

Bach Chaconne

The "Chaconne in Dm: for Solo Violin" is one of those immense masterworks of Bach which tower over other works of its period, as do the Sistine Chapel, the Mona Lisa, the Divine Comedy, and Hamlet. Not only is this 15 minute long unaccompanied violin piece an anomaly of masterfully intricate musical construction, not only is it an immense outpouring of soul, it is also one of the supreme tests of the violinist's interpretive skill, and technical stamina. I have always loved this piece, and have always been afraid to play it. However, I have twice summoned the gumption to play it in public, and both times were very serious life-transforming experiences for me.

The first time I played it, I was attending my little ghetto college in Los Angeles; we were providing "Music for Lunch", short little concerts, once a week for the students at break time. I don't remember what made me choose to play the Chaconne, but I certainly remember standing up in front of that crowd of young people, setting up my four music stands, and thinking, "I can't do this, I can't do this, I am going to finish setting up the music, and then I'm going to announce that I can't do this, I can't possibly do this is, I can't play this piece, it is too hard, I am not ready, I can't do this, I will announce as soon as I put this page down that I can't play the piece, I will just stop and say to the audience I cannot play this piece, I'm sorry I have to go now, I can't play this piece . . ." and so on. I then finished setting up the music, and launched into the piece at which point I thought to myself, "My God, I'm Playing it! I can't do this, I can't do this, I will just play to the major part, I'll get to the major chord and then I'll stop, okay, I can do it this far. just to the major part and then I'll stop."

Well, by the time I got to the major part, I was too well seduced by the passion and a glory of the piece to break off, so I kept going, and although there were many technical weaknesses, I, as they say, "brought it off". After that performance my piano teacher paid me one of the nicest backhanded compliments I ever got in my life; he said, "You play that piece ten times better than violinists with six times your technique!" Wow, I thought. Then he said, "And six times better than violinists with ten times your technique."

He was heaping high praise on my head for my interpretive ability, and musicianship, but he was also calling attention to my obvious technical deficiencies. It was one of the most motivating and encouraging comments that was ever made to me by any of my many teachers. The experience of meeting that piece head on and coming out alive at the end of it was also vastly encouraging, and the fact that I stood up and did it gave me the confidence to carry on with the violin playing that eventually made me a well-known performer of new music in Santa Cruz in the '80s.

The other Chaconne story takes place several years later, in California, when I was at the height of my form as a performer. I was preparing the piece for an Easter concert at the Methodist Church in Santa Cruz.

Once again I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the piece and was frantic to get myself in shape, so I could play my best for my students, who would be there, and for the holiday, which I hoped to celebrate. I slaved away over page after page of double stops, hacking and choking at the music trying to get all those finger patterns to line up in the exact right place every time. About a week before the performance, I still felt that the piece was beyond my ability. Then I noticed that I was so concerned about the technique of the piece that I had forgotten to go after the music.

Then I had a revelation: I realized that with just a little fudging, I could tell the Easter story with this piece! I began to see the story unfold; here was the prophecy, here the Pharisees, here the garden, here Pontius Pilate, and so on. I quickly wrote these cues into my score, so that when I had played to such and such a point, I would read the title of the scene, summon up the feelings inside me which I had about the scene, and then play the feelings, using Bach's notes to tell my own story.

Not only did this method illuminate the interpretation with higher mental insight, the playing was better technically, too, because the desire to realize the inner image in the outer world gave me superhuman strength to articulate a spiritual shape. I have drawn on this wellspring of the spiritual power many times since then. It is the only way I can sound as good as I do with as little practice as I do.