

The *Chaconne* for Solo Violin by J. S. Bach: A Performance Guide

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By

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Abstract

As one of the most important solo pieces in the violin repertoire, the *Chaconne* has inspired and tested numerous violinists on the road to violin mastery. It is not only the longest single movement of the unaccompanied violin works by J. S. Bach, but it also presents a variety of technical and musical challenges. Each section of the *Chaconne* varies in the required bowing and fingering techniques. This document will focus on intonation, string crossings, chords, memorization, and dynamics. This study focuses on helping violinists to find solutions for technical challenges when playing the *Chaconne*. I have collected ideas and suggestions from scholars and performers and combined them with my own insight as a violinist to write this document. I am hoping to provide a unique view for those who wish to comprehend and successfully perform the piece.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many violinists would argue that the *Chaconne* represents the pinnacle of Bach's works for solo violin. Although it was not well known at first, since the 1720s, Bach's *Chaconne* has become increasingly popular as a concert work especially after being championed by Joseph Joachim in the late 19th century. The piece has been arranged for other instruments such as the piano, saxophone and marimba, and there are numerous articles and books mentioning the piece, along with discographies and documents presenting it. For example, in June 1877, Brahms wrote a letter to Clara Schumann describing the *Chaconne*:

The *Chaconne* is in my opinion one of the most wonderful and most incomprehensible pieces of music. Using the technique adapted to a small instrument the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I could picture myself writing, or even conceiving, such a piece, I am certain that the extreme excitement and emotional tension would have driven me mad. If one has no supremely great violinist at hand, the most exquisite of joys is probably simply to let the *Chaconne* ring in one's mind.¹

The violinist Yehudi Menuhin once praised the *Chaconne*, saying it was "the greatest structure for solo violin that exists."²

At first glance, the *Chaconne* may not seem exceedingly difficult. For example, the techniques in the *Chaconne* are not as physically taxing as Niccolò Paganini's *Twenty-Four Caprices*, or Ernst's *The Last Rose* and Kreisler's *Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice* (all of which contain techniques such as left-hand pizzicato, harmonics, tenths, and a variety of challenging bow strokes such as flying staccato, ricochet, and sautillé). The harmonic challenges are not as great as other unaccompanied solo violin such as Eugene Ysaÿe's *Six Sonatas for Solo Violin* or Bartók's *Sonata for Solo Violin*.

What has made the *Chaconne* so formidable to violinists and awe-inspiring to musicians in general? Longer than the previous four movements of the D minor Partita combined, the

¹ Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann, *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms 1853-1896* (New York: Longmans, Green And Co. 1927), 16.

² Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1977), 326.

Chaconne presents the performer with significant technical and musical challenges. An effective performance requires the violinist to highlight the melodic and bass lines while playing difficult double stops and chords, sustain interest in a large musical structure consisting of a repeating four-bar progression, all the while maintaining a transparent tone and rhythmic poise.

Intonation in the *Chaconne* also requires a great deal of care. When playing any of Bach's unaccompanied solo works, violinists must provide the accompaniment themselves. Without another instrument to provide a harmonic grounding, players must be more independent and careful with their intonation.

Playing chords on the violin takes tremendous effort. Because violinists must depict several voices, but cannot sustain all the strings simultaneously, a coherent strategy for rolling chords is required. String crossings cause many issues, including uneven sounds, noises, and extra notes. To keep the melody rhythmically accurate while taking care of other harmonic notes at the same time is extremely challenging.³ Bach often puts the melody line in between the top voice and the bottom voice, which makes it even more complicated from a technical perspective.⁴

Memorization is another obstacle to playing the *Chaconne* comfortably. Ever since pianist Franz Liszt's performances in the nineteenth century set the standard, performers, including violinists had to engage with expectations for memorization. As an ostinato movement, the *Chaconne* has many similar sections and has a large structure with much harmonic repetition. And it is this repeating harmonic structure that can present difficulties for the performer in memorizing the music.

³ Carmelo De Los Santos, "Performance-Practice Issues of the Chaconne from Partita II, BWV 1004, By Johann Sebastian Bach" (DMA thesis, University of Georgia, 2004), 10-11.

⁴ Kyung Wha Chung, "Bach's *Chaconne* in D minor: Kyung Wha Chung Discusses the Transcendental Solo Violin Masterpiece with Caroline Gill," *Gramophone*, (Sept 2016): 60.

Choosing dynamics in the *Chaconne* is challenging. Because Bach did not indicate much in his score with regard to dynamics, the performer must choose the dynamics in the *Chaconne* by his or her own interpretation.

During the years of studying music at the conservatory and the university, I have had many chances to perform the *Chaconne* in concerts. In 2016, I performed the piece with dance students at the University of Kansas. The rehearsals and performances were intense and rewarding for learning the piece. We ran through the *Chaconne* many times and I gradually felt more comfortable performing it. During those performances, I also noticed that I had begun to develop strategies that helped me improve my playing. This document combines my personal experiences with perspectives and suggestions from violinists and scholars in order to assist others in learning the piece in a shorter period of time.

Chapter 2: Historical Background of the *Chaconne*

Composers who wrote for solo violin consistently attempted to experiment with new techniques for the instrument. These composers were often violinists themselves, with a vested interest in exploring new potential for the instrument. These techniques gradually expanded as more and more composers added works to the repertoire. To play Bach's *Six Sonatas and Partitas*, the player faces issues such as intonation, string crossings and double stops. In order to play musically, the violinist must keep these issues in mind and refine his or her technique.

Bach's works for solo violin have such stature that their predecessors are rarely performed and often overlooked. In fact, composers such as Thomas Baltzar (1630-1663), Johann Westhoff (1656-1705), Johann Walther (1650-1717), and Heinrich Biber (1644-1704) wrote complex music for solo violin that potentially influenced J. S. Bach.

J. S. Bach was well known as an organist and harpsichordist, but he was likely also a talented violinist who learned the violin from his father Johann Ambrosius Bach. After his father died, Bach continued to learn the violin from his older brother Johann Christoph. His ability on the violin was not well documented, but he was certainly good enough to take a place in the orchestra of Johann Ernst.⁵ According to his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, J. S. Bach was a capable violinist.

In 1717, Bach was appointed Kapellmeister at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt in Cöthen where he wrote his unaccompanied *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001 – 1006) three years later in 1720. The compositions were groundbreaking in the contrapuntal demands they placed on the performer. In addition, they share a common trait: they all create the illusion of multi-voice counterpoint even though they are performed as a solo instrument. The

⁵ Sandra Eun Joo, Kyung. "Chaconne from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2: Linear Analysis" (Master's thesis, California State University, 1999), 2.

Partita in D minor, which is the fourth in the set, consists of five movements: Allemanda, Corrente, Sarabande, Giga, and the Chaconne.

It is difficult to determine for whom Bach wrote the solo violin pieces but some suggest that they might have been written for Johann Georg Pisendel, a virtuoso violinist and the concertmaster in the court of Dresden.⁶ Another possibility is that he wrote them for Joseph Spiese, the Leader of the Cöthen orchestra.⁷ During that time, Bach also wrote the *Six Unaccompanied Suites for Solo Cello (1717-23)*, the *French Suites (1722)*, the *Inventions (1720)*, and the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier (1722)*.

Today, the *Chaconne* is often performed as a stand-alone piece by concert violinists, but surprisingly, the piece along with the six sonatas and partitas was not published until 1802 by Nikolaus Simrock. In 1843, violinist Ferdinand David introduced the sonatas and partitas to the public and produced the first edited publication. Later, they were popularized by violinist Joseph Joachim, who featured them on concerts regularly.

⁶ Pippa Drummond, "Pisendel, Johann Georg," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic>.

⁷ Stanley Ritchie, *The Accompaniment in Unaccompanied* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016): 3.

Chapter 3: Intonation

Intonation is often the most common issue in performing any unaccompanied solo violin work, but especially problematic in Bach's work. Even the slightest difference of pitch is audible on the violin. This is the reason that unaccompanied Bach is frequently used in auditions and competitions. These solo pieces test the violinist's intonation to an extremely high standard. In a sense, Bach challenges the violinist to create his or her own pitch center without any support from another instrument. Bach's solo works regularly require the player to adopt awkward left-hand positions. These positions create tension in the left-hand and make controlling intonation more difficult. I have found that the thumb can often become tense when stretching the other four fingers.

Using a Drone During Practice

To achieve better intonation while playing the *Chaconne*, practicing with an electronic device which produces a drone is a very helpful method. Because the *Chaconne* is in D minor, a drone with a single D, a D minor chord, or another relevant pitch (depending on the harmonies at hand) may help while practicing. This technique helps identify any note that is out of tune. To identify problematic notes, one can choose a short section and check intonation slowly. At first, practicing without vibrato can focus attention on intonation. Below is an example of using the drone. To begin, the violinists can pay special attention to the perfect intervals of the fourth and fifth. Once these intervals are secure, attention can be shifted to intervals with more room for interpretation: the second, the third, and the sixth.

Example 3.1 Drone Exercise 1: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 9-10



Example 3.2 shows a fast passage in the *Chaconne*.

Example 3.2 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 53-54



Example 3.3 adds a drone to this passage.

Example 3.3 Drone Exercise 2: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 53-54



As before, when practicing with a fast passage, it is useful to apply a slow tempo to check intonation. Example 3.4 is one way to practice the fast passage in Example 3.2. As shown, the performer must pause to change the drone in order to continue practicing.

Example 3.4 Drone Exercise 3: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 53-54

Example 3.5 shows another variation from the *Chaconne*. The counterpoint is more chromatic, and thus, additional drones are required. The player should use a variety of pitches to check his or her intonation.

Example 3.5 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 33-35

Example 3.6 is one possible way to use drones. The drones we use coincide with the bass line Bach provides us.

Example 3.6 Drone Exercise 4: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 33-35

Intonation on Chords

A different strategy for practicing intonation is necessary when approaching chords in the *Chaconne*. Example 3.7 is the beginning of the *Chaconne*.

Example 3.7 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1-5



A drone is less practical when practicing chords due to the changing chordal qualities in this passage. There are fewer choices in choosing an applicable drone and a dissonant note often results. An alternative strategy is practicing chords as double stops. Double stops show weaknesses in intonation. In order to concentrate on intonation, meter and vibrato should be left out.

Below is an example including the first few chords from the *Chaconne*.

Example 3.8 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 1-3



General Suggestions for Intonation

During performance or practice, one method for maintaining intonation is to have the left-hand fingers remain a bit loose on the string. When encountering a potentially out-of-tune note, adjusting to the right intonation quickly will therefore be easier. Some violinists press the strings firmly with left-hand, especially during complicated double-stop passages. However, this excessive pressure may be unnecessary. In fact, if the left-hand does not hit the fingerboard firmly, it has more freedom to move around and adjust when the intonation is not ideal.

Using open strings (even if they are not structural bass notes) to practice with the stopped pitches gives the performer better ideas about the right intonation. For instance, m. 9 is a step-wise passage, usually performed on the D string. Using the open A string to compare these notes can give us the right sense of intonation.

To strengthen intonation in general, it is also useful for violinists to run through the scale of the same key before practicing the piece. Before playing the *Chaconne*, I suggest playing through D minor scales and arpeggios, including double stops in thirds and fifths. Establishing this foundation of D minor can tremendously improve general intonation. I recommend playing the scale system by Carl Flesch. His system is useful for helping the player to build a better sense of intonation.

Chapter 4: String Crossings

Overview

String crossing is a fundamental skill for violinists. The modern violin has been outfitted with a bridge that is more arched than the baroque violin, with increased string tension. This also increases the difficulty of executing Bach's solo works, especially in regards to string crossings. Difficulty occurs when transferring right-arm weight on each string. It is also challenging to choose the appropriate weight for strings of different thicknesses (e.g. G- D or A-E). In order to avoid uneven sounds, the bow arm should apply the appropriate weight and correct angles of attack on the strings. In the *Chaconne*, many sections require applying awkward string crossings. However, it is possible to overcome this challenge with certain exercises and open string practice.

Practical Application

When encountering a string crossing issue, the player should first slow down the passage in question. The slower tempo may reveal more fundamental problems. If the passage is still demanding, the player should stop and practice with exercises that utilize only open strings. Playing open strings reduces technical variables and allows the player to concentrate solely on bow movements. Below are examples for applying these practices.

In example 4.1, each triplet requires a string crossing that jumps from E string to D string.

Example 4.1 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 244

The image shows a musical staff in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains three triplet eighth notes. Above the staff, fingerings are indicated: 1, 2, 4, 2, 3, 3 for the first triplet; 3, 4, 2, 4, 3, 1 for the second; and 4, 3, 4, 2, 4 for the third. Vertical lines labeled 'V' indicate string crossings between the E and D strings. Below the staff, the string sequence is listed as D A E D A E D A E D A E D A E.

String: D A E D A E D A E D A E D A E D A E

In order to find right arm motions, the player should use an open string exercise. In addition, the player should strive for a clean attack between the up and down bows. It is easy to hit the A string when crossing between the E string and D string.

Example 4.2 String Crossing Exercise 1: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 244



Another section that is typically challenging is the first arpeggio section, which begins in measure 89.

Example 4.3 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 89-90



Example 4.4 shows a typical execution of this passage.

Example 4.4 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 89



String: G D A D G D A D G D A D G D A D G D A D G D A D

As before, it is helpful to apply a slow tempo and observe problematic issues. If the string crossing is still difficult, one can use the same open string practice method detailed above. Below is a practical exercise for this section.

player can encounter when crossing strings: the number of strings, grouping of specific strings, bowings, articulations, etc.

Example 4.8 Wei-yu Chang: “Exercise No. 1,” m. 1-44

Violin

A practice guide for these exercises:

1. The player can use a reference such as a mirror, a camera or another person to check body mechanics
2. The player can focus on angles and weight transfer in between strings

3. The player can gradually reduce hand movements from either fingers, wrist or arm
4. The player can aim to move the wrist and fingers first and add right arm afterwards

Length of Stroke in String Crossings

The player can decide the length of bow and articulation that he or she applies on string crossings. This decision differs by his or her choices of interpretation. To find an ideal length of stroke in string crossings, the player can use the open string exercises from example 4.8 to find solutions.

Additional Suggestions

Otakar Ševčík provides exercises in his etude books *School of Violin Technique*, Op. 1. Some of his exercises are useful for improving string crossings. He provides instructions and suggestions for each etudes and added variations in bowings for practices. It is helpful to run through some of his etudes or exercises when dealing with string crossing issues.⁸ (See example 4.9)

Example 4.9, Ševčík: *School of Violin Technique*, Op. 1

⁸ Otakar Ševčík, *School of Violin Technique*, Op. 1 Book 1 (New York: G. Schirmer, 1905) 21, 28.

Chapter 5: Playing Chords

Although we see chords in the *Chaconne*, Stanley Ritchie points out that Bach never wrote two notes on one stem. He explains that “double-stops, and three or four voice chords should never be perceived as a vertical entity except for the purpose of harmonic identification.”⁹ This type of careful analysis not only helps the player technically, but also increases harmonic awareness.

When playing chords in the *Chaconne*, different approaches to rolling these chords may affect the rhythm while performing. The first step to presenting a convincing rolling style is to decide upon a consistent rolling strategy throughout the *Chaconne*. After selecting a rolling strategy, the player has to be aware of the effect of these strategies on the rhythm. In this chapter, I detail some techniques for rolling and provide a guide for practicing them.

Example 5.1 shows the beginning of the *Chaconne*.

Example 5.1 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1-3



Example 5.2 shows a conventional way of rolling chords. Many violinists learn to roll chords in a two-plus-two pattern from the very beginning of their musical training. In some ways, this is the “default” rolling technique in standard violin training.

Example 5.2 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1-3



⁹ Stanley Ritchie, *The Accompaniment in Unaccompanied*, 5

Performers who have used this approach in the *Chaconne* include Jascha Heifetz, Hilary Hahn, Gil Shaham, Itzhak Perlman, James Ehnes, Maxim Vengerov, Joshua Bell, Midori Goto, and Christian Ferras.

If the performer chooses this conventional rolling strategy, here are some useful tips to use while practicing:

1. Use a metronome and set a tempo
2. Divide the beat on both double stops
3. Practice with the metronome and emphasize the bass note to match the beat (Since the bass line is the most important voice to emphasize at the beginning of the *Chaconne*, rolling on the beat is preferable)
4. Practice rolling faster (See example 5.3)

Example 5.3 Playing Chord Exercise 1: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The top staff shows a single quarter note on the first beat, followed by a double stop (two eighth notes beamed together) on the second beat. The bottom staff shows a double stop on the first beat, followed by a double stop on the second beat. Both staves have a 'beat' label below the first beat, and vertical lines mark the start of each beat.

A second strategy is to play the bass separately, and then roll quickly through the other notes. (See example 5.4). Most often, the violinist will then sustain the top two voices of the chord. This type of rolling emphasizes the bass line to an even greater degree. Violinists such as Rachel Podger and Rachel Barton Pine play the *Chaconne* in this way as their performances are influenced by historical performance practice.

Example 5.4 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1-3



Below is a practicing guide for this type of rolling:

1. Choose the numbers of upper voices to sustain in the chords (See example 5.5)
2. Play the bass notes on the beat
3. As in example 5.3, gradually increase the speed of rolling

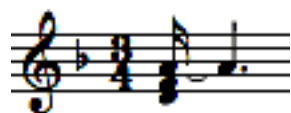
Example 5.5 Playing Chord Exercise 2: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, 1-3



A third approach is to apply the bow to all three strings simultaneously for three-note chords and an extremely rapid rolling motion to the four-note chords. (See example 5.5) Violinists such as Nathan Milstein and Gidon Kremer provide examples of this technique.

Due to the shape of the bridge on the violin, it is harder, when applying this third approach, to achieve a ringing tone and even voicing. However, in terms of rhythmic accuracy, this approach to three note chords (and specifically, the first chord of the *Chaconne*) is less complicated. But of course, one still has to decide upon a strategy for rolling the four-note chords as it is impractical to play four notes simultaneously.

Example 5.6 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 1



Previously, I focused on the opening theme, where it is important to emphasize the bass line. However, a different challenge presents itself when playing chords that highlights the melodic

lines. In each section of the *Chaconne*, the performer must determine which voice must be rhythmically emphasized.

In example 5.7 we see that starting from measure 141, the top voice needs to be emphasized. Since this melody leads the pacing, it should be rhythmically strict. The double stops and chords should not interfere with the melodic flow. Example 5.8 and 5.9 show a practicing strategy for this type of voicing.

Example 5.7 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 141-144



Example 5.8 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 141-145, the melodic line



Example 5.9 Playing Chords Exercise 3: J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 141-145, rolling before the beat



When executing chords, the rolling occurs in a short time. Due to the numerous rolling varieties that the *Chaconne* requires, the player can benefit from technical exercises. In this way, the player develops an automatic “vocabulary” of rolling techniques that can be matched to any musical situation.

What follow are some possible exercises for practicing rolling chords in a variety of ways. These exercises are useful to practice bowing techniques. In addition, they provide references for the player to decide his or her rolling strategy in the *Chaconne*.

Example 5.10 Wei-yu Chang: “Exercise No. 2” m. 1-14



In short, choosing a consistent rolling strategy creates a clear musical goal to achieve when practicing the *Chaconne*. Studying the different rolling strategies helps the player to decide what harmonic and melodic elements he or she wants to emphasize in the *Chaconne*.

When I performed the *Chaconne* with dancers at University of Kansas, I realized even more strongly the importance of rhythm and gesture. For dancers to feel the pulse, the player's rolling strategy had to be clear and consistent.

Chapter 6: Memorization

When using a heavily edited edition, players may easily be misled by editorial information, such as excessive fingerings and bowing suggestions, or unclear notations. In contrast, choosing an urtext edition and writing in personal notes such as bowings and fingerings strengthens memory.

In the Bärenreiter urtext edition, for example, the first and second extended arpeggio sections are presented as Bach wrote them: harmonic progressions that are left open to the performer's interpretation. (see example 6.1 and 6.2) An understanding of the harmonic structure is critical to a performer's memory. Using the Bärenreiter (or similar) urtext edition makes this structure more apparent and is an important first step toward developing structures of memory.

Example 6.1 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 89-90



Example 6.2 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 201-202



In memorizing a large structure, it is essential to consider several perspectives to support the learning process. In this chapter, I offer three strategies which I hope may provide useful references for performers of the piece.

1. Mapping the Overall Structure (simplified for ease of memory)

Length of theme: 4 measures

Number of variations: 64 variations

Section	A	B	A'
Measure	1-132	133-208	209-257
Key	D Minor	D Major	D Minor

2. Mentally Grouping Variations

Dividing the *Chaconne* into smaller sections helps memorization. For a large structure, the most effective way of mentally grouping sections will vary by performer. Below I offer one possible way of mentally organizing the many sections of the *Chaconne*, including my own personal descriptive language for each section.

Section 1 (Chord section) m.1-24. *Main theme. Dotted rhythms.*

Section 2 (Lyrical section) m. 25-56. *A continuously moving line in eighth and sixteenth notes.*

Section 3 (Intense section) m. 57-76.

Section 4 (Tranquil) m. 77-88. *Many diminished seventh chords outline in sixteenth notes.*

Section 5 (First arpeggio section) m. 89-132.

Section 6 (D Major Section) m. 133-152. *Slow pacing. Marching material starts on m. 145.*

Section 7 (Repeated A) m. 153-176.

Section 8 (Triumphant section) D major, m. 177-200. *Chords. A restatement of the main theme from m. 185.*

Section 9 (Second arpeggio section) m. 201-208. *The climax of the piece.*

Section 10 (Recapitulation) D minor, m. 209-228. *Step-wise bass line from m. 209 and m. 217.*

Section 11 (Finale Section) m. 229-257. *Triplets moving down from m. 241.*

3. General Memory Aids

1. Dividing different sections and memorizing small chunks is the most effective way to learn the piece. Because long-term memory is easier to form with repetition, memorizing in small chunks of music is preferable.
2. Listening to different interpretations can improve the impressions of the same passage. Sometimes violinists can be inspired by knowing that there is more than one way to interpret the same passage of music. Creating a personal interpretation helps to solidify memory.
3. Studying the harmonic progressions also contributes to better understanding of the piece, and makes memory even more secure. While the basic harmonic outline remains unchanged between variations, these are subtle differences that need to be committed to memory.
4. Connecting body movements with music supports memorization. While we practice, our body memorizes motions and the physical shape of chord frames. By focusing on this kinesthetic approach, it allows our brain to use movement as references for musical cues and connectors between passages.
5. Practicing performing in front of others is another way of revealing performance weaknesses and discovering spots at greater risk of memory slips. While we are training our body to memorize the music, our mind also needs to practice performing. Anxiety on stage may become the issue that disrupts our memory of the piece, and practicing performing helps familiarize the music and secure our confidence.

Chapter 7: Choosing Dynamics

Using a variety of dynamics is an effective expressive tool for violinists. Due to the repetitive nature of the *Chaconne*, dynamic contrast plays an important role in expressing the character of each variation. However, Bach did not indicate much in his score with regard to dynamics. It is assumed that the player will choose different dynamics with each successive variation.

Stanley Ritchie states that the dynamic choices of the performer's can be governed by several factors:

- the overall architecture of the movement
- the prevailing affect
- the alternation of consonance and dissonance
- tessitura* (the vertical range of pitches)
- linear direction
- the use of rhetorical devices¹⁰

While all his points are worth exploring, I will focus on the overall architecture of the movement, the alternation of consonance and dissonance, *tessitura* (the vertical range of pitches), and the linear direction he mentioned.

The Overall Architecture of the Movement

As mentioned before in the chapter six, the *Chaconne* has three large sections.

Section	A	B	A'
Key	D Minor	D Major	D Minor

Each section can be divided into small sections. These small sections have moments and ideas that contribute to the overall structure. And these ideas may contrast each other dynamically. It is useful to explore dynamic possibilities in between these sections. However, these sections are

¹⁰ Ritchie, *The Accompaniment in Unaccompanied*, 7.

divided and interpreted by the performer's own choices. Below I have provided my own possible interpretation.

A Section

1. Measure 1 to 24 shows the significant theme and first few variations of the *Chaconne*.
(Dynamic: *f*)
2. Measure 25 to 56 is a lyrical, sensitive section. (Dynamic: *mp*)
3. Measure 57 to 76 is intensive. (Dynamic: *f*)
4. Measure 77 to 88 is a relatively quiet transition. It contrasts the first arpeggios section.
(Dynamic: *mf*)
5. Measure 89 to 132 is the first arpeggios section and is the highest point in the A section.
(Dynamic: *p* → *f*)

B Section

1. Measure 133 to 176 is serene at first and more intense at m. 141. (Dynamic: *p* → *f*)
2. Measure 177 to 200 remains intense, and gradually increases its intensity. (Dynamic: *f*)
3. Measure 201 to 208 is the climax of the *Chaconne*. It's intensity and dynamic should surpass other sections. (Dynamic: *ff*)

A' Section

1. Measure 209 to 228 is dramatically smaller than the previous section. (Dynamic: *p*)
2. Measure 229 to 257 gradually increases its intensity and uses the opening rhythmic presentation of the main theme at the end. (Dynamic: *p* → *f*)

The Alternation of Consonance and Dissonance

The interplay of consonance and dissonance can invite dynamic contrast. A dissonance creates harmonic tension, and this tension can be released by a consonance. In the *Chaconne*, the player can use this technique to create contrasting dynamics.

Below are some examples in the *Chaconne*.

Example 7.1 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 1-6. A diminished fifth in measure 4 is a dissonance. The dissonance is prolonged by the fourth G-D on measure 5, and resolves to the F (4-3 suspension) on the same measure.



Example 7.2 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 15-16. A chord has dissonant intervals in measure 15.

15



Example 7.3 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 39-41. A diminished sixth interval in measure 39.

39



One practical technique to highlight the dissonance and consonance is applying contrasting dynamics to indicate their differences. Below I use this strategy in these examples.

Example 7.4 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 1-5.



Example 7.5 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 15-16.

15



Example 7.6 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 39-41.

39



Emphasizing the dynamics in between the consonances and dissonances points out their differences. Using this technique in the *Chaconne* also amplifies its intensity. In addition, identifying dissonances and consonances and practicing contrasting dynamics helps the player understand the harmonic language of the *Chaconne* more clearly.

Tessitura

Due to wide variety of registers (*tessitura*) employed in the *Chaconne*, the player may utilize these differences in exploring dynamics. Below are examples in applying this technique.

Example 7.7 shows one variation from the *Chaconne*.

Example 7.7 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 33-36



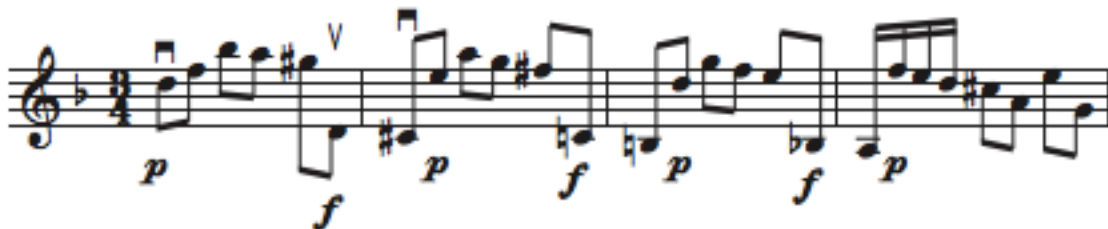
In measure 33 on the third beat, the voice drops from G# to D. The significant differences in range provides an opportunity to apply contrasting dynamics. Example 7.8 highlights this change of register. Example 7.9 shows one possibility of dynamic choices.

Example 7.8 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 33-36

Violin

Dynamic A: -----
Dynamic B: -----

Example 7.9 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 33-36



Below is another example for applying contrasting dynamics. Example 7.10 shows an instant change in register on the second beat from measure 169 to 171. The player may use his or her own dynamic choices in creating contrasting dynamics.

Example 7.10 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 169-171

169



Example 7.11 is one possible solution.

Example 7.11 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 169-171

169



The player can use contrasting length of strokes to create dynamic differences. For example, in example 7.5 the player can emphasize the bass line by using longer and heavier strokes, and in contrast, he or she can apply shorter and lighter strokes on the upper voices.

Linear Direction

Dynamic choices can be made from observing the linear direction. Here I provide practical suggestions for using linear direction to apply contrasting dynamics. Example 7.12 is a variation of the *Chaconne*.

Example 7.12 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 53-56



Example 7.13 shows a visual representation of the linear direction.

Example 7.13 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 53-56



Following the small-scale pitch direction is a possible first experiment. Example 7.14 shows a way of applying this strategy.

Example 7.14 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 53-56



Using this strategy excessively may overlap other dynamic details, however. For example, emphasizing the bass progression is a standard practice in Baroque music.

Example 7.15 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 53-56



As seen above, emphasizing the bass line interferes with the crescendos. In applying both strategies, the player may choose to make to compromise a variety of strategies.

Example 7.16 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 53-56



When the dynamic plan becomes complicated, the player may consider further simplifying the strategy. Applying the linear direction in large gesture is one possible solution.

Example 7.17 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 53-56



While the player applies these strategies, he or she should consider various solutions. In many possibilities, the player may find a combination or compromise of strategies useful.

Additional Suggestions: The Element of the Surprise

It is also effective to highlight the elements of the surprise when encountering a delayed or unexpected resolution. In measures 32 and 42, the C-sharp moves to D as a resolution. While listeners are expecting the same result in measure 44, they are surprised by the G in mm. 45.

Example 7.18 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 31-33, 43-45

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled '31' and shows measures 31, 32, and 33. The second staff is labeled '43' and shows measures 43, 44, and 45. In both staves, brackets are used to highlight the resolution of the C-sharp to D in measures 32 and 42, and the subsequent G in measure 45.

Example 7.19 and 7.20 show these different resolutions.

Example 7.19 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 32-33

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for measures 32 and 33. The notation is in G major, 3/4 time, showing the resolution of the C-sharp to D.

Example 7.20 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 44-45 (Delayed resolution)

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for measures 44 and 45. The notation is in G major, 3/4 time, showing the delayed resolution of the C-sharp to D and the subsequent G.

The example 7.20 has longer progression and more intensity. It is useful to emphasize the G for contrasting the differences. The player may choose to sustain the note a bit longer or increase the volume to achieve this purpose.

Example 7.21 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne*, m. 44-45



The opening thematic statement of the *Chaconne* has the following bass progression: D-C#-D-Bb-G-A-D as seen in example 7.22. Example 7.23 shows that the listener expects a G in measure 32. However, they are surprised by a G sharp.

Example 7.22 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m.1-5



Example 7.23 J. S. Bach: *Chaconne* m. 29-32



As before, emphasizing the G sharp is effective in applying the element of surprise. The player can use a contrasting dynamic to apply this strategy.

Practicing the element of surprise provides violinists with another strategy to achieve contrasting dynamics. While the player studies the harmonic progressions, he or she also learns to see the *Chaconne* in another perspective.

It is the performer's choice to apply strategies such as linear directions, *tessitura*, the overall structure, the alternation between consonance and dissonance, and the element of surprise to choose dynamics in the *Chaconne*. Depending on the performer's interpretation, he or she can choose a combination of strategies.

Conclusion

We have discussed the historical background of the *Chaconne*. We analyzed the performance difficulties with different violin techniques and collected performance guides from violinists and scholars to find answers.

The *Chaconne* takes on an important role in instrumental music. The universal language it speaks has inspired violinists and composers, and continues to be imitated and studied by modern musicians.

Learning the *Chaconne* takes tremendous time and efforts, but such experience also provides technical training and encourages learning. Violinists can benefit greatly from practicing and performing the *Chaconne*. Using a variety of strategies toward performance issues gives better chances in performing the *Chaconne* successfully. Choosing strategies that focus on intonation, string crossings, chords, memory, and contrasting dynamics strengthen the performance. In addition, it gives the performer diverse perspectives in viewing the *Chaconne*. Violinists can create their own exercises and performance guides to practice the *Chaconne*. These exercises and performance guides can provide references in tracking his or her understanding of the technical difficulties of the piece.

While we perform the *Chaconne*, we need every available resource to express our ideas, and that makes technical mastery important. Although encountering endless difficulties when performing the *Chaconne*, to learn the piece is beneficial and our journey through is a memorable experience. In the process of learning the *Chaconne*, the violinist gradually masters the techniques and trains his or her ability to listen critically, solve problems, and understand the music more deeply.

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