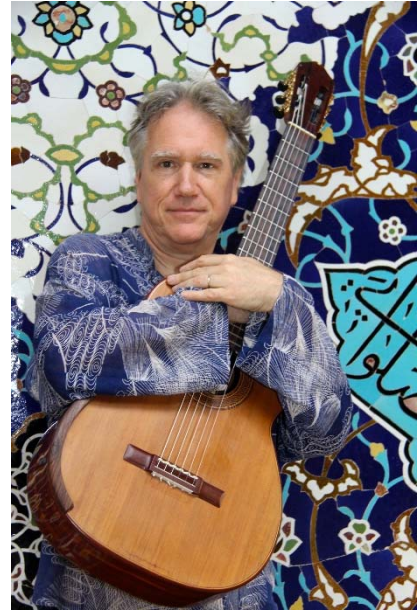


Reflections on J.S. Bach's Masterpiece the *Chaconne*

I first heard the *Chaconne* performed by the great Hungarian violinist Alexander Schneider on Thanksgiving Day 1968. It was a private performance for a group of my parents' friends. I remember it as if it were yesterday.

Alexander Schneider and my parents had several mutual friends. Because of this, John and Suzanne Verdery decided to throw a massive Thanksgiving Day feast. It was known throughout the land that if Suzanne Verdery were preparing any meal, you'd want to be on the guest list. Such was her reputation as an extraordinary chef and a fabulously generous hostess.



Sasha, as friends called him, agreed to not only attend but to grace us with a performance of the Bach *Chaconne*.

About 25 family and friends were invited. Educators, visual artists, and authors including Arthur Miller and his photographer wife Inge Morath and Thomas Messer (director of the Guggenheim Museum) made up this Thanksgiving Day gathering.

After the company arrived and had hors d'oeuvres and wine, we all walked over to the Wooster School Chapel.

As we sat ourselves in the various pews and came to order, Sasha tuned and commenced his journey into that day's performance of Bach's monumental work.

I remember the intensity of his facial expression throughout his performance. Believe it or not, I can still hear the resonance of his violin in the chapel's wonderful acoustics. After the final note disappeared into the ether, there was a reverent and enthusiastic applause from us all. It was a glorious performance.

Up until that day, I had never heard of the *Chaconne*. I only knew Bach's name because I attended many Sunday church services in the Wooster School chapel as my dad, John Verdery, was the headmaster/minister. The organists typically played a lot of Bach. Later in life when I attended Wooster, the organist was Mary Jane Newman, a virtuoso who constantly played Bach's works. On days when Mary Jane was absent her husband, the brilliant young Bach interpreter Anthony Newman, sat in for her. We high schoolers were all fortunate to hear Bach played on the school organ at such a high level. Anthony and Mary Jane remain dear friends and mentors.

It occurred to me years later when I started learning the work that Alexander Schneider's Thanksgiving Day performance was my introduction to what many feel is one of the greatest works for any solo instrument in the history of Western music.

Johannes Brahms was so taken with the work that he created a left-hand arrangement of the *Chaconne*. Below are his oft-quoted feelings about the work in a letter he wrote to Clara Schumann:

"On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind."

Arrangements of Bach's *Chaconne* exist for a wide variety of instruments, including piano, viola, cello, flute, mandolin, double bass, saxophone, marimba, bassoon, guitar, lute and even 12 celli. Leopold Stokowski arranged it for full orchestra.

The first arrangement for guitar of which I am aware was by the legendary Andres Segovia. He premiered it in Paris in 1930. Segovia must have been greatly influenced by Ferruccio Busoni's 1893 arrangement for piano.

Aside from being one of the world's most celebrated Flamenco guitarists, Paco Peña and his wife Karin also ran an international guitar festival for several years in Cordoba, Spain, that was second to none. In 1984, Paco convinced Cordoba's town authorities to allow the world-renowned guitarist John Williams to perform in its Great Mosque. The concert was part of this festival. I was invited as a guest artist, along with several other guitarists. Later I went on to be John's teaching assistant at the festival for three years.

John's *Chaconne* performance in the Mosque was another I shall never forget. It ultimately catapulted me to commence the journey of learning this magnificent work.

Throughout my relationship with the *Chaconne*, I have received coaching from a variety of musicians. It has been a revolving piece in my concert repertoire for several years. I finally recorded it in 2006 for my CD *Branches*.

Fast forward to April 2016. One day, after teaching the *Ciaconna* (the Italian spelling in the original manuscript), to my Yale student Max Lyman, I felt compelled to revisit, rethink, reinterpret, and re-record the *Chaconne*.

In addition, I wanted to make a video of the work, serving—among other things—as my own small protest against the devastation of this planet due to climate change. I knew exactly where and with whom I wanted to make this video. (You can read more about the making of the recording and the video in a separate article.)

Thus, began a new chapter of my relationship to the Bach *Chaconne*. What an edifying and rewarding journey it has been and continues to be.

Even though the notes remain the same ones I played in previous performances and recordings, new musical truths reveal themselves with each practice session. Often when I conclude a run-through, I will sit and marvel at the good fortune I have to play the piece in whatever manner I desire. It is always a humbling experience to get to the final cadence.

But what is it about the Bach *Chaconne* that so moves all who play and hear it? Is it the majestic opening theme, which lies above a distinctive, visceral chord? progression of four measures that seamlessly develops as the variations continuously unfold?

Is it that the work is comprised of 64 four-measure statements, many occurring in pairs upon a basso ostinato and its related chord progression?

Is it that the descending basso continuo pattern of D D C# D Bb G A D has a distinct lamenting emotional quality?

Is it that that Bach's *Chaconne* is a distant relative to the Chacona, a salacious dance with origins in Latin America that was further developed in Spain, Italy, France, England, and finally Germany?

Is it the unrelenting triple meter found in all *Chaconnes*?

Is it the recurring dotted rhythm (with its roots in the French *Chaconne*) of quarters and eighth notes with the frequent emphasis on beat 1 and 2?

Is it that Bach composed the piece in three sections, each diminishing in length: the first in D minor, the second in D major, and the last in D minor?

Is it the fact that this is the only *Chaconne* Bach ever wrote—the final (and longest) movement of his *Second Violin Partita in D minor*?

Is it the exquisite polyphony throughout and the constant phrase elisions that propel it? Is it that each of the three sections contains climatic points, both rhythmically and harmonically, that create an exquisite and unique musical architecture?

Is it the wrenchingly beautiful, sacred, hymn-like nature of the opening D Major theme?

Is it the way the composer knows just when and how to introduce a new musical idea or rhythm, as demonstrated in the D Major repeated-note passage, or in the usage of triplets in the 3rd section near the very end of the work?

Is it the overall gravitas of the work, a possible *Tombeau* that Bach could conceivably have intended for his recently departed wife Maria Barbara, the mother of seven of his children?

Or, is it that within those 257 measures lay more profound human emotions than most any other musical composition in history?

The answer is of course, that it is all the above and much, much more. In a word, the Bach *Chaconne* is ineffable.

So many of us who have played or listened to the *Chaconne* have forged a deep personal connection to it. We feel Bach wrote it specifically for us. It is that universal of a piece. In a way, it transcends musical genres. Musicians of all musical backgrounds can partake in and relate to its brilliance.

This is a piece that can survive many interpretations. I don't feel that it must be played in any one tempo. In fact, there can be varying tempi depending on who is playing it. I have heard great performances that have lasted 12 minutes and another that required over 15.

I have been deeply moved by a variety of interpretations from Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli to Leo Brouwer to Amandine Beyer to Nigel North. These are just a few, and there are and will be many, many more!

Bach's *Chaconne* remains a musical mountain too vast for me to climb, an ocean too deep to purge. And so, it goes.

How lucky are we to have been touched by it? Mahalo to the Master for composing the *Chaconne* among so many other musical treasures.

Peace, love, and Bach's *Chaconne*!

Ben

www.benjaminverdery.com

www.facebook.com/people/Benjamin-Verdery/531228711

www.gamisimonds.com/verdery