Coda. Robert Saxton's *Chacony*

It remains, then, to address my final research question; how has study of the pieces included in this thesis informed my approach to the performance of solo left-hand repertoire? To illustrate my answer, I have used Robert Saxton's *Chacony* which was included as part of the programme for my final recital for the Doctorate of Musical Arts. As I prepared the piece, I found myself analysing it using techniques from my thesis. I have, therefore, presented elements of my analysis below, before examining precisely how this knowledge affected my performance of the work.

The *Chacony* was first performed in 1988 by Leon Fleischer, for whom it was written, as part of the 41st Aldeburgh Festival. The piece opens with the gradual presentation of a 'ground', an ascending whole-tone scale, omitting the second degree, which starts on d and falls by a minor third on each repetition. After the first presentation of the ground, it is accompanied by a second part, which enters on d^1 and thus, in Saxton's words, 'the "ground" harmonises itself'.[1] The ground continues to fall by a minor third, until it reaches the original pitch, at which point the music is much faster and in a low register. As the texture becomes busier, the ground appears at different registers, and arrives ultimately at a 'deep pounding passage which ascends once again and resolves into a slow sustained coda'.[2] The coda is comprised of two incomplete statements of the ground, the latter presenting only the first three pitches of the piece.

Throughout *Chacony*, Saxton adheres to a style which clearly reveals the one-handedness of the performer and revels in the rhetorical and dramatic capabilities of the left-handed pianist. There is relatively little chordal writing and, where more than

[1] From 'Composer's Note' at the opening of *Chacony* (London: Chester Music, 1999).
[2] Saxton, 'Composer's Note', *Chacony*.

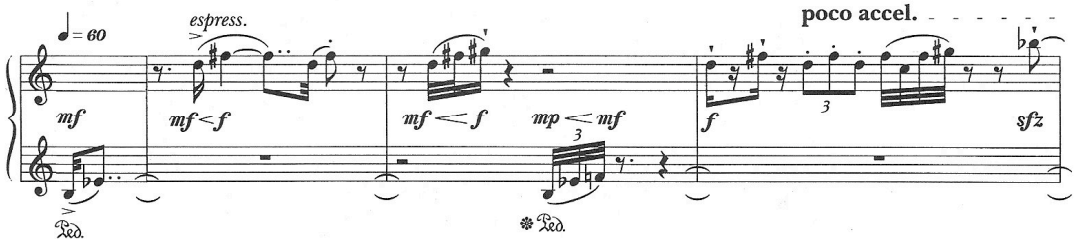
one note is struck simultaneously, it is clear that all could be contained within the span of one hand. In this sense, the piece has much in common with Britten's 'single line approach'. As a result, there is no melodic use of the thumb, no need to balance multi-layered textures and no incidence of passages in contrary motion. Different registers are used to an equal extent. There are, however, many gestures which employ a wide registral span and, while there is only one chord which is marked to be spread, the concept of the *style brisé* is deeply embedded in the work.

There are two principal ways in which Saxton enables the left hand to cover a wide registral area, both of which contribute to the dramatic effect of the work without giving the impression that it would need two hands for its realisation. The first is by introducing antiphonal exchange between the two appearances of the ground from b. 10 (see Ex. 66a). As the ground is presented in different registers, the lower voice descends progressively in minor thirds while the upper rises. By the end of this section, the tension between the two voices is extreme, and is achieved primarily through registral means (see Ex. 66b). This is mirrored later on in the piece where a rapid, oscillating, chromatic passage in the lower voice is interrupted by an emphatic, quasi-melodic figure in the higher (see Ex. 67a). The distance traversed by the left hand, in such a short space of time, is considerable and the performer's physical exertion is apparent both visually and aurally, in the momentary delay that occurs as the hand moves registers. Antiphonal exchange is also the primary textural device at the piece's climax, shown in Ex. 67b. Here the ground is hammered out in a low register, while a voice in the central range of the keyboard interrupts with ascending cluster chords. The sheer resonance and power created at this moment is considerable, yet it is still clear aurally that this is achieved by the left hand alone.

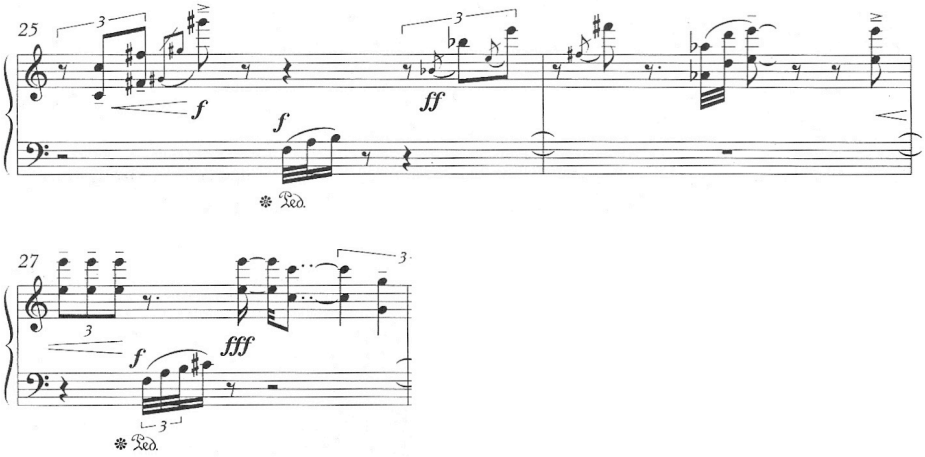
The second device which expands the range of the piano part and occurs

Example 66. *Chacony*[3]

a) bb. 9-12

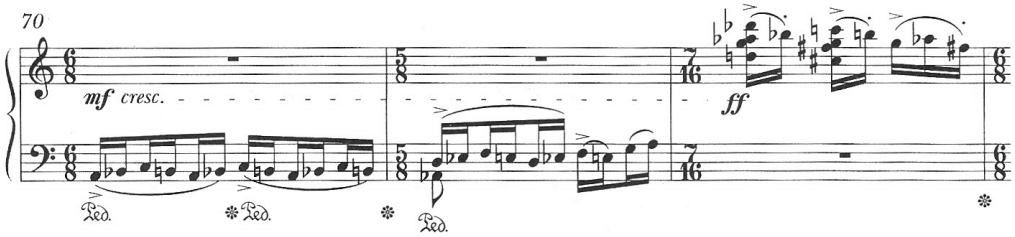


b) bb. 25-7

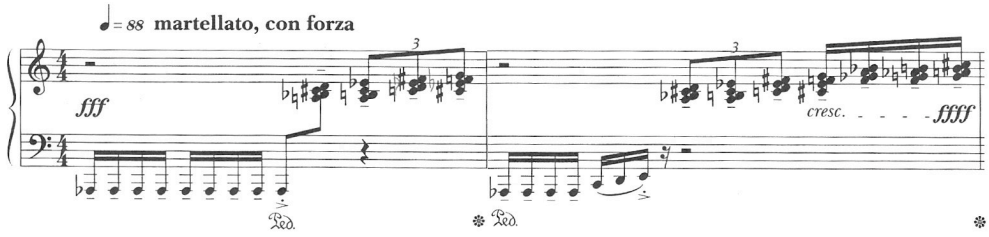


Example 67. *Chacony*

a) bb. 70-2



b) bb. 126-7

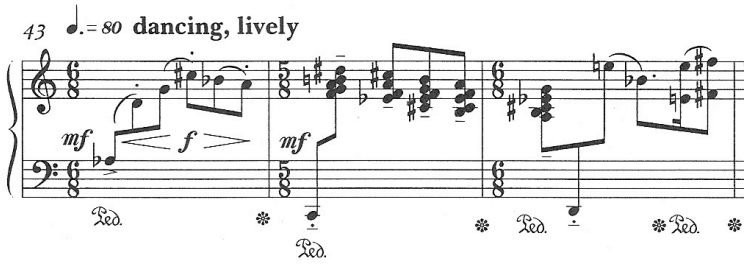


[3] All excerpts from *Chacony* are taken from the edition published by Chester Music in 1999.

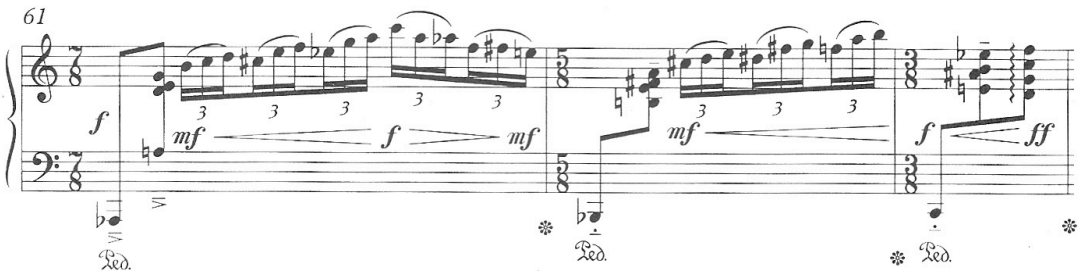
throughout the piece is the interjection of low bass notes which are seemingly unrelated to the material in the central or higher ranges of the keyboard. This is first apparent in Ex. 68a and occurs in elaborated guises later on, as shown in Ex. 68b. In all cases, the rapid leaps which are necessary to reach the bass register and then return incur a brief delay which unsettles the prevailing rhythm of the passage and contributes to its rhetorical effect. If the piece were played with two hands, this subtle expressive element would be absent.

Example 68. *Chacony*

a) bb. 43-5



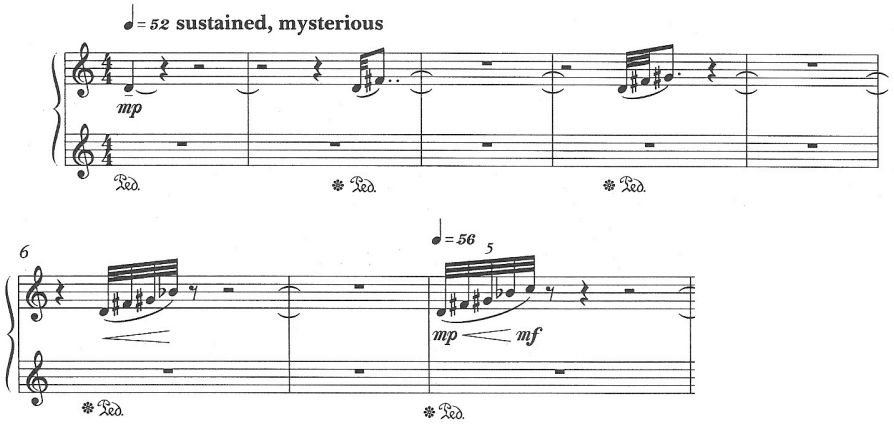
b) bb. 61-3



At first sight, the *style brisé* might not seem to play a major part in *Chacony*. After all, only one chord is marked to be spread in b. 63, and this is presumably a practical measure since it covers a span of a tenth, the largest in the piece. All other chords should be struck simultaneously as they never exceed the span of an octave. Yet, on closer inspection, the *style brisé* is inherent in the primary thematic motive of the piece, the gradually expanding ground. In Example 69 I have presented the very

opening of the piece and the entire presentation of the first iteration of the ground. The predominant concept within this motive is the asynchronous onset of a chordal resonance, which is essentially that of the *style brisé*. It has merely been augmented to cover a longer time-span.

Example 69. *Chacony*, bb. 1-8

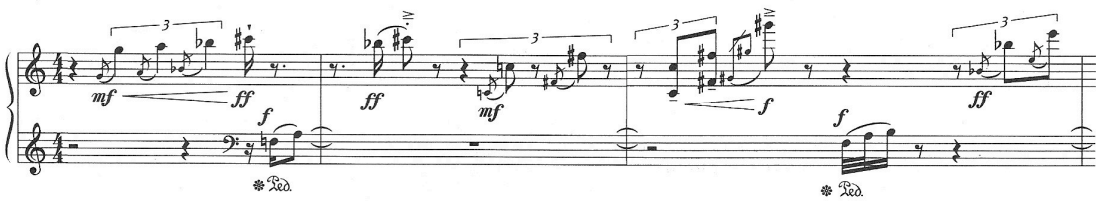


The importance of asynchronicity as an expressive device becomes more apparent later on in the opening section with the appearance of acciaccaturas (see Ex. 70a). These are, in essence, a different way of notating the *style brisé*. The delay inherent in these gestures is magnified at the close of the piece, where the ground returns in its grandest form (see Ex. 70b). The resonance of a single pitch, that of D which opened the work, is employed over several octaves in a rising gesture which is both engaging and affirmative. One could suggest that the *style brisé*, in its close relation to the ground as primary motive, forms the dramatic kernel of the piece and the rhetorical power that it exerts at the very end functions as a supreme endorsement of left-hand pianism.

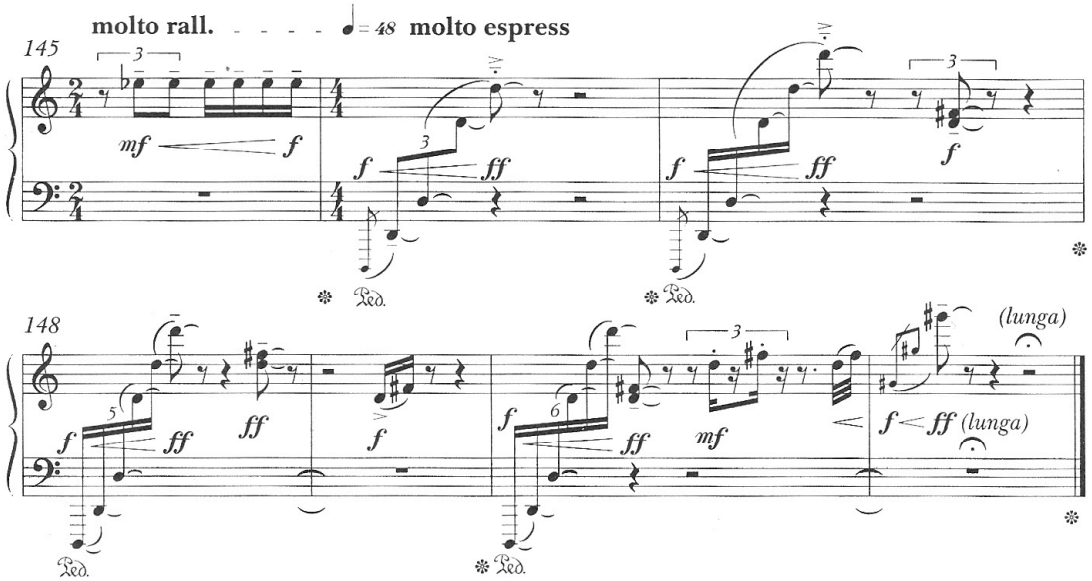
In order to achieve and fully project the necessary resonance, the left hand is dependent on the sustaining pedal to the extent that the latter becomes a 'second hand'. The pedal is marked to be used throughout, either for an exact duration or at the

Example 70. *Chacony*

a) bb. 23-25



b) bb. 145-51

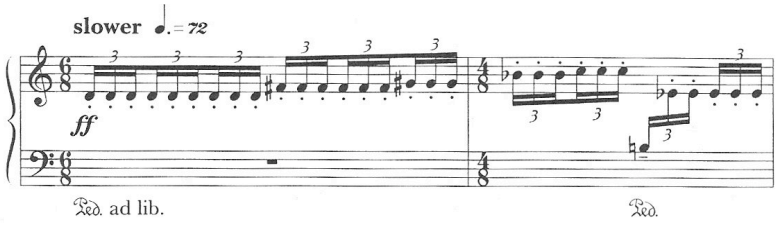


performer's discretion ('ad lib'). It is changed with the addition of each note to the ground, as in Ex. 69, and thus is intimately linked to the way resonance is built and developed from the outset of the work. Where the antiphonal low-note interjections occur, they are often held by the pedal for an entire bar despite the difficulty that this entails in maintaining clarity in the upper register (see Ex. 68b). The pedal is used to compelling effect in the two climactic passages (see Ex. 67b and Ex. 70b). At the very end, the entire range of the keyboard resonates, thanks principally to the support provided by the sustaining pedal.

The way resonance is used is of such importance in *Chacony* that one could argue it dictates the form of the work. In schematic terms, the ground recurs at various

points, as a ritornello might, and frames passages with more frenetic, intricate figuration (as shown in Exx. 67a and 68b). Yet, with each reappearance, the resonance increases through use of pedal, dynamics and the asynchronous sonorities of the *style brisé*. The opening, shown in Ex. 69, is comparatively muted whereas the next explicit appearance of the ground is marked *fortissimo* (see Ex. 71). The repeated notes here increase the resonance still further, yet even this is superseded by the striking outbursts at the very end of the piece (see Exx. 67b and 70b). Whereas in Ravel and Britten's concertos for the left hand, large-scale structure was dictated to a significant extent by the perceived exigencies of writing for one hand, in *Chacony* it is an exposition of the left hand's rhetorical and dramatic potential.

Example 71. *Chacony*, bb. 84-5



In order to give a successful performance of *Chacony*, therefore, it is essential to be aware of the influence that 'left-handedness' has exerted on its creation. While it is perfectly possible to perform the piece without an awareness of the issues discussed above, an informed approach may add subtlety and depth. For example, where one is required to span large distances rapidly, one may be tempted to do so as quickly as possible in order to minimise rhythmic disruption. Yet the momentary delays that can result from such wide leaps are an inherent part of the expressive impact and aesthetic of the work.

When initially getting to grips with the piece, I found it difficult to reconcile

the detail and clarity of articulation with the extensive use of the pedal notated in the score. I saw immediately that Saxton had adhered to a 'single line approach' and directed my energy towards projecting this line, onto which I superimposed the pedal. I was confused both by the 'muddy' sonorities that resulted, and by the extreme fatigue that I experienced. Many passages in *Chacony* are relentlessly active and should be played at a loud dynamic with liberal use of accents. Whereas in Britten's *Diversions*, the soloist has an orchestra to supplement the 'one-line' texture of the soloist, in *Chacony* the pianist is responsible for the whole. It was only once I appreciated that the pedal could be used as a second hand, integrated fully with and supporting the left hand, that I experienced some relief. I became more attentive to the resonances created and their development over time, particularly once I realised that this was of great structural importance.

An awareness of the use of both resonance and the augmented *style brisé* as formal devices in *Chacony* made it easier to 'ration' my energy and to convincingly project the large-scale structure of the work, using the pedal as my primary source of support. Whereas in many left-hand works, a significant challenge lies in projecting multi-layered textures clearly, here the principal concern was how to balance conflicting resonances without either undermining or obscuring them. I made a conscious decision to allow the work 'time to speak'; for the rhythmic instability introduced by wide leaps and the development of resonance throughout the work to evolve naturally, responding in real-time to a particular acoustic and instrument.

The most crucial influence which this study exerted on my performance of *Chacony*, however, lay in how I felt 'left-handedness' should be projected, if at all, in concert. From the outset, the 'one-handed' credentials of *Chacony* are clear and, despite its textural and registral scope later on, no attempt is made to give the

impression that it is written for two hands. The primary dramatic impact, in aural terms, of the piece lies in the progressively more expansive resonances that the pianist must create. Yet this is also reflected on a visual plane. At the opening, I try consciously in performance to be as still as possible and as the piece progresses, my physical gestures become, of necessity, more expansive. Rather than trying to restrain myself physically, as I may have done prior to this study, I appreciate the importance of the visual in creating a communicative live performance. I no longer attempt to 'normalise' the situation and downplay the physical exertion that is inherent in sustaining an entire texture over a considerable span of time with one hand alone.

Left-handedness is used in *Chacony* as rhetorical and dramatic inspiration. An awareness of the specificity and particularity of particular gestures, as they stand in relation to other works in the left-hand repertoire, adds another dimension to both the performer's and the listeners's experience. As with Godowsky, Ravel and Britten, it is in Saxton's use of particular textures, the *style brisé*, the sustaining pedal and register that one can best appreciate his approach to left-hand pianism and, as a performer, develop one's own.

Conclusion.

It is clear that among both composers and performers mentioned in this study, the preliminary challenge of left-hand piano music lies in the presumed need to compensate for a physical 'deficiency'. Yet this position seems implausible on examination of the repertoire itself and the various dramatic scenarios that composers espouse in their works for left hand. In his transcriptions of Chopin's *Etudes*, Godowsky catalogues a number of techniques which enable the performer to play arrangements of phenomenally difficult two-hand works with the left hand alone. Through melodic use of the thumb, ingeniously spaced and balanced textures, pivoting arpeggios and chords, antiphonal octave displacement, *style brisé* and versatile use of pedal, Godowsky shows that much more lies within the capabilities of the left-handed pianist than one might at first presume. Detailed fingering guides the performer through awkward and unconventional hand positions and even passages in contrary motion are shown to be feasible. With such an array of techniques and textures at one's disposal, the left-hand pianist may create the aural impression not only of a 'complete' texture, but of one that necessitates two hands for its realisation. Godowsky has utterly concealed the performer's one-handedness aurally, yet the visual revelation in live performance calls attention to the performer's proficiency.

In works for left-hand piano and orchestra, both Ravel and Britten employ techniques similar to those of Godowsky, although these are used in the service of differing dramatic scenarios. Ravel viewed the one-handedness of the soloist very much as a 'problem' which had to be concealed aurally, if not visually. He largely succeeded in doing so, although the ironic play between 'one-', 'two-', 'left-' and 'right-handed' textures in the central section of the concerto compromises this

somewhat. Britten, on the other hand, regarded the performer's one-handedness as something to be exploited and as a creative asset. As a result, *Diversions* functions less as a concerto proper than as a collaborative ensemble work. The pianist is heard very much as a part of the larger ensemble, rather than in opposition to it. Both works are prime examples of the importance of the visual in live performance, which throws into sharp relief the, at times, contrasting dramatic scenario implicit in their aural effect.

Wittgenstein's perceptions of the left-hand piano concerto, and the uses to which such works were put in the service of his career and creation of his performance persona, differs strongly from those envisaged by their composers. By commissioning these concertos as 'showpieces' it seems that Wittgenstein felt he had something to prove. While he regarded his disability as something to be both overcome and concealed, in purely aural terms, it was of necessity a very visual and present aspect of his artistic persona. The impact that these works made in performance, and, by extension, on the success of his career was, in large part, reliant on the fact that he could 'triumph' over his disability so spectacularly. It is in Wittgenstein's reception and performance of the concertos that the 'overcoming' narrative regains its hold. With these works, he was able to flaunt his technical ability, 'passing' aurally as a two-handed pianist, to pit himself against an orchestra, and was instrumental in the creation of an extensive new body of repertoire. The physical and emotional strain that he clearly suffered, however, is testament to the fact that

> both passing and overcoming take their toll. The… anxiety, and the self-doubt that inevitably accompany this ambiguous social position and the ambivalent social state are the enormous cost of declaring disability unacceptable.[4]

At the height of his career, Wittgenstein had a consummate grasp of left-hand techniques, as is evident from recordings made between 1928 and 1934. Many of

[4] Linton, *Claiming Disability*, p. 21.

these techniques appear in both Ravel and Britten's concertos. These works are intensely personal. They were written for a unique man in a very unusual situation, and, although they have been played on numerous occasions since by both one- and two-handed pianists, we risk impoverishing our appreciation of them by losing sight of their particularity. Wittgenstein's alterations show an acute understanding both of virtuosity as a dramatic and rhetorical feature and of the importance of visual display and theatre in the relationship between performer and audience. To some extent, drama, rhetoric and display are all inherent in the works in their original versions, but Wittgenstein refocused these elements to reflect his practical needs in concert more closely and to enhance the communicative impact of his performances.

Wittgenstein was raised in a family that set great store by fortitude and perseverance at a time when left-handed children were 'retrained' and when having a disability, more often than not, meant that one was largely excluded from society. His desire to conquer his disability and to 'fit in' is understandable, both in the context of his own times and from a contemporary perspective, and one cannot help but admire the energy and dedication with which he pursued his goal. The body of left-hand concertos which he commissioned is arguably the most comprehensive and insightful commentary on disability which exists in Western art music. His alterations prioritise concerns of the performer over those of the composer and, in so doing, remind us that such concerns are *additional* to those of the composer and not to be summarily dismissed. They should be viewed not as a corruption of the integrity of these works, but as an essential part of their significance and ongoing reception.