

## BMC 32 - *The Art of The Chaconne*

The Chaconne, Chacony or Ciacona represents the epitome of Baroque music and the Baroque musical forms. The Baroque spirit expressed in music is: Order, Pattern, and Form. Here there is to be no disorder, no atonal meandering, no shapeless movements. In the Baroque musical repertoire we find Fugues, in which a given theme is repeated in different clefs, and the stricter Canon, which is a 'round', each entry following on or overlapping the previous one. There is also a whole group of Variations: variations on a chorale melody, variations on a single, repeating bass-line (Passacaglia), and variations on a popular theme – the Chaconne. In that the Chaconne belongs securely among the most orderly of Baroque forms, yet is based on a recognizable melody, freer than the Passacaglia, much freer than the Fugue or Canon, it may justifiably be said that the Chaconne is the most readily enjoyable form among the typical Baroque musical idioms.

Both the Chaconne and the Passacaglia originated in dances, the Chaconne apparently in Spain where it was also considered to be of native South American origin. These were slow dances of three-beats-in-a-measure, usually based directly upon a ground-bass, or planned in short sections similar to those resulting from a ground bass. The Chaconne theme in Baroque times was frequently derived from a popular tune. A distinguishing characteristic is that those short sections were all of 4 to 8 measures.

All the major Baroque composers themselves made great use of the Chaconne, usually as an elaborate ground-bass piece in three-in-a-measure. The French composers were particularly fond of using this form as a finale in their Operas.

**Henry Purcell** (1659-1695) was the finest and most original English composer of his day. From the beginning, as a chorister of the Chapel Royal, he showed himself to be a musician of exceptional gifts, with Anthems and Services for the Chapel Royal coming down to us from as early as 1679. In addition to his duties at the Chapel Royal, Purcell was required on occasion to compose pieces for the Royal Court. In the Summer of 1680 he provided the Court with some Italianate instrumental music, including Overtures, Sonatas, Dances, the *Cibell* and the *Chacony*. Here in particular he exercised his ingenuity on the old-fashioned form, and his manuscript of the *Fantasias*, included the Chacony in g minor given here.

This was constructed on a simple bass pattern above which Purcell writes music of great passion and eloquence. Later on in this disc we also have his famous *Chaconne* from the Overture "*The Gordian Knot Untied*" (1691), a work not only containing music of the grandest vein, but with the Chaconne being one of the high points of his instrumental and contrapuntal writing.

**Arcangelo Corelli** (1653-1713) was one of the most important Italian composers of Sonatas and Concertos and one of the most influential violinists of the Baroque era. He came from a well-to-do provincial family and later enjoyed the comfortable patronage in Rome of a succession of distinguished royal and clerical music lovers. Corelli's twelfth (and last) Sonata from a collection bearing the Opus No. 5 of 1700, was titled "*La Follia*", and it earned Corelli world fame during his lifetime. It shows the great composer's extraordinary invention, involving 22 variations on a saraband-chaconne theme, later to furnish inspiration for Vivaldi and Bach.

**Johann Pachelbel** (1653-1706) was a church organist most of his life. A gifted intellectual, he was awarded at the age of 17 a scholarship to the Regensburg Gymnasium Poeticum. Three years later he accepted the post of Deputy Organist at the St. Stephan's Cathedral in Vienna. He later served as Eisenach Court Organist for a year, thus becoming acquainted with the Bach family, before taking up, in 1678, the post as Organist of the Predigerkirche, Erfurt, where he remained for 12 years. For a brief period Pachelbel took up residence in Stuttgart at the Württemberg Court (in 1690) under the patronage of Duchess Magdalena Sibylla. But his stay there was cut short by the threat of French invasion in 1692. After a brief service as Town Organist at Gotha, he finally ended his last eleven years as Organist of the St. Sebalduskirche in Nuremberg.

**Jan Anonin Losy, Count of Losinthal** (c.1650-1721) belonged to the aristocratic Czech Lobkovic family, with a castle at Roudnice. As a nobleman he was obliged to carry out a whole range of important duties, including managing his Estate and maintaining senior State Offices in Prague. He also had time to make extensive travels around Germany, Italy and France. When he was in residence in Prague, he arranged numerous musical evenings in his home. All this activity was greatly admired by his contemporaries, such as the Capellmeister G.H. Stölzel who writes: "*His Grace played the lute so well that probably only he who dedicates himself to it as his profession could play better*".

Amongst Losy's admirers we can even find the leading German "professional" Lutenist of the time and friend of J.S. Bach, Silvius Weiss, who came to visit him in Prague. Some two hundred of Losy's compositions, spread in more than fifty manuscripts across the whole of Europe, testify to his leading position in the Lute world of the time.

**Tomaso Antonio Vitali** (1663-1745), was the eldest son of the well known composer and string-player Giovanni Battista Vitali of Bologna. They both moved to Modena when his father was appointed *Maestro di Capella* to Duke Francesco II. Later, in 1692, he published a posthumous collection of his father's Trio Sonatas and on the following year embarked upon the publication of his own works.

**Gottlieb Muffat** (1690-1770), Court Organist in Vienna, was a member of a famous family of musicians. His father, Georg Muffat, was a significant figure in early South German Baroque music. Gottlieb became an outstanding representative of the last generation of great Baroque composers for the Harpsichord. His *Ciaccona con 38 Variazioni*, taken from his *Componimenti Musicali per il Cembalo* (1735), is one of the finest examples of Gottlieb Muffat's art of writing variations.

**G.F. Handel** (1685-1759). Handel's Organ Concertos were written primarily as Interludes in his Oratorios, the first two having appeared in 1733 at the King's Theatre, Haymarket. Two complete sets of these Organ Concertos were printed during Handel's lifetime, and a third set two years after his death, known as the Opus 7 "Third Set". The Chaconne heard here is the second movement, *Andante larghetto e staccato*, of Concerto No.5.

**Diderik Buxtehude** (1637-1707) was born in Helsingborg, Sweden. In 1660 he became Organist of St. Mary's, Helsingør, and in 1668 succeeded Franz Tunder as Organist of St. Mary's (Marienkirche) in the North German town of Lübeck. As Organist at Lübeck he composed prolifically and gave frequent recitals, continuing and expanding the annual series of pre-Christmas public concerts known as *Abendmusiken* which had been inaugurated by his predecessor Franz Tunder. Though strongly associated with Chorale settings, Buxtehude also composed a large number of free-form works, incorporating improvisatory sections of great virtuosity and highly accomplished fugues, as well as ostinato pieces such as Passacaglias and Chaconnes, such as the one displayed here; these were subsequently much admired by J.S. Bach, and later, by Brahms.

**Johann Sebastian Bach: Chaconne for Solo Violin**  
*with piano accompaniment added by Robert Schumann.*

Robert Schumann became a great promoter of the music of J.S. Bach, particularly during the last years of his life in Düsseldorf (1850-54). He first heard Bach's now celebrated Solo Violin Chaconne at a Concert in 1840 in Leipzig, given by Mendelssohn, who was at that time Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus. At this Concert, the Gewandhaus Leader, Ferdinand David, played the Violin Solo Chaconne, accompanied "freely at the piano" by Mendelssohn.

Schumann later wrote enthusiastically about the event: "David played a Ciacconna by J.S. Bach, a piece from those Sonatas for Violin Solo about which someone stated, wrongly enough: no other voice could possibly be added to them. Mendelssohn Bartholdy refuted this in best style by accompanying them on the piano and so wonderfully that the old eternal Cantor himself seemed to have had a hand in things".

Later in his life, after once again hearing the Chaconne played in Düsseldorf accompanied on the piano by Ruppert Becker, the son of a close friend of his and a former pupil of Mendelssohn, Schumann decided at that time to harmonize the entire Solo Violin works as he felt they would reach a far wider public if they were provided with piano accompaniment. On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1853 he suggested this to Dr. Härtel of the Leipzig Publishing House of Breitkopf & Härtel who accepted the proposal, and Schumann completed the piano accompaniments to the Solo Violin Sonatas on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1853.

With our program featuring several leading Baroque composers and wide range of instrumentation, this disc provides an excellent introduction to one of the Baroque period's most representative and entertaining forms.