

MUHL 585 RESEARCH PAPER

The Ciaccona: Bach's D-Minor Chaconne a dance?

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Introduction

The famous D minor *Chaconne*¹ is the elaborate, through-composed final movement of a complex work for solo violin, the second Partita BWV 1004. The aim of this paper is to research whether and how Bach's chaconne is structurally related to the *ciaccona*-a dance that existed since the early 1600's in Spain, and probably came from Perú or Mexico.

After a brief outline of the development and characteristics of both the Early Guitar Ciaccona before 1640 and the instrumental variation ciaccona in the second half of the 17th century, the author will determine how Bach's chaconne fits into the development of the popular dance. I will define the compositional characteristics of the dance found in Bach, as well as the modern and personal influences in the *Chaconne* from BWV 1004. Finally, ideas for interpretation and performance will be suggested, based on the findings of this and additional research.

The evolution of the Ciaccona

Early Guitar Music in Spain and Italy

Early mention of the terminus *chacona* appears in Spain towards the end of the 16th century, usually in connection with Latin-America and pointing out its mexican, or indian, or "mulattischen"² decent. Lope de Vega³, Joseph de Valdivielso⁴ and others describe the sensual character of the dance, and its closeness to the simple people. A popular refrain is:

"Vida, vida, vida bona

Vida, vámonos á Chacona"

¹ Bach, Johann Sebastian: Partita No. 2, BWV 1004 for Violin solo: Allemanda, Corrente, Sarabanda, Giga, Ciaccona, Kassel: Bärenreiter Urtext der Neuen Bach-Ausgabe, 1958

² V. Troschke, Michael. "Chaconne". Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Vol. 2, p. 550-555, Kassel-Basel-London-New York-Prag: Bärenreiter Verlag 1995

³ La isla del sol 1616 and Amante agradecido, 1618: Cotarelo y Mori 1911, S. 229b, MGG, p. 550

⁴ in *El hospital de los locos*, 1622, MGG p.550

De la Cerca⁵ complains about unusual and seductive body-movements, and Lope de Vega⁶ writes in 1632:

"God forgive Vicente Espinel, who brought us this novelty and the five courses of the guitar (because of which the noble instruments are already being forgotten, like the *danças*) , with the gestures and lascivious movements of the Chaconas, which bring such offense to the chastity and decorous silence of women"

No written musical examples from before 1628 of this Spanish dance have been found. However, with the Spanish king traveling to Napoli, the five-stringed *chitarra spagnola* became the instrument of the day in Italy. As a result of its popularity, musicians wrote several collections and instruction-books, written in tabulature or a new form of notation invented by the Italians, the *alfabetto*.

The first notated proof of both Ciaccona and Passacaglia appears in Montesardo's *Nuova inventione d'intavolatura per sonare li baletti sopra la chitarra spagnuola*, published in Florence in 1606⁷. It can be found among his *balletti*, and also appears with guitar accompaniment set to 10 texts of the Riccardiana manuscripts. The Spaniard Briçeno writes a *Método muy facilissimo*, a collection of dances which contains two dance-songs that mention the word *chacona* in the title. The specifications in the titles are related to the appearance of numbers and cross-signs in the tabulature⁸.

An older resource shows similar ostinatos in four-bar groups, with a repeated bass-formula. The Spaniard Diego Ortiz calls them *recercada* in 1553⁹.

⁵ Vida politica de todos los estados de mujeres, Alcalá 1599 in: MGG, p.550

⁶ Vega Carpio, *La Dorotea*: pp. 115-116 in: Hudson, 1967, p.16

⁷ Hudson, 1967, p.17

⁸ *La chacona, sobre el crúzado and La gran chacona en cifra*. MGG-article "Chaconne", p. 550

⁹ Diego Ortiz' *Tratado de glosas sobre clausulas y otros géneros de puntos en la música de violines* has also been translated into Italian and published in 1553 in Tolletano and Rome as *Il primo libro de Diego Ortiz*.

The ciaccona evolved quickly from being a popular dance in Spain to becoming part of the instrumental repertoire in Italy in the early 17th century, supported by the popularity of the Spanish guitar. The chordal strumming of the Spanish guitar became wildly popular in Italy, a trademark of the popular music of the day.

From a modern perspective, this music seems trivial and a step backwards compared to what happened 100 to 150 years earlier, in the secular Madrigals of Josquin and Isaac. Isaacs “sweet”, floral style, and Josquin’s expressive polyphony had previously been replaced by the monody, “a single vocal line free to trace in tone every nuance of meaning in the text” (Hudson, 1967, p.15), supported only by an instrumental continuo. The continuo consisted of a n occasionally figured bass line that would indicate a harmonic structure, but not the exact notes being played, or the instruments to chose. In monody, the ciaccona would be a popular instrumental piece (also with poetry), that would end the music to a play, or a set of dances.

The flourishing time for the guitar ciaccona with its typical bass-formula was between 1640 and 1660. It soon became popular among other instruments: Frescobaldi writes the first variations on a ciaccona-bass for harpsichord in 1614, and others follow. In the second half of the 17th century, ciacconas are composed for instrumental ensembles, violones, two violins, basso continuo and spinet.

While the concept of variation is extremely popular in Italy from the first appearance of the ciaccona, Spanish musicians, such as Sanz, start writing variations relatively late.¹⁰

There is a “hazy boundary” (Hudson, 1967, p.77) between the times when ciaccona’s were purely dance-pieces and when they entirely belonged to instrumental music. As instrumental pieces, they were most suitable for demonstration of the technique of variation. Scores show the words *variatio*, *passeggiato*, *mutanze*, *fantasia*, *aria*, *smenuito* which all mean “variation” (Hudson, 1967, p. 49). The variation ciaccona remained popular until the mid 18th century.

¹⁰ 1674 Gaspar Sanz for guitar, 1677 Ruiz de Ribayaz for harp

France and England

In France, the earlier variation chaconne appeared in keyboard and lute music. Later, the orchestral chaconne became, like the passacaglia, extremely popular. French examples for solo-instruments tend to repeat phrases exactly, like a refrain that alternates with other sections, modulate and break the four measure phrase length of the ostinato.

Hudson (1982) points out repetition and breaking the phrase length, modulation and double-dotting (derived from Ballet) to be typical characteristics of the French chaconne.

The orchestral chaconne¹¹ developed later as part of ballets and operas and has sections marked by modes, usually the parallel minor for the middle section. The different sections can be orchestrated differently, for example with only woodwinds for the minor part.

The orchestral version is far more popular in France, however it seems to have lost the ostinato and harmonic characteristics. Those were kept alive in the instrumental solo-chaconnes of Gaultier (1651), Couperin and J. Gallot (c.1672).

The English chaconne was influenced by the two French types, and the ground bass tradition.

Germany

German composers in the 18th century tend to combine the Italian ostinato-technique with the liberal French treatment of the bass in a chaconne. At the same time, chaconne and passacaglia then to meld. Vocal chaconnes can be found in Schütz (1647 after *Zefiro torna*), Buxtehude and Biber. Keyboard-chaconnes are known among others by Kuhnau, Fischer, Krieger, Böhm, Pachelbel, Kellner, Händel and J.S. Bach. Pachelbel and Buxtehude wrote important chaconnes for the organ, that were influenced by the Italian ostinato rather than the French ballet-chaconne.

The German chaconne marks the final stage of development for the genre. Composers write highly challenging solo-instrumental works, such as Bach's famous *Chaconne* in D minor, that incorporates the basic harmonic progressions into a highly polyphonic piece. It is

¹¹ For example: Jean Baptiste, Lully (1632-1687). Chaconne de Phaëton

the final movement of a Violin-solo work, a form called *senza basso* that had been used previously by Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656-1705), Johann Georg Pisendel (1687-1755), A. Kühnel (1645-ca. 1700) and H. I. F. Biber (1644-1704). The art of polyphonic violin-playing in Germany had reached very high standards in the late 17th century, and writing entire sonatas and suites for solo-instruments without basso continuo was simply the result of the great abilities of performers and composers (who oftentimes played the instrument themselves) of the time.

Characteristics of the Ciaccona

The guitar Ciaccona before 1640

The dances found in Montesardo's tabulature are called *ciaccona*, and present an ostinato in three different keys. They are organized in groups of four measures and present the chord sequence I-V- VI- I that most likely was used for diminution and improvisation.



Example: Bass progression in a Ciaccona by Benedetto Sanseverino, 1620 (in treble clef for demonstration)



Ex.: Ciaccona per guitarra, c. 1635

Outside of *rasgueado* music the bass-lines associated with *ciaccona* music are formed on the roots of the triads in these same progressions. The spanish guitar with its five strings (the fifth string being tuned an octave higher) will always play inversions of chords, which makes it a perfect chordal and continuo instrument. It can be completed with a bass instrument, such as the violone.

The bass progression can have a variant in which vi is replaced by IV or I-IV:



Ex.: Variation on the bass progression: Chiaccona by Giovanni Ambrosio COLonna, 1620

The main characteristics of the ciaccona in Early Guitar Music are repetition, instrumental variation and the characteristic rasgueado (strumming) technique of the baroque guitar.

Ostinato patterns are not very complex, usually only two phrases long, with no key change or rhythmic change within one two phrase-pattern.

Hudson mentions a single example of a modulating ciaccona in *Riccardiana* ms. 2804 (Hudson, 1967, p.78). While the Passacaglia can be major or minor, an early Ciaccona will always be in major (with a few rare exceptions). The dance ciaccona's are always in a triple meter.

The variation Chaconne

• Bass-lines

With the chaconne being played outside rasgueado guitar music, the basic framework becomes essentially melodic. The bass lines remain similar to those of Ex. 1 but can be played in other positions than just the root.

Other basses result from replacing VII for V, and filling in the intervals from I up to V. Outside of guitar music, the basses are often repeated, or rhythmically altered. The anacrusis of two quarters in the beginning is typical for the French and German chaconne, and can be found in Italy as well.

- Upper Voices

Examples for melodic frameworks that may occur in a melody:



Ex.: Melodic framework of the upper voices for the basses 1 and 2

Those melodic frameworks were ornamented, repeated and used as guidelines for improvisation.

- Tempo and Rhythm

As a *rasgueado* dance, the *ciaccona* in Italy and Spain was animated, rather fast. When the variation form developed, the melodic complexity increased and the tempo slowed down considerably. In France, the appearance of dotted rhythm slowed the form down even more, but is still somewhat faster than the *Passacaglia* in Italy and France. The French orchestral *chaconne* has a slightly lighter mood, due to the dotted rhythm, minor sections are sometimes marked *tendrement*. The dotted figure becomes a characteristic, for example in Lully's *chaconne* from *Acis et Galathée*¹², dotted eight-notes may occur as well.



Ex.: dotted figure in French Chaconnes

¹² *Acis et Galathée. Pastorale-héroïque* in a prologue and three acts by Jean-Baptiste Lully (born in Florence, 29 Nov 1632; died in Paris, 22 March 1687) to a libretto by Jean Galbert de Campistron after Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; premieres: Anet, château 6 September 1686, and Paris, Opéra, 17 September 1686.

As the variation chaconne moves from Italy to other countries (France, Germany, England) the bass becomes less syncopated.

- Meter

The variation forms maintain the typical $3/4$ meter. Four bar groups of $3/4$, sometimes in $3/2$, or on rare occasions in $6/8$ are being notated. The note values contained in those four bar groupings can be regrouped into two measures of $3/2$, or hemiolas. Such hemiolas (also possible in $6/4$, where the second two measures are in $3/2$) are often emphasized in guitar music, and change the structure of the music to a dialogue (question and answer).

- Mode

A few French chaconnes for clavecin are in the minor mode (Louis Couperin, Jean Nicolas Geoffroy). English chaconnes may also be in either mode. As mentioned above, later French chaconnes often include a middle section on the parallel minor, which can be called *passacaille*. However, “most variation chaconnes, like the original dance are in the major mode” (Hudson, 1981, p. xxiii).

- Ostinato/Ostinato within a phrase

The essential ostinato of the bass-line, although highly varied, often inspired composers to add still other ostinato effects.

Since the basses themselves do not allow much chordal variety, a harmonic ostinato can be observed. Far more frequent is the random or designed mixture of basses. Usually, the chaconne-bass is introduced in the beginning, and then changes according to a plan, or at random. Italian composers in the second quarter of the 17th century favor a *basso ostinato* in vocal music, while the changing basses occur in keyboard music, especially in France and Germany.

Occasionally, the upper voices also contribute to the ostinato effect of the single phrase, by creating *couplets*, pairs of phrases: another French technique. Such pairs can be unified by a common motive, their texture (for example arpeggios, scales, chords), a rhythm, or both a cadence and a texture. French examples for solo instrument repeat phrases exactly. Often, a

section in a nearly related key alternates with a refrain, and sometimes even the four-bar ostinato is broken.

Pairings are typical for the French orchestral chaconne, where all voices are repeated exactly, except for slight adjustments that help forming a period. The two phrases can be contrasting in dynamics. Hudson provides the example of an “echo-chaconne” (example 107 in: Hudson, 1982, p. xxv).

Other ostinato effects are the repetition of a single note, repetition of two simultaneous pitches, recurrence of melodic figures in the discant, recurrence of a motive on different pitches and harmonic sequences (rare).

- Formal structure

Many ciacconas, especially the Italian guitar examples are not divided into sections, and consist of a series of varied phrases. The ostinato, and the way in which one phrase varies from another creates a sense of forward motion. Rarely, modulation to a nearly related key happens. The Italian examples always use the whole pattern, either with or without variation, and present one variational idea at a time.

“The idea of chain repetition of phrases, either with or without variation, is seen as an integral part of the performance practice of the ciaccona.” (Hudson, 1967, p.77)

The harmonic scheme of a ciaccona is defined by the ground bass, a bass progression that remains unchanged throughout the piece, with small variations and substitutions. Once the music was written down, the melodic phrases begin “to lead independent lives of their own” (Hudson, 1967, p. 77)

The *Chaconne* in BWV 1004

Johann Gottfried Walter defines the chaconne in *Musicalisches Lexikon* as follows:

“Tantz, und eine Instrumental-pièce, deren Baß-Subjectum oder thema gemeiniglich aus vier Tacten in 3/4 besteht, und, so lange als die darüber gesetzte Variationes oder Couplets währen, immer obligat, d.i. unverändert bleibt. Es kann aber auch das Bass-Subjectum selbst diminuiert und verändert, allein den Takten nach nicht verlängert werden.”¹³

“Dance and instrumental piece whose bass subject usually contains four measures in 3/4, and remains unchanged for as long as the above composed variation or couplets are being played. The bass subject itself can be diminished and changed, but not made longer in measures.” (translation by the author)

This is, with the exception of ms. 129-133 and the final cadence true for Bach’s famous violin ciaccona from Partita No.2, BWV 1004. It is built in groups of 4 measures, with variations and diminutions on the bass ostinato:



Rhythmic variation of the Bass theme in ms. 5-8

“In solcher Art Stücken gehet man oft aus dem Modo majori in den Modum minorem & vice versa, und lässet, wegen der Obligation, vieles mit einfließen, welches sonst in einer freyen Composition regulariter nicht zugelassen ist.”

(Walter, in *Musicalisches Lexikon*, Leipzig 1732¹⁴)

“In those kinds of pieces one would wander from *modo majori* to *modum minorem* & vice versa, and because of the obligation will incorporate such things as are not allowed in a *composition regulariter*.” (translation by the author)

¹³ Walterl, 1732 S. 164 in M: MGG, S. 554

¹⁴ Thoene, Helga: Johann Sebastian Bach. Ciaccona-Tanz oder Tombeau? Eine analytische Studie. Oschersleben: Dr. Zithen Verlag, 2001, 2009, p. 79



MEASURE	MUSICAL EVENT	TERMINUS	ORIGIN
1-4	<p>bass ostinato introduced: 4 bar pattern. \underline{I}-V$\underline{3}$-i- VI- iv-V-i = Ciaccona!</p> <p>- The harmonic ostinato is consistent throughout the entire piece.</p> <p>- bass ostinato is introduced once in its entirety</p> <p>- anacrusis (rest on one, two quarters)</p>	<p>described by Hudson as <i>fundamental pattern 1c</i> (Hudson 1982, p. xiv),</p> <p>Ciaccona di contratempo (Hudson, 1982, p.3, ex.15)</p>	<p>Spanish and Italian chacona around 1620-30</p> <p>- used in France and Germany</p> <p>- French and German chaconne</p>
9-16	rhythmic variation of bass-pattern		French keyboard chaconne in the 2nd quarter of the 17th century
1-24	dotted rhythm, in quarter and eight notes,	Rhythmic variation	French variation chaconne
9-25	repeated melody through 4 variations in different voices	phrase pairing, with variations: <i>couplet</i>	French orchestra chaconne
26-37	lowest voice varies ciaccona bass, while upper voice sequences melody	two-part polyphony: incorporates the basic harmonic progressions into a highly polyphonic piece	baroque polyphony
89-120	arpeggiated chords for 8 variations	structural ostinato	variation chaconne after 1660, French ostinato
121-125	only one “trick at a time”: scales before arpeggios, scales after scales	scale variation no. 2	instrumental variation chaconne
126-132	<p>126-129: ostinato bass comes back in original from</p> <p>129-133 cadence to d Major</p>	<p>- cadential moment, four-bar ostinato broken</p> <p>- modulation to Major, 3part structure</p>	<p>- only French/German</p> <p>- only French/German</p>
133-136 & 142-145	<p>Choral quotation in bass line</p> <p>“Vom Himmel hoch”</p>	cantus firmus technique	German Christmas Song, also in Christmas Oratorio, BWV 428
137-138	<p>Choral quotation in discant:</p> <p>“Wie soll ich Dich empfangen?”</p>	cantus firmus technique	Choral melody from Christmas Oratorio, BWV 428
161-165-169	repetition of a single note, repetition of two simultaneous notes	melodic ostinato effects	ca. 1420
177-200	dotted rhythm, in quarter notes, full chords	melodic ostinato effects	French instrumental and orchestra chaconne
229-240	repeated single note a, with chromatic variations in 236-239	“churchbell variation” (Thoene)	Bach/Weiss- lute technique, open a-string of the violin
241-249	triplet variation	rhythmic variation	instrumental variation chaconne

Dance or tombeau?

Bach's *Chaconne*, the final movement of the second Partita BWV 1004 is a legendary, unusual piece. In her in 2001 published book, Helga Thoene investigates the background, symbolism and hidden meanings of Bach's D-minor *Chaconne*. Her findings show that the unusual length of the piece, the encrypted numbers that represent names and the use of choral-melodies in a highly polyphonic structure are all hints that Bach wrote a tombeau for his first wife, Maria Barbara Bach who passed away in 1720 in Köthen.

The bass-lines and melodic anchors are quotations of his own choral melodies without words¹⁵, whose meanings and the order in which they are used constitute a Mass for the death of his wife. They remain inaudible, until pointed out.¹⁶ Bach uses them in some instances as a cantus firmus, for example in measures 133-174 of the major part: "Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her" ("I come from the heaven's high").

The choral is not only one of the most famous Bach has written, but also has a resurrection-theme, which goes along with the sudden major of the middle part in ms. 133. Bach's masterful use of cantus firmus technique and elaborate polyphony seem to bridge the chaconne back to Josquin and Isaac, herein recalling the beauty of liturgic vocal music. Recent recordings¹⁷ of ensemble-versions with violin or lute and vocalists have shown the inherent lyrics and liturgic frame of the work.

Bach also engraves the name "Maria Barabara" in the beginning of the piece¹⁸ in honor of his wife. When adding up the letters of her name according to their position in the alphabet, one will end up with a number. By giving the notes a number equivalent (a=1, b=2 etc., sharps and flats add a 0. C # is 30), the two sums can be compared, and appear to be the exact same.

¹⁵ About the use of Choral quotations without word in the *Chaconne* and other violin works by J.S. Bach, view: "Das wortlose Choral-Zitat in der *Chaconne*", Thoene 2001, p. 72ff

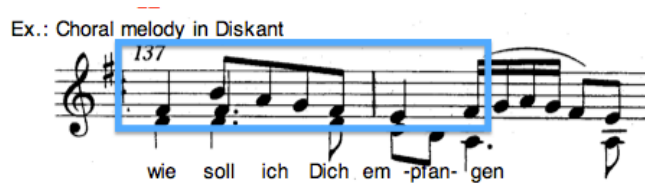
¹⁶ Maybe not for the educated listener at Bach's time? (E.B.)

¹⁷ Poppen, Christoph & The Hilliard Ensemble: Morimur, CD ECM Records GmbH, 2001

¹⁸ Thoene presents a rather complex numeric system of "Tonbuchstaben" (sound-letters) that describes how the "Maria Barbara" is part of the first four measures. (Thoene 2001, p. 89)

While this knowledge may not be of much help to the performer who is concerned with the execution of technical difficulties, it adds another level of understanding and biographical depth to the piece. In some instances, elaborate melodies can be underlaid with words of a choral, which supports a clearer idea of musical phrasing. Example: The words “Wie soll ich Dich empfangen” are represented by the melodic quote f-b-a-g-f-e-f in ms. 137-138.

(Also view attached score.)



The beginning of the phrase is marked by f#, or the word “wie” on beat 1 of measure 137: a typical phrase elision, where a new variation begins on the last note of a previous four bar ostinato, and in ciaccona practice a very common compositional tool. Most performers, however, start the new phrase *after* beat 1, on the b, a decision that has to be questioned if one knows of the underlying text to the music.

Conclusions for interpretation

The research of music-historians only comes to life when applied to modern practices and accepted by performers. While the following suggestions have been written based on the findings in literature and musical examples, they remain suggestions, and each musician will have to make decisions based on knowledge and taste, not just upon the edition in front of him.

“Die Notenschrift ist auf jeden Fall ein völlig unzureichender Notbehelf. Wenn ich die Notenschrift einfach in Klang umsetze, entsteht Blech draus. Ich muss eine Gebrauchsanweisung haben, um zu wissen, was meint überhaupt eine Note.”¹⁹

(Nicolas Harnoncourt, 2008)

“Sheet music is definitely an insufficient crutch. If I simply translate a score into sound, the result is: crap. I need an operating manual to know what a note means.”
(translation by the author)

The instrumentalist who plays a Ciaccona before 1640 has to understand that dance-music is being played. Ideally, a violinist aware of the practice would seek to be accompanied by a baroque guitar, and aim to write or improvise his/her own variations, after presenting the music.

For the Bach-Chaconne, there are certainly more opinions than recordings existing. However, a few points can be made, assuming that Bach knew very well what genre he was writing in.

- Tempo: not too slow, tempo giusto, based on the runs in the scale variation. All variations are to be played in one tempo, including the middle part in minor.
- Phrasing - mostly 4/8 bar groups, also consider the choral phrasing if applicable

¹⁹ Hagedorn, Volker: “Er sah mich als Verräter”, Interview with Nicolas Harnoncourt in: Zeit Online, 6.4. 2008, p.4

- Rhythm: french (double) dotting

Bach's chaconne is an artful version of the 17th century instrumental variation chaconne, and a highly biographical work, written upon the death of his first wife, Maria Barbara. As part of the second Partita for violin solo, it is a final movement like most orchestral and instrumental chaconnes of the early 17th century in Spain, and towards the end of it in France.

The double-dotted French style clearly emphasizes beat one, rather than two-the chaconne is not a Sarabande.

Other than the popular Spanish ciaccona, BWV 1004 is a semi-religious work, and has to be understood within the religious context. The lyrics behind the choral melodies quoted by Bach are proof that he found consolation in his faith and his music while grieving his first wife Maria Barbara Bach.

Composers have been inspired by the powerful and virtuosic work, and reacted with transcriptions, or in the case of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy (1840) and Robert Schumann (1854) even wrote a piano-accompaniment. The versions for piano solo by Busoni or Brahms (for the left hand only), or Segovia's and Yepes' transcription for the guitar are proof for the timeless beauty and the inspirational value of the work. As transcriptions, they naturally do not attempt to mirror the performance practice of the time-be it Bach's or the 16th century ciaccona practice. Rather, they are evidence of the prevailing taste in the 19th and 20th century, and have to be looked at as such.

To use them as examples of how to play BWV 1004 would be "interpretation backwards", and conclusions about the original drawn from a transcription, no matter how excellent it may be, will always lack authenticity.

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