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Front cover: etching of 'il famoso Tartini' by the English print-maker William Daniell (1769–1837) after a sketch by George Dance (1741–1825), courtesy of The British Museum; background: detail of violin (1903) by W. E. Hill and Son.

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GIUSEPPE TARTINI AND HIS *SONATE PICCOLE*

by Peter Sheppard-Skærved

During his lifetime the Istrian-born composer violinist Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770) was celebrated as both as virtuoso and philosopher in music. It was after his appointment as *maestro di cappella* at the Basilica of S Antonio, in Padua, in 1721 that his fame began to spread across Europe. Even though he spent the rest of his life in Padua, he was sought out by musicians and travellers, so much so that his violin class became known as the ‘School of Nations’. His contribution to violin technique is summed up in a famous letter of 1760 to Maddalena Lombardini (later Sirmen), which was extensively translated and published in the years after his death. Tartini’s maxim *Per ben suonare, bisogna ben cantare* (‘To play well, you must sing well’) was celebrated by his most important violinistic descendant, the Italian-born Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824), responsible for founding the French ‘school’ of violin-playing which produced the trio of Rodolphe Kreutzer, Pierre Rode and Pierre Baillot.

In the last twenty years of his life, Tartini became increasingly concerned with the theory and physics of music. He published major works on harmony and mathematics, the first of which, *Trattato di musica secondo la vera scienza dell’armonia*, was published in Padua in 1754. In 1750 there is the first mention of *Sonate piccole* in a letter he wrote on 24 February to the poet-philosopher Francesco Algarotti, who was employed at the court of Frederick the Great. The resulting cycle forms one of the largest integrated sets of sonatas for any instrument, and the gradual change of handwriting in the source indicates that Tartini worked on this set for a number of years, perhaps into his old age.

At first glance, the initial works in the cycle of *Sonate piccole* initially appear to be variously scored for violin alone and *violino e violoncello o cembalo*. But Tartini himself noted in his letter to Algarotti that in these sonatas, the cello (*bassetto*) part was there as a formality, or as he put it, ‘per cerimonia’. Tartini noted: ‘I have played these without bassetto, and that is my true intention’. It is that ‘true intention’ I have followed in these recordings.

The pioneering Tartini scholar, Paul Brainerd, wrote:

exaggerates his use of this gambit in the unbearably poignant final *Giga* [22], leaning into the fifths, minor seconds and (by nature) untuned ‘unisons’ (playing the same note held on adjacent strings). My performer’s instinct suggests that he is making meaning out of the inevitable failure: ‘All flesh is grass’. The ‘coded’ title added to this sonata – ‘Senti lo mare’ – is ambiguous. It translates as ‘hear the sea’, but it may be an allusion to Tasso’s *Orlando Furioso*, where the sound of battle is compared to the sound of the sea: ‘Il gran romor che si senti nel mare’ (Canto X, Stanza 99). If so, it hooks neatly into the underlying allusions to Torquato Tasso’s *La Gerusalemme liberata* which emerge later in the cycle. The middle movement, an *Allegro cantabile* [21], reintroduces some of the ‘fanfare’ material from earlier, but without evening trying to lift the mood of resignation.

Tartini’s works for solo violin are unknown to the majority of violinists. His thoughtfulness – the very quality that caused him to be lionised during his long life – has caused the larger part of his music, and his ideas, to slip from view. His music does not repay quick listening, or quick study. It demands time, from the performer and from the listener. In order to take time to really study, we musicians have to be convinced that the time invested will be worthwhile. We are already persuaded of the personal benefits of taking time with Mozart, with Bach, with Beethoven; my experience is that the riches of Tartini’s solo sonatas repay a similar ‘long view’. Having spent the better part of four years studying, performing and recording them, I am ever more fascinated, and ever more enchanted.

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.





the bottom of the page (the tenth of the manuscript) which bears the *Andante cantabile* [12], but in my opinion its placement there is simply a practical issue. The bottom of the facing page offered Tartini no space for an extra movement, and in bound form these two pages would be next to each other. It seems clear enough that this movement forms a bridge between the *Allegro assai* [13] and the *Presto* [15]. Although this sonata is in C major, the first movement, both in tessitura and manner, points back to the opening of the cycle, and the use of *polyptoton* (different repetitions of the same note or syllable) invites the listener to recall the missing melody. The two fast movements of this sonata are perhaps the most redolent of folk music, particularly in their aggressive repetition of tonic/dominant drones, perhaps a harkening back to the street-music of Tartini's native city of Piran.

Sonata No. 5 in F major

It is in the fifth sonata that Tartini seems to start pointing towards the sensibility of the next century. The opening *Andante cantabile* [16] also contains tantalising hints of how he enriched his own texts in performance: 'stemless' note heads appear in a number of places, fleshing out the harmony. The following *Allegro* [17] includes the first bird-imitations in the cycle, recalling Vivaldi's ornithological excesses in the concerto *Il Cucù* (RV335, in A major). The ternary form of the march-like *Allegro assai* [18] allows Tartini to push his harmonic experiments further: the end of the *minore* 'b section' gradually squeezes the melodic and chordal material into the space of a diminished third – C sharp–D natural–E flat. This piquant writing opens the door for the 'heart-on-sleeve' writing of the last movement [19], which is entitled (using a 'substitution cipher', Tartini's personal code) 'al tormento di questo core la crudele si renderà' ('to the torment of cruel love which afflicts this heart') – not a direct quote from any source but an allusion to the Tasso and Petrarch which the composer loved.

Sonata No. 6 in E minor

The overt emotion of the end of Sonata No. 5 sets the scene for the unremitting melancholy of No. 6. As a performer, I am fascinated by the delicacy of this key, in which Mozart himself wrote only one work, a sonata for piano and violin.⁴ He and Tartini seemed to have found similar sensibility, but Tartini returned to it. The opening *Andante cantabile* [20] reintroduces the dissonant final chords which the composer had essayed in the Third Sonata [8], and draws a painful parallel with the inevitable 'saltiness' of the held unison chord with which this movement ends; indeed, Tartini

⁴ K304/300c, 'No. 21', of 1778.

The whole tendency of the *Piccole Sonate*, as compared to Tartini's sonatas with obligato bass of the same period, is toward the utmost stylistic simplicity [...] – a consequence of Tartini's recent and avid espousal of the aesthetics of Nature-imitation.¹

Tartini built this idealist 'nature-imitation' around something very real, and very 'natural', the phenomenon of the 'third sound', or what would come to be known as 'Tartini's notes' amongst violinists. In 1754 he wrote:

The 3rd Sound is the real physical fundamental bass of any given interval, and of any given pair of melody lines; the successive 3rd sounds produced by the combination constitute the true fundamental basso of melody. Any extra bass would be ridiculous, or at best, a constraint.²

By 1754 it was clear that in Tartini's heart the true music was that in which the true bass was implied, 'in the air'; and so to compose music with a written bass would be a betrayal, perhaps even heresy. The eventual manifestation of the *Sonate piccole* was proof of this thesis, one which few of Tartini's contemporaries were prepared to accept *in toto*.

What material exists for these 'small sonatas'? In terms of publication, all that there is is a two-volume edition of *26 Piccole Sonate*, brought out by Edizioni G. Zanibon in 1970, and an uninformative edition of one of these works, in D major (No. 20 in this survey) by Schott & Co. from 1973.

But predating both of these publications was Luigi Dallapiccola's *Tartiniana Seconda* (1956) for violin and orchestra, or violin and piano. Dallapiccola had composed his first *Tartiniana* in 1951, based on Tartini's concerti and continuo sonatas. His *Tartiniana Seconda* culled material, with merely cosmetic changes, directly from four of the *Sonate piccole*. As far as I can tell, Dallapiccola's 'transformations' of these movements marked the first publication of any of this music.

There is no critical edition of the *Sonate piccole*,² a situation no doubt arising from the assumption that Tartini was not a first-rate composer, or that the sources for this cycle are problematic. But they are not – there is a wonderful manuscript. This document, MS.1888, is held in the Library of the Basilica of S Antonio in Padua, Tartini's home for most of his life, and also his employer.

The manuscript is the only substantial sampler of Tartini's own handwriting. But what a sampler! Any composer's approach to the page is instructive, and can provide information on any number of aspects of his output. The manuscript of the *Sonate piccole* provides the richest array of these clues imaginable, ranging from the painstaking sequence of experimentation, composition, editing and

¹ Paul Brainard, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1961), p. 390.

² My own critical edition will be published by Toccata Press in due course.



rewriting familiar to any writer, through to the ‘white heat’ of inspiration, instrument close by, when, caught up in the moment, the composer forgets the number of beats on the bar and writes on furiously, improvising, as it were, pen in hand, until he catches his mistake, rewinds the two or three errant bars, and goes on correctly.

At first glance, it appears that there are 26 sonatas, as published. But the Sonata numbered ‘26’ in the source is actually 27th in sequence. The Zanibon edition avoided this anomaly by ignoring the last sonata in the numbered sequence altogether. But even that ‘extra’ sonata finishes on page 88 of the manuscript: there are eighteen more pages, not of notes, but finished works, numerous extra movements, second and third versions and vocal material, scattered across the whole sequence of pages. There appears to be material in Tartini’s hand for 30 sonatas. There are a number of entries in what seems to be a later hand, written in a compositional style which is, to my ears, different from Tartini’s. These works are therefore not included in my reading of the Padua manuscript.

Sonata No. 1 in G major



The first sonata in Tartini’s cycle begins, as one might expect, in ‘overture’ style. Whatever the eventual length of this set of works, it is clear that the composer wanted to set out on the journey with a swagger. The first movement, *Molto andante* [1], is almost in *concertante* mood, with dramatic echo-effects, grandiose sweeps across the compass of the instrument and strident double-stopped fanfares. But the end of the movement puts paid to this mood of assurance, seeming to end in the minor, almost in retreat – a hint at the journey which is ahead. The second movement, *Allegro cantabile* [2], is a set of variations. Here the manuscript offers a glimpse of Tartini coming back to the work over a period of time, offering a second version of the theme, both as an ending, resulting in a hint at palindromic form, and various options for some of the decorative figures. The third-movement *Allegro* [3] appears to have been the original final movement, as it toys with the opening figure from the initial *Molto andante*. Instead, the manuscript offers an addition, a ‘siciliana’-like *Giga* [4], which introduces the mood and compound figures of the Sonata No. 2. The source is ambiguous as to the composer’s eventual preference as to where this movement might be situated, since it also suggests (by means of contrary page-indications) two other spots in the whole cycle where this movement might sit. This ambiguity is, to my mind, evidence that the composer returned to this work repeatedly as a performer, and found that different circumstances suggested different options, which means that one can hardly speak of a ‘final version’.

Sonata No. 2 in D minor



The Second Sonata has something of a ‘dark pastoral’ feeling. It is in the first movement, a *Siciliana* [5] where Tartini offers the first instance of the ‘symmetrical harmony’ which he had extracted from his substantial treatise on music and geometry of 1754 (the *Trattato di musica secondo la vera scienza dell’armonia*). In the early years of the nineteenth century, Anton Reicha would offer a large-scale cycle of duos as ‘evidentiary support’ for his theories of two-part writing (he cites Tartini as an influence in the accompanying treatise³). It is tempting to suggest that Tartini might have been of half a mind to do the same thing, to offer these works as ‘proof’ of his own theoretical writings – which were much maligned in the years after his death. The third movement, *Allegro affettuoso* [7], is, like the first, based on fifths and sevenths; these two are provided with internal balance by an ‘alarm’-like *Allegro* [6], recalling the opening figure of the Sonata No. 1 and offers the first example in this cycle of another trope for which Tartini was known, chains of trills.

Sonata No. 3 in D Major



The Sonata No. 3 can be seen as an extended ‘tierce de Picardie’, turning to the sunnier major, for the previous minor-key sonata, and the opening *Andante* [8] picks up the ‘siciliana’ motif of the first movement of No. 2 and spins it out further. This movement also provides Tartini with a first opportunity to try out another experimental gambit, cadencing, both to the dominant and the tonic, to an octave with a held leading note – a technique which, Tartini theorised, would produce a low bass tonic note, obviating the requirement for a basso or, as he put it, enabling him to play *senza bassetto*. The following *Allegro* movement [9] is the first ‘da capo aria’ in the cycle; remembering Tartini’s maxim *Per ben suonare, bisogna ben cantare*, I have no qualms calling it that. The final two movements, a *Giga* [10] and *Allegro assai* [11], find different ways around very similar rhythmic material. The latter introduces a variant on the ‘devil’s trill’ effect, where a held trill is punctuated with melodic material: here fingered pedal notes are sustained, while a legato line moves around them, requiring the held note to be played with finger substitutions – a technique of which Ernst would make much in the next century.

Sonata No. 4 in C major

This work, like No. 1, offers another example of the composer adding another movement at a later date (by which time he had stopped offering the redundant *bassetto*). This movement, *Grave* [14], appears at

³ *xii Duos pour Violon et Violoncelle, précédés d’un petit traité sur l’harmonie à deux parties*, Op. 84 (1814?).