



Bisel Classics

Tomaso
VITALI
Chaconne

Violine
Continuo
(oder Piano)

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Preface

The provenance of the only known extant manuscript of the “*Vitali Chaconne*” held in the Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden, has been hotly debated ever since Ferdinand David made the seminal arrangement of the work which introduced it to the world and gave it its baptismal name: ‘*Ciaconna*’. For a long time the work was thought to be a hoax piece, written by David and passed off as the work of a venerable master. With the manuscript now available in the public domain we know this to be untrue and there are strong textual reasons that suggest Tomaso Vitali was not the composer either... or at least, not the only composer. Perhaps the chief exponent of this view was the German musicologist and “chaconne expert”, Wolfgang Reich.

Reich argued that the Dresden manuscript was a composite document with at least four individuals involved in the process of preparation identified in his study: the composer or the owner of the source (Vitalino), an anonymous composer (of the violin part), the copyist and the archivist. For reasons unknown, Reich chose to omit the author of the *musica ficta* and the other corrective annotations in the ms. Although this editor may have been a modern contributor to the ms. there is also the possibility the annotations were added during the first stages of preparation. This omission aside, each of these individuals contributed something to the work and Reich frames his analysisⁱ thus:

1. The writer of the only existing source (Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden, Mus. 2037-R-1) is identifiable from his handwriting as an otherwise reliable

copyist of the Electoral chapel whose work can be seen in a number of other copies. The manuscript must have been made between 1710 and 1730 but contains strong inconsistencies. ⁱⁱ

2. The bitonal setting of *d#-min.* in the violin against the *g-min.* of the bass in mm.150-157 is held as incompatible with contemporary practices. Reich regards this setting as an “*obvious mistake*” with treble and bass mutually exclusive from one another (in this passage at least) and taking an altogether separate example, supports this view by referring to the “*fino al segno*” in m.41 as “*pointless*” in this context.
3. The entry “*Del Signor Vitalino*” on the cover of the manuscript is inconclusive. Taken from the score by the archivist around 1750 when the music collection was uniformly labelled.
4. “*Parte del Tomaso Vitalino*” on top of the first page of music means the “*part of Tomaso Vitalino*” and this refers not to the composer but to the owner of the source for the transcript. Reich adds that there was no musician in the Dresden court orchestra known by the name of Vitalino and the score is not a part (*parte*), but a score (*partita*).ⁱⁱⁱ

From these premises, Reich postulates:

- a) The composition that led to the Dresden manuscript, was a single part described as the “*Parte del Tomaso Vitalino*”.
- b) This single part was probably the bass melody and its figuration.
- c) The part is presumed to have been handed by its owner (Vitalino) directly to the composer of our version, because at

an intermediate copy Vitalino would have noticed its errors and amended it as required.

In conclusion:

d) It is conceivable that the violin part was freely composed without first becoming fully accustomed to the transpositions in the bass. The mismatched parts were then given to a copyist in order to produce a cleaner copy. The copyist copied the parts faithfully without correction or omission and this is the version that has been handed down to us.

This conclusion disregards the corrections and amendments offered by an unmentioned unknown hand, since Reich was concerned only with the composition of two layers of text and the process which explained how as separate entities, *they* came together. Reich concedes the reasons why Vitalino himself never finished the corrections on the piece are lost in time, as is with all probability, the identity of the anonymous composer who wrote the violin part and for this reason, he suggests the piece should be referred to as simply the '*Dresden Chaconne*'. Just as unlikely perhaps was the idea that the "*Vitali Chaconne*" could ever be supplanted by the moniker of an anonymous composite version in the public consciousness. This knowledge however, can only enhance the work's already considerable reputation by casting an illuminating light on its mysterious origins and revealing a compellingly plausible complex process of events that led to its present development.

With regard to the inconsistencies present in the Dresden ms. as we have suggested already, we might be forgiven for thinking the copy had been prepared in a hurry with several corrections (in fact) being made first by the copyist (Grundig), and then by some unknown hand who added further corrections in pencil in the style of *musica ficta*.

Reich dispelled this notion with his hypothesis that the manuscript represents an interim copy that combines two text layers in a single document that consistently reproduces the errors and inconsistencies of the separate documents. The annotations of the unknown editor are not considered to be a wholly legitimate application of *musica ficta* or of any systematic method of mutations rather, a corrective technique often applied to render a piece ready for performance but just as likely in this instance, applied as preliminary corrections in the preparation of a final clean copy. The *ficta* are not always rigorously applied by the unknown editor and sometimes he marks these (necessary) accidentals, sometimes not. In order to differentiate between the corrective *ficta* added by the unknown editor and those added for the present edition and to produce the cleanest copy suitable for reading, only those added for the present edition are recorded in the textual notes. Editorially contributed continuo figures on the other hand, are not otherwise mentioned in the textual notes but are enclosed in parentheses in order to differentiate them from the original figures.

A good accompanist would have had no difficulty elaborating upon the artfully conceived figures of the continuo part while an experienced performer would have had no difficulty recognising chromatic alterations not only after *ficta* had corrected a passage but immediately before it too. The discipline of placing musical symbols exactly over or under the point in the music where they apply is a relatively modern one.

The subject of margin notes and corrections made by several editors is vexed because corrective annotations will always have a certain greater authority in a document but expressive alterations require additional justification. In every instance we must decide if the annotation is meant to

correct original errors or only to enhance the musical performance with expressive markings and articulation. In the first instance, the corrections are mostly necessary to arrive at an objectively correct musical text, in the second instance they may lead to an insight into the performance practices of the day but are otherwise subjective and superfluous to an authoritative interpretation of the work.

When the German violinist Ferdinand David (1810-1873) came upon the "*Vitali Chaconne*" in "*Schranck No: II*", a collection of roughly 1,750 works from the estate of the concertmaster Johann Georg Pisendel (1667-1755) it was a momentous discovery. It was probably, Julius Rietz who had first come across the "*Schranck No: II*" in the basement of the Katholische Hofkirche in Dresden in the 1860's after it had languished in obscurity for over a century although the exact period is open to speculation. Rietz and David were both working in the Gewandhaus (Rietz as conductor and David as Konzertmeister) and teaching in the Conservatory (Rietz teaching composition and David, violin) but their association went back at least as far as 1826 when Rietz had played in chamber music concerts together with David in Berlin.^{iv} It is conceivable that David learned of the Pisendel collection from Rietz or vice versa. Moritz Fuerstenau incorporated the Pisendel collection into the inventory of His Majesty the King of Saxony's royal private music collection where it stayed until its transfer to the Royal Public Library in 1896.^v

In David's authoritative arrangement of this piece he refined the manuscript's many inconsistencies into a coherent composition and professed it to be a piece by Tomaso Antonio Vitali (1663-1745). It was first published by Breitkopf & Härtel in '*Die Hohe Schule des Violinspiels*' (1867)^{vi} a series of twenty Baroque and early Classical pieces that made a valuable addition to the repertoire as

equally suitable teaching material and stimulating concert items. The dual purpose of the set, planned it seemed from the outset, would have been a godsend to any publisher but by this time David's reputation was such that his name alone could have sold the works to a willing public.

Professor Clive Brown and research assistant Dr. George Kennaway of Leeds University's CHASE project have conducted extensive research on David which may be summarised as follows.^{vii} David's early instruction under Spohr and his subsequent positions as Konzertmeister of the Gewandhaus Orchestra (1836-1873) and as head of the violin department of the Leipzig Conservatorium (1843-1873) furnished his credentials as a world-class authority, the pre-eminent representative of the modern German violin school and a virtuoso performer with an impressive record of collaboration with some of the other leading musicians of the day. The records include programme notes mentioning Clara Schumann as the accompanist in a performance of the Vitali chaconne in a chamber music concert at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 29th October 1870. Having been published separately along with the other nineteen works of *'Die Hohe Schule'* after Ferdinand's early death in 1873, the violin parts of the twenty pieces passed into the hands of Ferdinand's son Paul and were finally bound together in a single volume. Paul David was one of the first music masters of Uppingham School and his father's annotations in *'Die Hohe Schule'* are preserved along with numerous other inherited works using the soubriquet "Uppingham" for the entire collection. In this case, the designation reminds us of the fact that after Ferdinand David made his own amendments to the first edition of *'Die Hohe Schule'*, Paul David added to them with ideas of his own.

For the first edition of the work published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1867, David included two signs in the edition which

bear explanation here. The serpentine line for vibrato  has become part of the common modern vocabulary of signs though it makes a rare appearance in David's work, only appearing in m.150 of this edition. It is possible that the writing of his '*Violinschule*' (1863)^{viii} around the same time as arranging the works of '*Die Hohe Schule*' may have occasioned the use of vibrato in this piece as a tip of the hat to the pedagogic. If on the other hand, we are to understand his instruction in terms of the prevalent expressive performing convention, it is a device that more often than not he personally eschewed: "*The vibrato may be made slowly as well as quickly, but must not be employed too frequently nor without sufficient reason.*" Spohr in his own '*Violinschule*' (c.1832)^{ix} had gone into greater detail with observations on the gradations of speed in the type of vibrato from slow, accelerating to fast and slackening, all dealt with in the graphic representation of the serpentine line and this is a treatment of vibrato that has found its way into modern notation, but although he makes a similar graphic distinction the tenor of David's approach is that when it occurs in a quiet passage, it is played slowly becoming faster the louder one plays.

The other type of sign to make a rare appearance in one of David's works is a sign we have called the *spitze* (,) which David used to signal the use of the whipping bow technique that Spohr had called *fouetté*, presumably after the ballet steps of the same name. David's description of the technique can be found in his '*Violinschule*'^x: