

Johann Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber: *Rosary Sonatas*

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Abstract: *Johann Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber's personality and work were pivotal in the 17th century, which is why he is considered one of the most prominent violinists and composers today. Born in the former Bohemia, later he worked in Austria as a violinist and composer in the Salzburg court. He was practically one of the first composers to compose for a solo violin. Among other things, he became a well-known and respected composer for the - until then – unexplored areas used in the Rosary Sonatas on the violin, the use of scordatura as a musical background, high positions, double stops, etc. In this article, I would like to present a more detailed but concise description of the historical origins and instrumental solutions of the Rosary Sonatas, presumably written in 1678.*

Key-words: *Biber, Salzburg, Rosary sonatas, scordatura*

1. Introduction

In the 17th century, musical movements in northern Italy expanded and "dominated" the courts of Germany and Austria, and the Salzburg court was no exception. Carlo Farina, Biagio Marini, Marco Uccellini, Dario Castello just to name a few, either from Venice or engaged in Venice, the musical centre of the time, were working on developing a new style of music, new genres. German and Austrian composers were heavily influenced by the above composers and will remain so for the next 150 years. The first non-Italian concertmaster in Vienna was the Austrian-born J.H. Schmelzer, from whom the young Biber was certainly able to learn to play the violin, which later heavily influenced Biber as a violinist and composer. In Vienna, Schmelzer also grew up in an Italian musical environment, so it is no wonder that later Biber was also a witness of Italian style influence even during his service at the Kremsier Court. Biber's skill for imitating vocals on instruments and, most importantly, on violin soon became apparent, and its perfection is manifested in the Rosary Sonatas. The-sonata cycle divisible in three units of five reinforces the Italian freedom of music, imagination, ingenuity and brilliant execution of the violin.

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2. Discussion

2.1. Mystery Sonatas

The beautiful, well-preserved manuscript of Biber's Rosary Sonatas can still be viewed today in Munich's Bavarian State Library, but fortunately, the opportunities provided by the World Wide Web also offer us access to a first, critical viewing of the manuscript, as well as to its download, for free, nonetheless. Due to the absence of a title page (which for a long time was presumed to be lost, but as it turned out later, it was not written), it is impossible to know the exact title of these sonatas. Also because of the missing title page, we do not know the exact date or dates on which the works were composed. The first page (which should be the title page anyhow) presents a recommendation in calligraphic writing, presumably Biber's handwriting. The work was dedicated to Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph, Biber's employer in Salzburg. This information somewhat narrows down the date when the 15-piece sonata collection was composed, that is, between 1670 (Biber obtains a position in the Salzburg court) and 1687 (the death of Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph). As I mentioned above, the exact title of the sonatas is not known, however, Biber refers to the 15 sacred mysteries in his dedication, but interestingly he mentions the word sonata only in the listing of items, hence the current name: Rosary or Mystery Sonatas, in some places with older titles such as Christ Sonatas, Copper-Engravings sonatas, etc. Not all sonatas have titles, just information on the items or the information needed by the artist(s) to perform them.

Rather than titles, each sonata is introduced by a copper engraving or medallion, depicting certain moments from the life of Jesus Christ or Maria. The 15 sonata accompanied by medallions summarize are a summary of the 15 rosary mysteries, namely the five joyful, the five sorrowful, and the five glorious. Perhaps placing the date of the cycle's composition before 1678 can be disregarded, as that is the year when the Rosary Society expanded in Salzburg, and it is entirely conceivable that the works were introduced in October (Catholic Month of Mary) of 1768, performed by the composer himself. Scholars strictly concerned with this subject believe that these works were performed by Biber in the Great Hall of the Aula Academica in Salzburg, built in 1619, during the rosary prayers, so by no means in the church, in a liturgical context. The presumption regarding the location where the sonatas premiered is supported by fact that the walls of the Aula Academica still have paintings dating back to 1636, which are closely related to the copper engravings of the Mystery Sonatas. Other assumptions do not exclude the possibility that many sonatas were composed during Biber's service in the court of Kremiser. To support this hypothesis, his employer, the bishop at the time, was very fond of and admired the use of scordatura, and in Kremisier, as in the Salzburg

Aula Academica, there is a fresco depicting similar mysteries. I think the relationship of these sonatas to one another and to the copper engravings of the corresponding mysteries could be lengthily disputed. It is also possible that some of the sonatas were created independently of the mystery theme and were added to this series, which is actually an element of program music, much later. The reason I allow myself to use the term cycle is because there are several factors that connect the works structurally: on the one hand, the brilliant use of scordatura (except for the first sonata and the Passacaglia ending the cycle) in all sonatas, and on the other hand, the frequently used theme, variation as a composition technique. Through all that it is obvious and visually striking that Biber, in addition to mastering the scordatura, also treats the violin as a virtuoso instrument (quick scale moves, double stops, high positions). His ingenuity in his instrumental skills somewhat compensates for the solutions that appear to be meagre only from the harmonics point of view. To be specific, the Jesuits wanted to feel in every possible way total devotion and spiritual immersion. Rosary prayers could be truly brought closer to human sense if they were able to yield full devotion through all five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) simultaneously. Moreover, we cannot overlook the fact that due to the missing title page it is not possible to know the exact continuo „amount“, since; after all, we are talking about violin sonatas with basso continuo. The only indication for this can be found at the Aria Tibicinum item in the 12th sonata, at the composer's Solo violone request. The only (and most likely simultaneous) continuo suite is the cello, in our case a bass viola da **gamba** and a keyboard instrument that can play chords, that is a clavichord, harpsichord or a positive organ or even a plucked string instrument such as the lute, theorba or aciliuto. I would rule out the harpsichord from this assumption because the sonatas do have a quite intimate nature, thus I believe the positive organ can play a much more prominent role in the continuo playing than the harpsichord.

2.2. Scordatura

Although it is true that today it is described as an „outdated“ technique, it has been in constant use since the 16th century. In the 16th century the scordatura was used for various plucked string instruments, but by the beginning of the 12th century it was also widely used in bowed string instruments. Scordatura means mistuning, which means that a particular instrument needs to be tuned differently from the normal, standard tuning. This was most common with the late 16th, early 17th century lute players who tuned the strings used in the lower register to a lower pitch, thereby providing the instrument with a deeper bass register. This technique is called basso descordato.

For bowed string instruments, the mistuning technique was first used on the viola da gamba for purely instrumental reasons, as tuning a string on a higher or lower pitch makes it technically easier for a performer to perform a certain work. The use of scordatura on bowed string instruments really means three things: simplifying different complex rounds, long distances, double stops, etc.; due to the tightness and tuning of the strings, each instrument has a unique tone colour, now if we mistune them, the strings will resonate differently created, creating a completely new tone colour, thus expanding the range of an instrument, which obviously can be of great help and advantage in the case of a chord or even polyphonic work. The first composer in violin literature to compose for a scordatura violin was Biagio Marini from Brescia. Marini is considered to be one of the most prominent figures of the early Baroque era, and not by chance. He was the first to ingeniously compose a soprano melody engulfed in various effects. Later, neither before nor after Biber did the next generations go as far in experimenting with scordatura as he did. This fact is supported by the 15 violin continuo Rosary sonatas, which do not have two identical sonatas that use the same tuning. It is worth noting the use of Biber's carefully calculated scordatura in these sonatas. The first sonata has standard tuning, in the second sonata the two lower strings change by one second, while in the third sonata no strings remain in their original position. On the one hand, it is worth noting that the two extreme strings were framed, because if the g string was left very loose, it could not resonate sufficiently so that it could not properly transmit the entire vibration to the body, ergo the bass register of the instrument was not enough. Compared to the customs and tuning traditions of the age, they have always striven to tune the e string as tight as possible, to give it a beautiful singing voice. Thus, there was really no other solution than somehow adjust the two middle strings to the others and to the tone, because their manoeuvring space was way bigger, which Biber made us of. Also in accordance with the customs of the age, violinists did not use the fourth finger, they always changed planes with an empty string, and since we are talking about natural gut strings, the music was also much more „live”, that is the empty strings was significantly more rich in overtones than the one held down by the fourth finger, not to mention the fact that before the 1700s they used very thick strings for violins. The scordaturas of the mystery sonatas also carry symbolic elements, such as the 7th sonata, where the tension force completely changes, that are while the two lower strings were very tensioned, the upper two were very loose, thus this opposite force completely tortures the violin. The use of the most extreme scordatura, and not only in the Rosary sonatas, but practically throughout music history, is associated with Biber. In the 11th Sonata, Biber changes the places of the two middle strings. This solution was often misunderstood by many, but it was not until 1991 that Reinhard Goebel, the pope of the old music movement, the founder of the baroque ensemble Musica Antiqua Koln, realized that it was not

really the strings that had to be exchanged, but they need to be crossed at the violin bridge, which incidentally is a cross-like pattern. What is strange is that the use of scordatura on any bowed string instrument is transfigured into musical notation, into the so-called tablature. This means that, compared to the standard tuning, the represented notes will produce completely different sounds. That is, a different voice is heard than the performer sees on the sheet. After Biber's death, the scordatura began to go out of fashion, but did not disappear. Later composers also liked to use the scordatura.

2.3. Passacaglia

The last and final sonata of Biber's Rosary sonata cycle is the Passacaglia for solo violin. We have no exact information on whether the composer really wanted the Passacaglia as the end of this cycle or whether this work was composed before the cycle, that is, before 1674. I consider both variants probable. One thing is certain, Biber's Passacaglia was created much earlier than the Saxon composers (Westhoff, Pisendel, Telemann, Bach...etc.) works for solo violin. The four-tone bass tetrachord turns into an ostinato, which actually runs through the entire sonata. However, we are talking about a standalone item, and yet, interestingly; the passacaglia also shows a triple arrangement based on the three tempo markings and tetrachord heights that the composer has noted. After the initial position of the G minor tetrachord, it appears an octave higher in the middle of the work, and then retreats to its original height, from where it accompanies the higher melodic voice of an improvisational nature. Just like in the case of Bach, numerical signs suggest that the Passacaglia is not a stand-alone work, as many claim, but is very much part of the Rosary sonata cycle. The two-bar g minor tetrachord plays 75 times in total; the first 30 times in the initial position, followed by 15 times in an octave higher and then 20 times in its original position. Thus, the 15 Rosary sonatas appear in the middle of the work and the 30 + 20 bar units together make up 50, which corresponds to a series of rosary prayers. These "hidden" numbers clearly prove the Passacaglia's summary role at the end of the Rosary sonatas. With utmost certainty, Biber was a renowned violinist of his time, both visually striking and a real "gourmet treat" for today's performer; it's a challenge to perform well these works. At the same time, he is an ever-searching composer for colour, who creates a brilliant range of tones for folk dance music, spiced with effects, blending it in with the art music. This genius is also evident in the Passacaglia, as the various entry passages do not show any kinship in harmony or metric, in fact, the passages practically "scrub" one another. Of course, it is clear from the above that we are talking about a very high quality composition, which is obviously equally enjoyable for the ears and souls of the 21st century. Although Biber's Passacaglia was written long before the Bach Sonatas and Partitas, there is no doubt that it is very similar to

the second partita's Ciaccona. It is possible that Bach heard Biber's Passacaglia somewhere, though the probability is very low, but if it did, his Passacaglia written nearly 40 years ago could have clearly provided the basis for Bach's Ciaccona.

3. Conclusion

Perhaps many of us, but especially most of us, violinists, wonder what great instrumental antecedents of J.S.Bach's work composed for solo violin are. Well, in my opinion, Biber's sonata cycle unique in every way greatly influenced the instrumentalists and composers of later generations. I believe that every decent instrumental artist should be familiar with the music of the past centuries and its proper technical and musical representation, so in this article I have tried to provide the reader with a rather informative but at the same time concise summary of Biber's Rosary sonatas. Unfortunately, in the absence of contemporary documents, we have to make a number of assumptions, but I think this "collateral loss" is dwarfed by the wonderful music, the manuscript of which remained in very good condition. Biber was one of the first composers to write works of this technical difficulty for the violin and at the same time used the scordatura most courageously. The latter greatly influenced the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and even Bartók Béla.

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