

A Note on the Recording from the Performer

Tartini was fascinated with constructing a new syntax, even a new architecture, for music. He found it in the 'extra material', the overtones and harmonics which are the daily world of a violinist, with the instrument hard up against their face. A violinist does not only hear the sound of the violin but *feels* the vibration, through various direct contacts – the collarbone, the chin, the hands (both on the neck and string), and on the stick of the bow. Tartini's fascination with almost inaudible sounds is, in part, the result of this close contact, as I, too, hear and experience them for hours every day. Tartini's later disciples sought to find ways to enhance these sounds for the listeners, worried that, as halls grew, these acoustic felicities would be lost. Pierre Baillot (1771–1842) recommended sticking a key on to the violin, so that its rattling would amplify the effects! I am not prepared to do that (as it would damage the table of the instrument), but the extraordinary precision of modern microphones, and the artistry of my engineer, Jonathan Haskell, enables this material to be heard. We have endeavoured to find a sound that Tartini would have relished; not the violin at a distance, but up close, the grain and fibre of bow on string manifest, the extraordinary, and sometimes disturbing, resultant harmonics more apparent. I hope that you enjoy it, as this proximity is my experience of the violin and was, I feel, one which inspired the composer.

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Giuseppe TARTINI

30 Sonate piccole Volume Two Sonatas Nos. 7-12

Peter Sheppard Skærved, violin

FIRST COMPLETE RECORDING

GIUSEPPE TARTINI AND HIS *SONATE PICCOLE*

by Peter Sheppard Skærved

Giuseppe Tartini died in Padua in 1770, aged 77. His creativity did not seem to have ebbed, and, judging by the lengths to which musical explorers such as Charles Burney went to seek out his legacy, his was not an anachronistic voice. Violinists came from all over Europe to study with him, so much so that the flowering of French violin-playing in the decades after his death can be seen as one of his successes; French virtuosi held him in such regard that they were prepared to lie about having studied with him. It seems that in the two decades running up to his death, he had, along with theoretical writings, returned repeatedly to the manuscript of the *Piccole Suonate* which are the focus of this cycle of recordings.

In February 1750 Tartini had sent some *Piccole Suonate a Violino solo* to the Court Chamberlain of King Frederick the Great, the polymath Count Francesco Algarotti (1712–64). In line with his opinions on the other sciences and arts, Algarotti sought musical refinement and compositional modesty as instruments in the service of poetry, which seems to have inspired Tartini, questing after his own blend of concision and poetic lyricism. In 1755 Algarotti would write:

Another reason for the present decadence of music is the peculiar dominion it has taken upon itself to found, and which today has reached such a height. The composer behaves like a despot, doing exactly as he likes, concerned solely with musical matters. There is no way in the world to make him understand that his role has to be subordinate, [...] in a word, to give the language of the Muses greater vigour and energy.¹

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) was of the opinion that Tartini was one of very few composers able to reach this poetic ideal through his instrumental music:

The composers of instrumental music will make nothing but an empty noise as long as they do not have in their heads, like the celebrated Tartini, as they say, an action or an expression to be represented.²

The *Piccole Suonate* were not published in Tartini's lifetime, or in the century following. But there was a practice of obtaining manuscript copies of Tartini's unpublished works, both during and after his life. Visiting Padua in the months after Tartini's death in 1770, the indefatigable Charles Burney sought them out:

The day before my departure from Padua, I visited Signor Tromba, Tartini's scholar and successor. He was so obliging as to play several of his master's solos, particularly two which he had made just before his death, of which I begged a copy, regarding these last drops of his pen as sacred relics of so great and original genius.³

¹ Francesco Algarotti, 'Essay on Opera' (1755), transl. by Bonnie Blackburn in Enrico Fubini (ed.), *Music and Culture in 18th-Century Europe: A Source Book*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 235.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *De la liberté de la musique*, Amsterdam, 1759, section XXXVIII.

³ Charles Burney, *Music, Men and Manners in France and Italy* (1770), ed. Edmund Poole, Folio Society, London, 1969.

the gondoliers no longer sang the famous passages from Tasso (and, less often, Ariosto) which had echoed around the canals in the past. Lord Byron included this complaint in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18):

In Venice, Tasso's echoes are no more,
And silent rows the songless gondolier;
Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,
And music meets not always now the ear:
Those days are gone.¹³

The passage of Tasso cited above was one of the favoured extracts which the oarsmen had chanted, and there was wide speculation as to the origins of their manner of singing. Tartini seems to give an answer. His melody is written out without barlines and is modal, elaborated each time (he wrote the melody in full twice) with more vocal ornaments. It reminds me of his Balkan origins, and sounds just like Ottoman *makamlar* (modes of Arabic origin). It seems to be the perfect pendant to Byron's own lament, written decades later.

Tartini gently underscores the reference with the third movement of this sonata, labelled 'Canzone Veneziana' (Venetian Song) [25]. The importance of this sonata, which climaxes with a tremendous set of variations [27], is emphasised by an inscription (in Tartini's 'substitution alphabet') on the second movement: 'Il tormento di quest'anima' [24]. I will write more about this 'torment', and the link between Tartini and Tasso, as it returns in later sonatas in the cycle.

Tartini's mature works seem to embody far more than merely a transition between forms of Classicism. I have come to sense in them an incipient Romanticism. Just because he was old does not exclude him from contributing to the impulses that led Horace Walpole to design Strawberry Hill (1748), or Goethe to write *Werther* (1774). This was the generation which re-animated the voice of Torquato Tasso, who saw something new in his moments of 'sentimental' *Verklärung*, in battle, and among the ruins. Tartini was a leader among them; his cycle of *Piccole Suonate*, points to this shared fascination.

¹³ George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Volume 2, John Murray, London, 1823, p. 88.



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Torquato Tasso's *La Gerusalamme Liberata* is a puzzling and looming presence behind Tartini's set of 30 *Piccole Suonate*; the composer refers to it a number of times in the 'Padua Manuscript 1888', the source for these sonatas.

Sonata No. 11 in E major

This five-movement sonata is arranged around a mysterious 'siciliana'-type third movement [20], left out of the earlier imprints of the *Piccole Suonate*. The reason may have been the sheer originality of the movement. Although the time-signature is a conventional 12/8, the actual structure of bars 1–3 is '6/8 + 3/4' with 'hemiolas' notated in the new subdivision, not 'across' the 'compound' meter, as was customary at this time. This device invites player and listeners to be ready for more surprises – which duly arrive. At four places (eight, if you count the repeats) a technically 'illegal' subdivision appears of '3/8 + 2/4 + 2/4'. Now this bar clearly does not add up, resulting in only eleven quavers (eighth-notes) in each bar. But it is not a mistake, and for anyone who has either played (or danced) Latin-American music or anything written since Stravinsky, it works perfectly well, spreading eleven notes across the space of twelve. Tartini was writing these works for himself; perhaps if he had published them, this apparent 'irrationality' would have been ironed out, and the music poorer for it. It is similar to a technique in Islamic geometry, using the fact that the sum of certain fractions is very close, but not equal, to others. In Islamic tiling regular octagons and hexagons often make a framework into which 'tweaked' pentagons and heptagons fit, leaving small squares, an inconsistency which the human eye not only accepts but perhaps requires, perhaps explaining the enjoyment of such apparent imbalances in music.

Sonata No. 12 in G major

This piece thrusts the performer deeper into Tartini's mysterious relationship with the texts that haunted him, the significance of the fragments and memories of Tasso embedded in this music. This sonata is one of three including the *Aria de Tasso*. The words, which Tartini also includes, come from lines 272–75 of Book 12 of *La Gerusalamme Liberata*. It is surely worthy of note that Tartini, fascinated with form and numbers, chose to include these words at the beginning of his own twelfth sonata [23], exactly reflecting their position in Tasso's cycle. Here they are, in the 1763 translation by John Hoole:

But now what Time to dusky shade consigned,
Night spreads her veil of silence o'er mankind,
Behold a warrior in my dream appear'd,
And o'er my heard a naked falchion rear'd.¹²

By the end of the eighteenth century, it was widely lamented that the song of the Venetian gondoliers had been lost, replaced by bad operatic duets and squawking horn-players. This was not only seen as emblematic of the decay of the city, but more, that the past itself was growing dark, that the future was not so bright. Visitors to *la Serenissima* noted

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, Book 12, lines 272–75, p. 36.

There are tantalising hints, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that something of these unpublished works was known, at least amongst musicians with the intellect and refinement to appreciate them. In 1798 the pedagogue-virtuoso Pierre Baillot (1771–1842) made a remark which suggests that he was playing these works. Frustrated by the difficulty of communicating the beauty of Tartini's music to 'popular' audiences, he noted:

I had made up my mind to risk it, in spite of those servants of bad taste, who never want to hear what is beautiful, because the idea of beauty is not accredited by fashion.⁴

Such an observation would hardly be made about either Tartini's populist continuo sonatas or concerti. Baillot would have been acquainted with Tartini's epic 1754 *Trattato di Musica, seconda la vera scienza*, in which he would have read that Tartini aimed at 'The greatest perfection of good taste [...] of the voice, and of expression'.⁵

In 1834 the aging Baillot returned to the subject of Tartini's solo works in *L'Art du Violon*:

we have put in exercises, in order to make more familiar one of the most beautiful effects of the violin chords – and to put students more quickly into condition to perform all the fugues and sonatas of Corelli, Tartini and Geminiani, and the Sonatas of [Johann] Sebastian Bach.

Tartini believed that, by directing the attention of composer, player or listener to the simplest, most refined details of music, it might reach beyond the page, beyond sound, the material plane:

Music is but the act of combining sounds; nothing now remains of it but its material part, divested of all that spirited with which it formerly was animated. By neglecting the means which directed its operation to a single point, its object is now vague and general. If I experience from it impressions of joy or grief, they are wild and indefinite, for the effect of the art is perfect only when it is specific and individual.⁶

Tartini was not unaware that his music, like his ideas, would be unpalatable to many, and yet he was also aware that his apparent brusqueness was as much an advantage as a hindrance:

The present author, however, is not ashamed to show himself as he is, rough and uncultured; indeed, it works to his advantage, as he is both pleased and anxious that the naked truth be seen.⁷

He seemed to equate his quest for musical truth, for spiritual essence, with an attempt to reach inwards, to the heart. In 1769 Edmund Burke's *Annual Register* reported how this concern was manifest in his teaching:

⁴ Baillot to Monbeillard, letter dated 3 April 1798, quoted in Denise Yim, *Viotti and the Chimmerys: A Relationship Charted through Letters*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, p. 107.

⁵ Quoted in B. Stillingfleet, *Principles and Power of Harmony. Containing an 'account [...] of Tartini's Treatise on Music'*, London, 1771, p. 86.

⁶ Translated by Louise Goldberg, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1991, p. 287.

⁷ Tartini, *On the Principles of Musical Harmony Contained in the Diatonic Genus* (1767), quoted in Fubini, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

'That's fine', says he, or 'that is very difficult, that is brilliantly executed; but', adds he, putting his finger to his heart, 'it did not reach hither.'⁸

Suonata No. 7 in A minor

It was a performance of this sonata, at Wilton's Music Hall in London in 2008, that propelled me into an in-depth exploration of this cycle. The composer Michael Alec Rose (a work of whose was also in the concert) was enraptured by the set of variations [3] (one of three in the cycle) which forms the bulk of the piece and excitedly pointed out the 'moment-to-moment' power of Tartini's writing. Its defining characteristic is a hair-trigger sensitivity: like a good mystery novel, its meaning and direction can change in performance, with the slightest nuance or inflection. My fascination with this sonata grew upon hearing the 1958 recording made by Luigi Dallapiccola (with Sandro Materassi, violin) of his re-composition of the first movement [1]. Dallapiccola's version, entitled *Pastorale*, reveals the palindromes built into Tartini's writing, and elegantly responds to his 'symmetrical' harmony, by folding music into its own retrograde. His insight is with me whenever I play this piece. If he could produce an *omaggio* of such delicacy and beauty, simply by framing, echoing and garlanding Tartini's enlightened restraint, clearly this is music of genius.

Suonata No. 8 in G minor

As I play it, this sonata brings to mind Tartini's concern and understanding for the limitations of notation, its inability fully to communicate the desires of the composer, the correct execution. On 20 November 1749 he wrote to Algarotti:

It is impossible for another man (whoever he may be) to match my character and expression perfectly, just as it is impossible for another perfectly to resemble me. All the same, in all order to make my character and my intentions clear, I should say that I seek the greatest possible affinity with nature and am least at home in matters of art: for if I possess any art at all, it is that of imitating nature.⁹

The sonata is written in what was becoming the fashionable, 'modern' style in the second half of the eighteenth century: two parts. There are only two three-note chords in the whole piece, and these both include octaves, underlining the two-part texture rather than adding to it. The predominantly treble *tessitura* ensures that 'Tartini's notes', the resultant tones for which he was celebrated, can be heard as a ghostly bass-line. The last movement, *Allegro assai* [8] makes use of his famous 'Devil's Trill' device, sustaining a trill while a melody is played above or below it. Leopold Mozart (1719–87) devoted a paragraph to this technique in his *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule* (1756), noting that the 'trillo accompagnato' demanded 'no little industry' to master. But he was too

⁸ Edmund Burke, *Annual Register: A View of the History, Politics and Literature of the Year*, Dodsley, London, 1770, p. 166.

⁹ Letter dated 20 November 1749, sent from Padua, quoted in Paul Brainard, 'Tartini and the Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, xiv (1961), p. 386.

curmudgeonly to acknowledge Tartini by name (even though he quoted two examples from his work), referring to him as a 'celebrated violinist of our time'¹⁰

Suonata No. 9 in A major

Compared to the melancholy G minor of Sonata 8, No. 9 is a bright and 'open', not only in key, A major, which allows more brilliant 'open' strings (A and E) to ring free, but also in manner, which is consciously 'outdoors'. It is not in an *alla rustica* style, but playing it reminds me of Tartini's remark about himself, that he was 'not ashamed to show himself as he [was], rough and uncultured'. That is, of course a matter of degree, but the sonata is full of birdsong: chains of triplets with 'mordents' on the E string, trills buried in the midst of cross-string arpeggios and, in the last movement [13], a *lira tedesca* (hurdy-gurdy) imitation. The sounds of the countryside found their way back into instrumental music just as the cult of 'natural-ness' saw out the end of the Enlightenment. By 1775, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart would include a (much less sophisticated) hurdy-gurdy imitation in the last movement of his Fourth Violin Concerto (K218, in D major). Tartini pre-empted the virtuosi of the nineteenth century, most particularly Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–65), by playing melodies both above and below the held 'drone' which is the defining feature of this instrumental *mimesis*.

Suonata No. 10 in B flat major

It was not until I played from the manuscript of this sonata that I was truly struck by the power of Tartini's understated emotional gestures. The first two movements are very formal. The first [14] is a stiff, 'courtly' 'siciliana', keeping listener and performer at a distance with its insistent fifth-based harmony. This device, it seems to me, is a trap, a lure, preparing the listener for the experimentation in the second movement [15], which is built around a series of 'symmetrical' contrary-motion cadences. Initially, these are simply diatonic, moving tenth–octave–fifth, but this harmonic device leads to the more chromatic, experimental cadence of a diminished seventh–fifth. Tartini shrewdly used the slightly odd effect of these devices to wrong-foot listener and player yet further before the next movement, which is clearly marked in the manuscript *Subito affettuoso* [15]. Nothing could be more different – all the preceding stiffness is swept away by its open expressiveness. On first playing this movement, I felt that that it just might refer to the 'love-at-first-sight moment' in Tasso's *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, when hapless Tancredi first sees the warrior Clorinda (whom, later, he will kill – a tragedy informed by many typologies, not least that of Achilles and Penthelisea).

O wondrous force of love's resistless dart,
That pierc'd at once, and rooted in his heart!¹¹

¹⁰ Translated by Editha Knocker, Oxford University Press, Oxford and London, 1985, p. 201.

¹¹ *Jerusalem Delivered, an Heroic Poem, Translated from the Italian of Torquato Tasso, by John Hoole*, Edward Little and Co., London, 1763, Volume 1, Book 1, lines 375–76