middle appearance of the theme, just before the quietly contrasting D major part, is written in a typically pianistic way, with broken octaves before the chords. There is, in Busoni's setting, a manifest textural evolution throughout the three appearances of the theme, which contributes in a decisive manner to heighten the magnitude of the work. In this sense, the hand-crossing motion in the opening bars could be too visually distracting, bearing in mind the grave and solemn context of the initial theme. A gestural restraint in these initial moments would also help to set the differences between the three entrances of the theme (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 1-5: Busoni's original setting.

The decision is then associated with a fundamental problem, related with the questions placed in the beginning: should one be entirely faithful to Busoni's note-setting, or should one find the most comfortable and efficient way to render the music? "Purists" might say that if Busoni wrote expressly for the left hand, then it must be played so. Another perspective, though, may be to consider that the most effective means are the ones that always should be used to achieve the best possible control, and therefore it

⁵ Publisher's Note, op. cit.

⁶ The wrong thing to do at this point would be to roll the chords, and deprive the listener of this significant connection.

trying to achieve the best possible physical balance and tonal control over the melodic line.

The passage that marks the return of the minor key after a long section in D major (bar 214), corroborates the intention Busoni had of writing the initial bars for the left hand. *Figures 5 and 6* compare the original setting of Busoni with another suggestion for a different hand distribution. Specific fingerings are also proposed, in which the melodic line essentially takes place in the right hand with occasional interventions of the left hand. These left-hand interventions occur between bars 215 and 217, and intend to preserve as much as possible the stability of movements, through reducing the hand displacements to an absolute minimum in the assumption that the finest tonal control can be better achieved in this manner.

Figure 5. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 214-21: original note distribution.

Figure 6. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 214-21: alternative note distribution.

In the previous examples, we have looked at alternatives regarding two passages which Busoni had intended to be specifically played with the left hand. In the next excerpt, the passage is already divided between the hands; the question lies on the way in which they are divided. The suggested splitting of notes incorporates specific advantages in comparison with the original setting. To begin with, it is more relaxed for the left hand, as it allows it to stay in a more compact position, avoiding the octave stretch of the initial three notes and making the moment of hand-alternation more comfortable; likewise, the right-hand finger alternation on the repeated notes is technically very efficient and adds clarity to the passage, which Busoni intended to be played *distintamente*; a relevant interpretative aspect should be to sustain the first note of every beat slightly longer, replicating in some way the effect of the natural stressing of the lower notes by violinists before changing to the higher strings. This passage is specifically idiomatic of the violin and the interpretation should take that into consideration. In this sense, the closer position of the hand may help better to control this note highlighting. A literal rendering of Busoni's articulation in these bars could eventually sound too "Lisztian" and pervert the original spirit. The five beats between the third beat of bar 102 and the first beat of bar 104 could also use the same distribution as the one suggested for beat number two of bar 102; however, in those passages, as the left hand remains in a comfortable position, and due to the difficulty of striking the inner notes of the chords starting with the thumb on the black key (B flat) without anticipating the movement, it is safer to keep to Busoni's original distribution, so long as care is taken to maintain the continuity of articulation and note stressing.

The image shows a musical score for the Chaconne in D minor by Bach, as revised by Busoni. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef. The first system is labeled '102' and 'distintamente'. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes. The second system is labeled '104' and 'simile'. It continues the pattern. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5. The left hand has a more compact position compared to the original setting.

Figure 7. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 104-107: original note distribution.

Figure 8. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 104-107: alternative note distribution.

Busoni's harmonic enrichment of certain passages could be well represented through the adding of notes in the passage between bars 41 and 54. Whilst in Bach the passage has only one melodic line in semiquavers, Busoni writes octaves in a low register, but mostly, he strategically adds two and three note chords, punctuating this relatively long sequence. These complements bring an extra element of interest to the passage and, once they are there, their presence should be conveyed in a convincing and musically relevant manner. Thus, a delicate stressing of the upper note will create an expressive parallel line, which should be played neither too fast or too staccato, the same occurring with the octaves in the left hand.⁷ The note distribution suggested in the chords of bars 47 to 51 helps to control expressively the continuation of the line through the splitting between the upper note in the right hand and the integration of the lower note in the middle of the left-hand octaves. An excerpt of the passage between bars 47 and the first chord of bar 54 is presented in *Figure 9* with Busoni's setting, whilst *Figure 10* shows the hand splitting suggestion from the end of bar 49 to the beginning of bar 52, together with the continuation of the right-hand line until the first chord of bar 54.

⁷ I have an annotation in my own score of Busoni's transcription of the *Chaconne* (Schirmer's edition) that reads: "Equal tempo from beginning to end". This annotation (originally in Portuguese) was taken, as I remember it, at a master class of pianist Sequeira Costa in Lisbon, in the early 1980's. One of the most prominent Portuguese pianists of today, Pedro Burmester, was playing the *Chaconne*, and I can still recall Sequeira Costa's instructions to hold back on the tempo. Costa was, in his youth, a favourite pupil of Busoni's close friend Vianna da Motta, already mentioned above a propos the *Chaconne*. Georges Enescu had apparently the same idea of a constant tempo. According to Serge Blanc, "the tempo advised by Enescu remains stable ($q = 60$) from beginning to end, regardless of the major technical differences between the many variations, which are linked together without respite" (Blanc, op. cit., p. 52).

Figure 9. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 47-54: original note distribution.

Figure 10. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 49-54: alternative note distribution and articulation.

Execution of trills

There are, of course numerous matters concerning the interpretation of this extraordinary work. The reflection made above concerned mainly the question of hand splitting solutions, but the essential point was how to convey in the best possible way the essence of the music. Other fingering options, as well as issues regarding pedaling (notably the use of the *sostenuto* pedal),⁸ phrasing, or articulation, could also emerge as fertile ground for discussion. There are, however two important moments in the work where an apparently irrelevant detail can be disruptive, and it would feel strange not to mention them before coming to an end: those of the trills added and written down by Busoni in the cadenzas that mark the end of the two first major sections of the work.⁹ Although Bach did not indicate them in the original text, their existence is

⁸ Murray Mc Lachlan's recent book *The Foundations of Technique* (Faber, 2014), refers precisely to a passage of the *Chaconne* as an example for the use of the *sostenuto* pedal (p. 110). There are in fact, many places in the piece where this resource can be used to an enormous advantage.

⁹ Vianna da Motta had also the habit of writing down the trills, either in his editions of music by other composers (he was co-editor, together with Busoni, of the first Breitkopf & Härtel complete edition of Liszt's piano works), or in the scores of his pupils and perhaps this fact is relevant, given the mutual influence Busoni and Da Motta exerted on each other. One of the latter's most distinguished disciples,

perfectly defensible; still, beginning on the real note, the trills do not faithfully portray what research on historical performance practice has revealed in more recent years, and what is today generally accepted as the proper way to ornament in these cadential moments. *Figures 11 and 12* compare Busoni's writing with our own suggestion, in which the trills start with the upper note.

Figure 11. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 137-8: Busoni's trill setting and performance suggestion.

Figure 12. Bach-Busoni, *Chaconne* in D minor, bars 213-4: Busoni's trill setting and performance suggestion.

Concluding remarks

Arrived at this point, it is time to return to the questions placed in the beginning and try to come up with answers. As to whether Busoni's *Chaconne* should be chiefly regarded as an early eighteenth, or as a late nineteenth-century work, the text has made clear that our standpoint is that it must remain chiefly within the spirit of Bach. One of the most common mistakes made by pianists is to interpret the more difficult passages predominantly as striking displays of virtuosity, disregarding not only the spirit, but also the structure of the work, thus failing to relate to Bach's original writing. Examples of this are often to be heard in the octave sequence starting in bar 41, where Busoni's indication *Piu mosso ma misurato* or, in German, *Bewegter doch immer gemessen*, is

João de Freitas Branco, relates the following: "He carried out profound studies on the proper way of executing the trills in Beethoven. [...] For him there were no trills with an indeterminate number of notes. He wrote down the trill, indicated the termination, marked the fingerings, and never were those annotations short of a well-grounded argumentation." (Branco, João de Freitas. Viana da Mota. Lisbon: Gulbenkian Foundation, 1987, p. 112). Da Motta also published an article on Beethoven's trills in the sonatas. 'Os Trilos nas Sonatas de Beethoven'. *Revista Brasileira de Música* II, June. 1935, pp. 114-26

used as an alibi to start the “roar” right from that point. If one reports, however, to the violin score, there is no change in the density of the text at that point and Busoni’s enlargements and instructions should be interpreted in a very thoughtful manner (see also *Figure 10* and Footnote 7).

The second question, on whether Busoni’s indications and enlargements can be compatible with the original spirit of Bach’s music, is, of course, intimately related with the previous one. The last comment already anticipates the essence of the answer, which is, however, twofold: from the point of view of the addition of notes, harmonies and textures, it is possible to convey the magnificence of Bach’s music, alluding to the greatness of sound of his larger organ works. It is not in vain that Busoni’s other Bach transcriptions stemmed almost entirely from works originally written for the organ, as mentioned above; on the other hand, looking at the text from the perspective of Busoni’s performance indications, such as dynamics, tempo changes, accents, hand-distribution and fingerings, the risk of deviation from the original spirit may vividly arise. It is therefore important to adopt a critical posture regarding these components, in order not to lose perspective of Bach’s style when performing the work. Bearing this in mind, this version has the potential to create a distinctive universe, combining allusion to the textural delicacy of the violin with the grandeur of the organ’s massive sonorities.

We arrive then to the pragmatic side of this little text, which lies in the attempt to find ways to mediate the spirit of the original text with Busoni’s pianistic writing, through presenting practical proposals, mostly related to fingering and hand-splitting options. Generally speaking, the reverence to the musical text is something that is today seen as sacred and virtually unquestionable. However, it must not be forgotten that, in the case of the *Chaconne*, one is in the presence of three domains: the one of Bach, the one of Busoni and, ultimately, the one of the performer, in whichever time a given performance may take place. Almost three hundred years have passed since this piece was initially conceived as the final dance of a Bach’s violin *Partita*, and it has been well over one century since Busoni’s piano transcription appeared. An early twentieth-century approach to this transcription must have been entirely different that the one expected today, and possibly one hundred years from now something completely diverse will take place. The essential matter is that the performer should take on a proactive and critical attitude, making use of all the knowledge available, courageously adopting an aesthetical posture and assuming the consequent performing decisions. In this sense, the situations proposed and analysed above may be illustrative of an approach that aesthetically believes foremost in conveying the spirit of Bach, for which performing choices in the pursuit of that aim need to be made both in an informed and undaunted manner.