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## Analysis of the Preludium of the Rosary Sonata No. 1 in D minor for violin and basso continuo The Annunciation by H. I. F. von Biber: An Angelic Dialogue

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# ANALYSIS OF THE PRELUDIUM OF THE ROSARY SONATA NO. 1 IN D MINOR FOR VIOLIN AND BASSO CONTINUO "THE ANNUNCIATION" BY H. I. F. VON BIBER: AN ANGELIC DIALOGUE

FRANGEL LÓPEZ-CESEÑA, MM

## 1. Introduction

When I was preparing my final undergraduate recital at the Escuela Superior de Música del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in la Ciudad de México I was asked to add a baroque piece to my repertoire. My violin teacher, Maestro Cuauhtémoc Rivera Guzmán suggested that I look at the work of a unique Bohemian-Austrian composer, Biber. I started my research and found the Rosary Sonatas. They captured my attention not because of their rare tuning, beautiful copper engravings of the original, and unique copy of the manuscript, but for their representational clarity, something I noticed and experienced upon first hearing the Sonata No. 1, "The Annunciation", particularly its Preludium. Through the virtuoso and intricate line of the violin I was able to "see" in my mind, the Archangel Gabriel revealing God's will to a frightened Mary. I imagined a concerned and fearful Virgin Mary answering to the angel. In summation, I witnessed an angelic dialogue by listening to the music.

I identified musical elements as biblical characters with determined acting roles. These characters have an agency and reside in a certain level of musical subjectivity that virtually exists in the world as creations of composers and performers. To explain this, I will base my reflections on the recent *Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* by the music theorist Robert S. Hatten.

## 2. A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music:

In 2018 Robert S. Hatten, Professor of Music Theory at the University of Texas at Austin's Butler School of Music published the last in a trilogy of books on musical meaning that have shaped the field of music semiotics. *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* gives us a theoretical framework to use for analytical purposes.

The first thing to understand is that Hatten gives agency to musical perspectives such as movement, gesture, embodiment, topics, tropes, emotion, narrativity, and performance. This type of agency is referred to as "Virtual Agency" and should be distinguished from the actual agency of listeners, performers (with performative agency), composers and teachers,<sup>1</sup> the actual agents of music.

The Virtual Agents of music are: persona (e.g. Cone's "composer voice"<sup>2</sup>), subjectivity (as integrative, self-reflexive consciousness), narrative (staged by shifts in level of discourse), actors (with roles in a dramatic trajectory), agents (with human characteristics), and actants<sup>3</sup> (prior to agential identity).<sup>4</sup>

Agency is a term used in sociology and philosophy that refers to the capacity and exercise of a being to act in a determined environment.<sup>5</sup> Since Hatten is granting the capacity to act "to musical elements that "do not exist" properly in the world, he designates this agency as "virtual": it stands for something that almost exists or acts, but not quite. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) the American philosopher and father of pragmatism and modern semiotics, defined "virtual" as follows:

A virtual X... is something, not an x, which has the efficiency (virtus) of an X" (1902)<sup>6</sup> Table 1. summarizes the perspectives of music that have a virtual agential capacity as well as the virtual agents that will hold it.

**Table 1. A Theory of Virtual Agency**

Gives agency to	Through Virtual Agents
<b>Movement</b>	<b>Persona:</b> (e.g. Cone's composer voice)
<b>Gesture:</b> Spontaneous, thematic, dialogical, rhetorical, and tropological	<b>Subjectivity:</b> (as integrative, self-reflexive consciousness)
<b>Embodiment</b>	<b>Narrative:</b> (staged by shifts in level of discourse)
<b>Topics</b>	<b>Actors:</b> (with roles in a dramatic trajectory)
<b>Tropes</b>	<b>Agents:</b> (with human characteristics)
<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Actants:</b> (prior to agential identity)
<b>Narrativity</b>	
<b>Performance</b>	

In summation, Hatten's theory gives agency to the music by itself; an agency inferred from the implied actions of sounds as they move and reveal tendencies with music-stylistic contexts.<sup>7</sup> This theory embraces gesture and emotion as part of a comprehensive theory of musical meaning.

From my perspective as performer, I found this theory of analysis useful and relevant. It aids in developing a broader understanding of musical phenomena. It gives equal importance to elements that are traditionally forgotten in music theory (e.g. movement and embodiment). Hatten ties everything together in a theory that enables a holistic comprehension of music that will help performers better explain and theorize the virtual power of music.

Bellow, I will give agency to musical gestures drawing from its spontaneous, dialogical, and rhetorical characteristics. Through that, I will recognize and identify the virtual agents as biblical characters interacting in a virtual musical world.

## 3. Biber

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (b. Wartenberg, Bohemia, bap. 12 Aug 1644; d Salzburg, 3 May 1704) was a Bohemian-Austrian violinist and composer. He was an outstanding virtuoso of the 17th century. His most known and played works nowadays are The Rosary Sonatas for violin and continuo, especially those which require scordatura.<sup>8</sup> He was not a very famous composer before the middle of the 20th century, when his music was rediscovered and restudied. The Rosary Sonatas were never published in Biber's lifetime; the manuscript was discovered much later, and published in 1905. The scordatura<sup>9</sup> required in those pieces is a topic that raises discussions. Putting aside the performance practice issue of retuning a violin during a concert, the greater tension that some of the tunings require is striking. Furthermore, many violinists are rather conservative and retuning makes them uncomfortable.

## 4. Rosary Sonatas

The Rosary Sonatas (also called Mystery Sonatas or Copper-Engraving Sonatas) are a collection of fifteen sonatas for violin and continuo with a final passacaglia for violin solo composed around 1674 and dedicated to the composer's patron, the Archbishop of Salzburg Maximilian Gandolph von Kuenburg.<sup>10</sup> Each sonata has been named in accordance to Catholic rosary devotion/meditation; this is based on the copper- engravings. Therefore, they are divided into three sets of five sonatas each, making a clear reference to the three type of Mysteries of the Rosary from that time: Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries.<sup>11</sup> Possibly, they were performed during the Rosary week (first week of October) in the Chambers of the city's Confraternity of the Rosary, an association to which Biber belonged.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Biblical Annunciation

The Annunciation is the moment when Saint Gabriel the Archangel announces to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus. In the Bible, the Annunciation is described in the Gospel according to St. Luke (1:26-38) from the New Testament as follows:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born as will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age h also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

This biblical passage contains a clear dialogue between Gabriel and Mary that could have been used by Biber as a dialogical inspiration for his first Rosary Sonata, particularly its Preludium.

## 6. Rosary Sonata No. 1, "The Annunciation"

Rosary Sonata No. 1 belongs to the Joyful Mysteries and it has three movements: Preludium, Aria allegro – variatio – Adagio, and Finale. The first movement contains a musical setting that recalls the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel and it could be considered a good example of representational music. I will use six musical moments from the Preludium where a two agents' dialogue can be determined.<sup>14</sup>

1. According to the gospel, Gabriel appears to Mary first. This could be identified in the music in bar one. The long opening note represents the moment when Gabriel appears surrounded by light. The first measure of the Preludium contains the quasi-improvisatory free mood and "mélós"<sup>15</sup> of the entire movement. The beginning of the Preludium is not violent or brutal, but is rather sudden and bright. I like to compare it with the noon sun light of Nazareth in the spring.<sup>16</sup> The opening combination of rhythms appear only in the beginning.

2. Right after this odd and short introduction, there is a long (five bars) virtuoso passage of thirty second notes that finish with a descending third progression and D minor arpeggios in sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note rest. This is the first part of the message

that Gabriel gives to Mary, where the thirty second notes represent the enigmatic words corresponding to Gabriel's prophetic announcement. Bars eight and nine

(the descending third progression and D minor arpeggios) correlate to the strongest phrase said by Gabriel thus far: "and of his kingdom there will be no end".

3. After the eighth note rest, there is a change in gesture. Now Mary asks a question. To articulate the difference Biber put slurs over a short phrase where there are no thirty second notes. It is delicate and afraid. It portrays the awe and bewilderment of a young Mary receiving such strange salutation and news.

4. In bar thirteen the Angel Gabriel speaks once more, but this time talks about the Holy Spirit and the power of God. Biber uses thirty second notes going high up in the violin register. Rhetorically, using a higher register in the dominant for Gabriel's second intervention may represent God's power and will. It answers Mary's question: "How can this be, since I have no husband." Gabriel's second intervention finishes with a long A (quarter note) preceded by a descending D minor scale covering a considerable part of violin's tessitura. This dramatic descending may relate to Gabriel's last words: "For with God nothing will be impossible."

5. In bar eighteen, after another rest, there is another gestural change. Mary is talking once more saying: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." This last comment is represented in the music; here the violin plays in a more singing style phrasing helped by slurs. When Mary refers to the words previously spoken by the angel, Biber adds an improvisatory phrase in G minor with thirty second notes.

6. The final musical phrase (pick up to bar 21 through 24) could be a representation of fear and astonishment. The Preludium concludes in a long, somber, and low D. Mary accepts her destiny and is willing to follow God's will. However, as a normal human being, she will start to think about and assimilate the mystery as represented by the other movements of the sonata.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite all the existing research relevant to Biber and his Rosary Sonatas, (mainly concerning the use of scordatura) more information is still needed about the presumable relations between the music and the corresponding biblical passages. The Preludium of "The Annunciation" by Biber is a beautiful example of an almost programmatic relation with a biblical text and music, but as I described before, a better term to define it is representational. The main goal of this research is to help performers and listeners. It can contribute in a big way to the interpretation of the Preludium because it gives clearer ideas of phrasing, rhetoric and the intrinsic *mélòs* of the passage. It also enhances the listening experience, elevating musical elements to an almost real, i.e. virtual existence.

Personally, this paper helps me by complementing my research, analysis, and aesthetic enjoyment of this piece of music while I continue my work on a deeper analysis using musical hermeneutics and agency. This is also my first contact with Hatten's analytical techniques developed in his recent book *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*. A theory I considered a tremendous input into the music meaning discussion.

Paper presented at the First International Meeting of Student Research in Music and Musicology at the University of Évora, Portugal, November 28-30, 2019.

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer Voice*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Actant in literary theory is a person, creature or object playing any of a set of active roles in a narrative.

<sup>4</sup> Hatten.

<sup>5</sup> Markus Schlosser, Edward N. Zalta ed. "Agency", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015-), accessed September 30, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/agency/>.

<sup>6</sup> Charles S. Peirce, "Virtual," in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. James Mark Baldwin (London: Macmillan, 1902), 763-64.

<sup>7</sup> Hatten.

<sup>8</sup> Elias Dann and Jifi Sehnal, "Biber, Heinrich Ignaz Franz von," in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03037>.

<sup>9</sup> Italian, from *scordare*: to mistune. A term applied largely to lutes, guitars, viols and the violin family to designate a tuning other than the normal, established one. Boyden et al., 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Roseen Giles, "Physicality and Devotion in Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber's Rosary Sonatas," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* vol. 4, no. 2 (2018): article 3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1105>.

<sup>11</sup> The Luminous Mysteries were introduced in 2002 by Pope St. John Paul II in the apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Marie*.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, *The Rosary Sonatas*, Andrew Manze and Richard Egarr, Harmonia Mundi 507321.22, 2016, 2 compact discs, Liner notes by Andrew Manze.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Marshall, trans., *The R.S.V. Interlinear Greek – English, New Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1979), 221-2.

<sup>14</sup> Agents (human or human-like) or actors, since they appear in a narrative.

<sup>15</sup> From the Greek word *mélòs* (song, tune). Hatten proposed this term to refer a "path or passage of our focal attending when we listen to a musical discourse." Hatten 2018.

<sup>16</sup> In the Catholic calendar, March 25th is the day of The Annunciation, exactly nine months before December 25th, Birth of Jesus Christ. According to the tradition of the Angelus, the annunciation happened at noon.

Appendix 1: Heinrich Franz Biber, *Sonate I [Praeludium]*, unter Leitung von Guido Adler (Wien: Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich, 1963) 4-5.



see Appendix 2, next page

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber:  
engraving by Paulus Seel for  
Biber's *Sonatae Violino solo*, 1681

Appendix 2: Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, Rosary Sonata No. 1 “The Annunciation” for violin and continuo, Original Manuscript (ca. 1678) BSB Mus. ms.4123, n.d. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

**Appendix 2:** Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, Rosary Sonata No. 1 “The Annunciation” for violin and continuo, Original Manuscript (ca. 1678) BSB Mus. ms.4123, n.d. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.



*Frangel López-Ceseña*

Violinist Frangel López-Ceseña is one of Mexico’s bright young talents. Frangel has performed all over Mexico, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and the US. He has earned first prize in both the 2014 National “Tomas Ruiz Ovalle” Violin Competition of Mexico and the 2017 CSU Concerto Competition. Frangel received a Bachelor’s degree in violin performance from the Escuela Superior de Música del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (Mexico). He holds a Master’s degree in Music from the Colorado State University. Currently he is undertaking doctoral studies on full scholarship at Western University. His research and performance interests are baroque music, contemporary repertoire for violin, violin history, musical hermeneutics, rhetoric, music semiotics and agency.

## ‘MUSIC IS A CONDUIT TO UNDERSTANDING HUMANITY’ ~ NEW CD FROM ELORA SINGERS OFFERS AN ANTIDOTE TO THE YEAR 2020

ANTONIA HERSCHEL

**F**or all the pain that 2020 has brought – pandemic, racial injustice, riots and social divisions – there is incredible healing to be found in music. Not as an escape, but as a response.

Two remarkable compositions on a new CD recording from the Elora Singers speak of “hope and of love in ways that are very important” for the times we are living in, says Elora Singers artistic director Mark Vuorinen.

Ojawa First Nations composer Barbara Croall created *Giishkaapkag*, (Where the Rock is Cut Through) which is a powerful work asking where the missing Indigenous girls and women are. This work, commissioned for the 40th anniversary of the Elora Festival in 2019, received its world premiere at the opening night.

Also on the CD is *This Love Between Us*, by Reena Esmail of Los Angeles. The work is in seven movements, each of which focuses on a different religion. It marries the Western baroque orchestra and choir to Indian tabla and sitar to beautiful effect. It, too, was performed at the festival last summer.

“Since then the world has changed incredibly,” Vuorinen said.

*This Love Between Us* provides extraordinarily rich layers of musical experience in which the text – derived either from the religious writing, or from poets who write through the lens of their religion – speak of love, unity, and kindness.

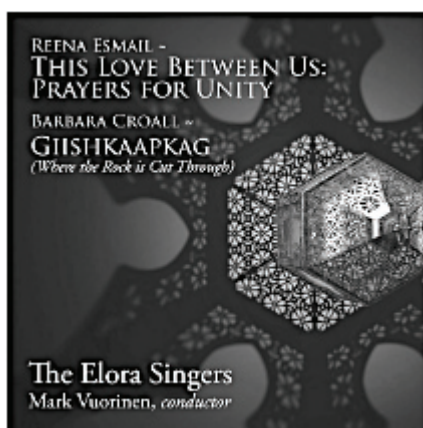
“Each movement also contains a unique combination of Indian and Western classical styles, running the continuum from the Christian movement, which is rooted firmly in a baroque style, to the Zoroastrian movement, which is a Hindustani vilambit bandish,” Esmail says on her website, [reenaesmail.com](http://reenaesmail.com) (Roughly translated, a vilambit bandish is a song in a slow tempo.)

Esmail has always had two musical cultures in her life: Indian and Western. “I had to create space to negotiate those two cultures,” she said in an online discussion prior to the CD release. “That space became my music.”

She wrote the work in the difficult time leading up to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. But she said her mind “always returns to the last line of this piece, the words of Rumi, which are repeated like a mantra over affirming phrases from each religion, as they wash over one another: “Concentrate on the Essence. Concentrate on the Light.”

“Music is a conduit to understanding humanity,” Esmail said.

As for Croall, she conceived of her work for cedar flute, percussion and choir by thinking about rocks, which according to traditional Anishinaabe knowledge are the oldest beings on earth.



She depicted the rock formations as “having voices that have transcended time,” she said. She drew inspiration from Agawa Rock near Wawa in northern Ontario. It has ancient paintings on it that were created over centuries.

Some of her own ancestors made paintings there and “it is a long-held tradition for our people to do ‘vision paintings’ on the rocks at certain sacred ceremonial grounds, she said.

The work begins with the clear, haunting sound of the traditional cedar flute, the pipigwan, as the music gives form to the voices coming out of the rock.

The text asks where the missing women have gone. We think, of course, of the women who were killed, or presumed killed, and who were the subject of a Canada-wide inquiry.

But this is not the first time, nor the only context, in which Indigenous women have disappeared.

The Indigenous culture was a matriarchal one before the Indian Act established band councils that quickly excluded women. “They weren’t even allowed in the room.” Croall said.

Women are returning, but “it is an evolving process,” Croall said.

At the discussion before the CD launch, members of the Elora Singers responded to both composers.

Mezzo-soprano Christina Stelmacovich described how emotional it was to sing both of these works.

“We are absolutely honoured that you allowed us into your world,” she said. “Thank you.”

The CD is \$20 and is available for purchase through the Elora Singers website at [elorasingers.ca](http://elorasingers.ca)



*The Elora Singers*