

## **Nicht ganz allein - Far from alone - Pas vraiment seule Music for viola solo**

Bach's Chaconne and folk music from Denmark?

Biber's Passacaglia and a Swiss Scottish? And all that for solo viola?

When the first Lockdown began in March 2020, one of my first thoughts was: finally enough time to practice Bach's Chaconne on the viola!

When I started, I didn't know exactly where this journey would lead. Gradually, the idea developed to record music that has crossed my musical path as a violinist and violist and touched me - and which I can play alone on the viola. I have been touched by very different pieces from very different times and styles - here they meet.

Some of the pieces on the CD are linked to musicians who have crossed my path; this is also where the seemingly random compilation of folk music from Romania, Denmark and Switzerland comes from.

The result is a wide-ranging collection, from baroque music to old and new folk music from three countries to the music of the Swiss composer Armin Schibler from the years 1947-1950, which was previously unknown to me.

At first glance, the pieces do not appear to fit together in the classical sense, but in fact there are strong connections to be discovered alongside the obvious contrasts.

### **"Far from alone"**

I am far from alone when I immerse myself in the music alone in front of the music stand and try to understand the composer. Far from alone is how I feel when I stand alone on stage in concert and play for my audience. Far from alone is also the title of the piece by Noldi Alder - and last but not least, I have hidden a piece in the programme that I actually don't play alone: In Cântec de dor, Lisa Harringer plays the second viola. Besides, when I listen to music alone, I don't feel alone.

I hope the listeners feel the same.

### **cânt la violă - I sing on the viola**

In Romanian they say "I sing an instrument" instead of "I play" as in German or English. Everything I play is about telling a story - singing on the viola.

Music is language made of sounds, it has to speak and touch. No two notes are the same, each is part of a musical gesture and phrase. As a musician, I see myself as a translator: I try to translate into sound what I see as a statement in the music I play - in an authentic and personal way.

I enjoy the technical challenges in the different ways of bowing I face when playing in very different styles. I search for the colours of the different styles by listening, experimenting and exchanging ideas with colleagues.

### **Biber and Bach - Passacaglia and Chaconne**

What fascinates me about Biber's Passacaglia and Bach's Chaconne is the intensity that arises from the repetitive bass figures and harmonies.

The freedom and expression of the variations that unfold over them are incomparably expressive.

"It resembles the architecture of a cathedral, the individual variations are like light falling through differently tinted glass windows. When you play it, you have the feeling of dancing with your own shadows." (H. Rosenkranz)

This quote, written about the Chaconne, fits both pieces for me. With the Chaconne I see another dimension: here I experience all the ups and downs that a person can go through in life. Several decades before the Chaconne was written, a particularly rich culture of solo violin playing had already developed in southern Germany and Austria. Well-known representatives of this art of violin-playing were, among others, H.I.F Biber and J.H. Schmelzer. Bach, who probably learned the violin as his first instrument, was certainly familiar with the works of his contemporaries and those of the virtuoso violinists of previous decades. Perhaps Biber's Passacaglia inspired him to compose the Chaconne? The connection between the two pieces is already outwardly visible in the ornate and varied melodic writing and the demanding polyphonic double-stop playing. In the magnificent manuscript intended for an archbishop, Biber's Passacaglia is preceded by the depiction of a guardian angel. One can interpret the Passacaglia as a "guardian angel sonata", which lends symbolic meaning to its structure. Just as a guardian angel guides man on his paths, the bass, always the same, accompanies the violin through all harmonic ups and downs. One may also think of the origin of the word passacaglia, namely "passar le calle" - to walk through the streets.

## **Spillemandsmusik: Dronningens Contillion, Peder Gyes and Rumlekvadrillen**

The two great baroque works are followed by folk music from Denmark. I placed the pieces here, because they contains a very old dance that was already written down in 1775 in "Svabos Notenbuch" in Copenhagen. The courtly dance movements of the Baroque period, as written by Bach and his contemporaries, are also based on such old dances. In Denmark, pieces of this kind have been handed down through handwritten dance books since 1760.

I began playing Danish folk music for myself in memory of a spectacular year of study in Copenhagen and many a musical summer in North Jutland. With its fiddle tradition, it has a lot in common with Irish music, which I also like very much.

Spielmannsmusik is dance music with a deliberately noisy, robust sound, with resonating strings and double stops. The way of playing is thus clearly different from art music.

What fascinates me about all folk music - as it does here - is that old and new pieces stand side by side as a matter of course. I combine "Dronningens Contillion" with a new piece by the Danish folk musician and violinist Harald Haugaard, "Peder Gyes" and a well-known dance from the Danish repertoire, the "Rumlekvadrillen". According to Harald Haugaard, it is a masterpiece of Danish spillemandsmusik. It originally comes from the small island of Taasinge south of Funen.

## **Music from Appenzell: yodelling and "löpfige" music (löpfig means elated)**

The folk music of my adopted homeland, Switzerland, has also accompanied me for many years; meeting the Appenzell musician Noldi Alder many years ago was the initial spark. The natural yodelling and the folk dances with their original character inspire me. I have adapted two natural yodels, so-called Zäuerli, written down by Swiss folk musicians from an old recording, for the viola. They are usually sung, but instrumental versions are not rare. Next to a traditional dance "Schottisch" I put a piece by a contemporary Swiss folk musician, the polka "Nicht ganz allein" by

Noldi Alder from 2001. Noldi's inspiration for his piece were the techniques that "classical" composers like Bach and Ysaÿe used for

their solo pieces.

If you want to know more about Zäuerli: <https://www.roothuus-gonten.ch/cms/images/PDF/NaturjodelrundumdenAlpstein2018.pdf>

### **Hoffmeister: Mozart's friend and Viennese classicist**

What folk music has fundamentally in common with Viennese classical music is the 8-bar phrase - and the minuet. The minuet was originally a courtly dance, but was also adopted by folk music. It served as an important musical form for the composers of the Viennese Classical period: For the young composition students to learn the basics of composing according to clear rules, and for the masters to pour all their compositional sophistication into this actually so small musical vessel.

There are hardly any solo pieces for violin or viola from the Viennese classical period, there is no common repertoire. I am all the more pleased to have found in F.A. Hoffmeister's "Etudes for Viola" a "Theme with Variations" that displays the tonal ideal and charm of the classical period and, with its simple, folksong-like theme, draws a bow to folk music.

F.A. Hoffmeister was a personal friend of Mozart, whose works he published, among others. He is also to be regarded as one of the most skilful and prolific composers of upmarket, artful light music of his time.

### **Music from Romania... always with dignity!**

The violist Marius Ungureanu was my colleague in the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich for a long time, and the Romanian music I learned from him for a joint project has accompanied me for a long time. As I said before, "to play an instrument" in Romanian means "to sing an instrument". Marius Ungureanu: "And if you don't have an instrument, you just play from or on the leaf: Doina A Frunzei comes from Transylvania, from Cluj-Napoca, and means exactly 'sung from the leaf'. You hold a leaf between your hands and blow on it. (Note: On hikes you have probably also blown on blades of grass - I personally have never managed a melody).

The peasant doina is a non-ceremonial type of song and is usually sung in solitude, with an important psychological effect: to "lighten the soul". Marius Ungureanu: "A Frunzei is the song of the leaf. So you sing the leaf's song. The song belongs to the leaf and you take it

over and sing it. Everything has its song, and if you can hear it, you can sing it - or pass it on."

Here is a version of the doina "A Frunzei" actually "blown from the leaf": <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=911232806059089>

## **Cântec de dor**

The story to this piece in Marius' own words: "It was in Michelsberg (RO), on a walk with my father and we had a pretty heated argument. We were arguing so much on the street that lightning and thunder and rain started. Let it be a coincidence or not. After that, out of anger, Cântec de dor was born, when we were back home. It must have been 1995, in the summer. As for the word DOR: translated it would be "longing", but in terms of meaning it depicts a sinking into melancholy, nostalgia, sadness, joy, without any specific content, a lament of joy, as contradictory as that sounds. In terms of mood, it is best expressed with "to feel blue..."; Into the Dor, one sinks singing, euphorically lamenting, BUT WITH DIGNITY! It is never whinging!" The slow part is followed by a "Brau", a lively, here rather angry sounding, Romanian folk dance.

## **.... and "Dance" by Penderecki**

Between the Romanian pieces I have placed the dance by Penderecki, a miniature written for a teenage violinist. With its virtuoso violin artistry and folk music-like gestures, it hardly stands out here as „serious music“ ...

## **Armin Schibler - Little Concerto for Viola Alone**

I only recently got to know Armin Schibler's music - on the occasion of a concert celebrating his 100th birthday in 2020, I played his string trio with my Trio Oreade. After an impressive meeting with Schibler's wife Tatjana, interpreter of Armin Schibler's violin and viola works since the early days, I began my musical discovery of the "Little Concerto for Viola Alone".

Schibler wrote it between 1947 and 1951 in his own highly emotional tonal language, close to tonality. Here, too, there are some echoes of folk songs.

Armin Schibler always wanted his music to "aim under the skin" (A. Schibler) His tonal language did not break with the past. He withdrew from the avant-garde of the 1950s, which expressly

wanted this break. A. Schibler about listening to his music: "Whoever wants to listen can still feel „feel at home" here, he is still in contact with the system of order that made our previous European music possible."

The calling, searching of the elegy is followed by a fun and virtuosic capriccio. I see the dance more as an expressive dance than a folk dance. I experience springing, wildness, thoughtfulness.

What particularly excites me about this programme is that - no matter where - I can open my viola case and spontaneously make music for people in the best Spielmann tradition. Alone, but not entirely alone.

### **Meet Gibson by Antonio Stradivari**

Between August 2017 and July 2021, I was entrusted with one of the rare Stradivarius violas. The "Gibson" from 1734, a generous loan from the Habisreutinger Stradivari Foundation, is a magnificently sounding instrument. I am happy to be able to capture this experience with my recording. It is a gift and an honour to be part of the 265-year line of musicians who have played this instrument.

I wonder if "Gibson" has played this much folk music before. My own instrument is a viola made by Ulrike Dederer in Zurich in 2013, and has a wonderfully dark, warm and balanced sound. It can also be heard: in Cântec de dor, played by Lisa Harringer.

### **Acknowledgement**

My thanks go to all those who ensured that I was far from alone in realising the project: first and foremost Jan Žáček, who ideally supported me as sound engineer during the recording in his wonderful Klangscheune. Thanks to my colleague Lisa Harringer from the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, I was able to play Cântec de Dor not alone with great fun. I thank the musicians with whom I exchanged ideas about their own music or that of other composers (with whom I could no longer speak myself): With Renate Steinmann, director of the Zurich Baroque Orchestra, I talked about Biber and Bach; with Marius Ungureanu, violist and jack-of-all-trades, about his and the rest of Romanian music; with Noldi Alder, folk musician from Appenzell, about "Nicht ganz allein", Zäuerli and Swiss dances. Harald Haugaard, Danish folk musician, impressed me with his wonderful groove in Danish folk music and Mrs. Tatjana Berger-Schibler invited me to her house in Zurich, where she has

lived since 1947 and where her husband Armin Schibler created his music.