



Transcriptions for Viola da Gamba, JS Bach

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BWV 1003, 1004 & 1006

Background

Others have already written plenty about these great works and praised the genius of Bach without which our baroque repertoire would be quite bleak, so I will refrain from doing so here. Anyone wanting to read a detailed analysis of Bach's solo instrumental music should consult David Ledbetter's Book *Unaccompanied Bach – performing the solo works*, which gives a good insight into the background and structure of each movement. Neither will I attempt to justify or defend the fact that I am playing Bach's solo violin music on the bass viol. Anyone who has reservations about the idea need not worry: playing this music on the bass viol is so difficult, it is unlikely to start a trend. However, an explanation of my personal background and path to this recording may be more appropriate here. Numerous reasons brought me to the point of wanting to play Bach's solo violin music which started with an initial fascination when I, by chance, first laid eyes on these pieces as a teenager. At that point my playing level on the viol was already better than that on the violin despite weekly violin lessons, and looking at this music made me lament the fact that Bach left so little music for the viol. I have great admiration for Paolo Pandolfo's 2001 recording of his arrangements of the 6 Cello Suites for viol, as I had by that point played a few movements myself, but never managed to successfully play a whole Suite. Over the last 25 years I now and then dug out my volume of Bach's solo violin music and made feeble attempts at getting through some of the movements – partly to understand Bach a little better, partly to improve my sight reading, and partly because I simply wanted to make it work on the viol. For a very long time I didn't even manage to play one movement successfully. When I was a student at the Musikhochschule in Frankfurt we viol students were coached in consort playing by Michael Schneider, recorder player and Head of the Early Music Department. In particular, he had very little patience with us tuning forever. Once we sat down with our instruments, he said 'I am going to the toilet now and when I get back you are tuned!'. Often those of us who did turn up for our Monday morning consort session had to endure a rant about the laziness of viol players when some of our colleagues failed to turn up. On one of these occasions Mr Schneider got particularly upset about this lack of commitment and gave us a long lecture in which he used an image which has stuck in my mind ever since: 'You viol players need to pull yourselves out of the bog by your own hair!'. I thought then and still think now, that he was right about that: every musical instrument under the sun has achieved the humanly impossible, the piano being a prime example of this. The viol lives a sheltered life in this respect, which is partly due to the fact that it died out before music got truly difficult, and partly because it is an instrument that sounds best playing slow and contemplative music, showing off its sonority and infinite colour spectrum, this being – together with the lack of volume and projection – a prime cause for its demise in the 18th Century. Realising that no viol player had (at least in public and to my knowledge) walked the stony path of exploring where the real limits lie, I felt I had an obligation to do that.

Practicalities & quandries

When I decided to finally get to grips with this music and found the determination to seek a solution to every technical problem, I faced a long struggle to do so. A late beer on my patio brought me the first useful step: whereas

some of the pieces would work in standard viol tuning, most don't, so perhaps a different tuning was the solution? I experimented with various tunings, and trying to make pedal notes and wide-spaced chords work, I settled on d a d A G D (A). There is some similarity to the tuning of a violin (or in fact the 5-string Quinton) and having an extra A string in the middle is often quite useful, although it creates more string crossings. The biggest question throughout was whether to try to sound like a violin an octave down, or whether to make this music into something more idiomatic-sounding for the viol. The nature of my instrument made this decision for me. With the instrument twice the size and more strings, the stretches and jumps with the left hand and many more string crossings with the bow make for much more physical effort and create for grit and clouds of rosin dust as a result. On the other hand, playing chords is a familiar concept and more strings mean there is more choice in how to spread a chord. A viol bow is proportionally not as long as a violin bow which means slurs across longer passages or groups of notes often have to be subdivided. Although obviously envious of violinists' ease and agility I also find there is something lacking when this music is played on a 4-string instrument with no real bass range, resulting in the bass line an octave higher than is natural, combined with the tendency to focus on the tune rather than acknowledging the underlying bass line. I found it very interesting to discover that only very old-fashioned modern violinists carry on with slurs in bars 73-76 in the Chaconne, as I think is logical, interpreting the sudden lack of slurs as simple laziness on the copyist's part. Most violinists now play those passages with separate bow strokes, as is written, even those with modern bows which don't lend themselves readily to this. It seems almost as if there is a need to show that they can, rather than following a natural instinct. If this was a piece by Biber I would hazard a guess that most would just carry on with slurs and agree with me that this is the implied intention. I used a facsimile of the autograph and only added the occasional note to a chord, rewrote the first arpeggio in the Chaconne which was impossible on twice the string length, and played the 3rd Partita a tone down.

French style & historical thoughts

The feeble attempts by my piano and violin teachers to feed me some understanding of a modern approach to classical music proved an utter waster of time, as I had soaked up Early Music from a very early age and was quite resistant to modern ideologies. This meant I could enjoy approaching this music afresh from a completely different viewpoint, as well as using a natural instinct in the interpretation and speed of French dance movements. David Ledbetter expresses the wish that cellists listened to French viol music when preparing for Bach's Cello Suites and got some knowledge and inspiration from that style of playing. Bach's solo string music is written with such a profound understanding of the French Suite that it is quite a revelation when this dominant element is allowed to flourish. Although it is much debated, there seems to be some evidence that Bach made some transcriptions for the lute, but viol players are –without any surviving evidence – not even in a position to argue a point for themselves, so one would be in a precarious place if one claimed that an 18th Century viol player would possibly have played these pieces. But equally, not having a surviving arrangement is not proof that nobody tried, as it is perfectly possible to play from the manuscript.

In his entertaining treatise about the demise of the viol in France, Hubert LeBlanc describes in great detail how the violin came to Paris and dazzled everyone with virtuosity. LeBlanc's *Defense* is full of insight into the changing fashions of the time: on one hand he blames *Sultan Violon* for marching into Paris and taking over, arranging an unfair public contest with Madame Viole in a large room which would favour his own strengths, but he also praises his beautiful tone and agility. On the other hand LeBlanc obviously adores the viol sound above everything else, but blames viol teachers for keeping secrets to themselves and holding on to their superficial *Pièces*, rather than embracing the new fashion of Sonata-playing. LeBlanc could not find a publisher for a number of years, but when he received a publishing offer from Pierre Mortier in Amsterdam, he left his house instantly in his night shirt and slippers to go to Holland. Without this publication viol players would be standing on thin ice as regards arranging violin Sonatas for the viol: 'After three times the years it took for the Siege of Troy, one can begin to grasp the true intricacy of the difficulties this instrument [the viol] presents. With fingering and bowing one can constantly start from the beginning again, there is no fixed method one can hold onto which forms any set of rules one can follow. [...] Ah! To play the Sonatas by Leclair on the viol with all its chords, one has to have managed to penetrate to the chore of the matter.' (Traditional dating of the Siege of Troy is c.1194-1184 BC..)

Instruments: BWS1006: 7-string bass viol by Bob Eyland after M Colichon (standard tuning); BWV 1003&1004: 6-string bass viol by Merion Attwood, copy of anonymous 17th-century instrument (custom tuning). Pitch A= 415Hz. Music used: Johann Sebastian Bach, Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato, Facsimile of the autograph. Recorded 10-13 April 2012 in St Andrew's Church, Toddington, Glos. Producer and engineer: Adrian Hunter.

'The first quality an instrument needs if it is to survive and not be proscribed, consists of not being restricted in any way, being able to play high and low, and not lacking any semitones. It has to lend itself to playing Sonatas, which are the prose of music, the prose that all instruments which aspire to immortality have to be able to speak with ease, just like one would express oneself in one's own language.. Several Masters of the viol are quick to say that, when something presents itself difficult to play: this was not written for the viol. It is a great injustice to accuse it of their own incapacity. There is no music in the world which it is unable to master, and consequently nothing can be found that is not suitable for it. Such unfortunate talk is one of the reasons for nobody having fully committed themselves to becoming a true master of the viol, and fully acquiring the skill of playing it, as one would the violin.' *Hubert LeBlanc, Defence de la Bass de Viole contre les Entréprises du Violon et les Prétentions du Violoncel, 1740*

Technical issues & thanks

Due to the limitations of modern technology one repeat had to be cut in order to keep the recording under 80 minutes in length. My gratitude goes out to many people, including Merion Attwood and Bob Eyland for making wonderful instruments and bows; Dlugolecki, Gamut, Kuerschner, Baldock and Pirastro for going to the trouble of making consistently good strings; Jane Schopf for lending me her beautiful little viol to practise on; Ian Baldwin for an endless supply of good English ales; and not to forget inspiration from Gerald Garcis, claiming that 'the problem with Bach is that it is a battle which Bach always wins', and from Rudolf Lutz and Edna Stern, arranging and playing the most inspiring Bach Chaconne ever (HM ZTT050601).

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