

## Johann Georg Pisendel: *Sonata for violin solo in A minor*

Előd GÁBOR<sup>1</sup>, Ignác-Csaba FILIP<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Johann Georg Pisendel's personality was dominant in eighteenth-century Germany. Although his name has been largely forgotten over the last 250 years, it is no wonder that his contemporaries were outstanding musicians and composers like J.S.Bach, G.F.Handel, G.Ph.Telemann or even A. Vivaldi in Venice to name but a few. Pisendel's unique solo sonata represents the evolution and completeness of 18th-century German solo violin literature by J.H.I.F. von Biber, J.P. von Westhoff, J.S.Bach and G.Ph.Telemann's besides works. In this article, I would like to present a more detailed analysis of instrumental, compositional interrelations, and historical analysis of the unique solo sonata of this great violinist.*

Key-words: *violin, sonata, solo, without bas, Pisendel, Dresden*

### 1. Introduction

Pisendel's solo sonata, like many 17th-18th century works, was forgotten, and it took almost two centuries to rediscover these works. For the most part, movements after the Second World War, such as the Modern Early Music Movement, facilitated the rediscovery and performance of these works. In 1949-1950, large volumes of sheet music manuscripts were discovered in the Dresden Library, where there were found mostly works of Dresden composers or composers working in Dresden, and many more. Many Vivaldi, Telemann and Bach manuscripts were also found. It was then that Johann Georg Pisendel's sonata and several violin – basso continuo sonatas were discovered with notations added by the author himself. It is an interesting fact that the composer did not always write his name on his compositions, so it was very difficult to identify these works. He often used the monogram AΩ instead of his name. We do not know whether the solo sonata was published in the composer's life, most probably not, but after the great discovery, the work was released in 1952, thanks to Günter Hausswald.

---

<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University Brasov, gaborelod@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Transilvania University Brasov, ignac.filip@unitbv.ro

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Johann Georg Pisendel

Johann Georg Pisendel was born on December 26, 1687 in Cadolzburg, Bavaria, as the child of Simon Pisendel, cantor of Cadolzburg. The Pisendel family has a history of earlier great musicians and instrument makers. The young Johann Georg soon became interested in music, so his first music lessons and steps were directed by his father. Determined to follow the footsteps of his father at the age of nine, he leaves Cadolzburg and goes to Ansbach, where he becomes a choir boy. In parallel, he takes singing lessons from the singer and composer Francesco Antonio Pistocchi and violin lessons from Giuseppe Torelli, an Italian concertmaster from Bologna. In 1701 Torelli returns to Bologna and the young Pisendel is left without a violin teacher. Torelli was an outstanding violin player and composer of his era, so there is no doubt that the four years the young pupil spent with Torelli had a great impact on Pisendel as a violinist and later as a composer.

Pisendel continued his studies, and from 1703 and was taught by his host, Kapellmeister Johann Christian Rau, Torelli's successor, and by concertmaster Johann Wolfgang Wolff. At the age of 16, he took a *Tuttist* position with the Ansbach Court Orchestra. In March 1709 the young Pisendel left Ansbach and went to Leipzig where he studied law. On his way to Leipzig, he stopped in Weimar, where he met Johann Sebastian Bach, who at the time was working there, and Bach gave young Pisendel a Telemann double-concerto, copied by Bach, as a token of their friendship. Arriving in Leipzig, he met Georg Philip Telemann. Here, between 1709 and 1711 he was a student of the Collegium Musicum founded by Telemann and separately studied composition with Heinechen. Pisendel and Telemann became very good friends, which lasted until Pisendel's death. He has listened and played many Italian works in Leipzig, including the famous op. 5 Corelli violin sonatas published in 1700, the latest Torelli violin concerts, etc.

This is where Jean Baptiste Volumier, concertmaster of the Hofkapelle (founded in 1548) in Dresden, heard and noticed Pisendel. At Volumier's invitation, the Lutheran Pisendel became a court musician at the Dresden Catholic court of the Saxon elector Augustus the Strong. For the rest of his life, Pisendel worked at the court. The Elector Prince regularly had his musicians travel abroad, so Pisendel was no exception, this way reaching Paris in 1714, Berlin in 1715, and Venice in 1716 and 1717. Already while in Leipzig, Italian music aroused great interest in the German violinist, so obviously he visited the Venetian violin virtuoso and opera composer Antonio Vivaldi during his stay in Venice. He studied with Vivaldi for nine months, then traveled to Rome where he took lessons from the former Corelli

student, Antonio Montanari. It is an interesting fact that Pisendel mentions in a letter about this journey in Italy and says "*While I could learn technique and ingenuity from the Venetian master, I could acquire advanced harmonic senses from the Roman master ...*" Returning to Dresden, he had students and colleagues such as J. J. Quantz the flutist, the older Benda, the Graun brothers or even J. F. Agricola.

After the death of Volumier, the concertmaster of the Hofkapelle, Pisendel became court concertmaster and, although there are many remaining letters, and several works dedicated to him, which prove that he was considered one of the greatest violin virtuosos of his time, he practically abandoned soloing and composing, and devoted all his time to orchestral activities. Pisendel, who died in 1755, maintained a close friendship with G. Ph. Telemann, who dedicated to him a Concerto in 1714, more than likely had a good relationship with J. S. Bach and, fortunately, Vivaldi's 6th Violin Concerto is still to be found in the Dresden Library, with the dedication "*fatto per il sign. Pisendel*" (RV172, RV205, RV208a, RV237, RV242, RV314).

## 2.2. Historical origin of the sonata

There is still a great deal of controversy surrounding the date of Johann Georg Pisendel's solo Sonata in A minor. After the first research, musicologists dated the creation of the sonata between 1715 and 1716, that is, before Pisendel's trip to Italy. This assumption cannot be ruled out solely on the basis of the stylistic features of the work. During Johann Sebastian Bach's visit to Dresden in 1717, he obviously visited Pisendel (or Pisendel visited Bach in 1716) operating in the Dresden court, and for this reason it cannot be excluded that Pisendel's sonata could have served as a reference for Bach in composing his later solo sonatas and partitas. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for the above assumptions, but many things seem to prove the birth of the sonata at a later date. In the absence of Pisendel, the elector hired new Italian musicians at the court in Dresden (including the Italian violin virtuoso Antonio Veracini), and Pisendel, who returned in 1717, was quite sensitive about the fact that Dresden, to date representing the French style, became to radically favor the Italian style. It seems obvious that Pisendel avoided the seemingly unfolding Franco-Italian conflict, trying to find a "blended" style as a composer, the obvious fruit of which is the solo sonata in A minor. Another hypothesis for the later birth of the work is quite valid, as at the beginning of the first and second movements of the sonata we find ourselves facing a dotted rhythm (Lombard rhythm), which Johann Joachim Quantz mentions in his Flute School, published in 1752, in which, according to his statement, this rhythm came into fashion around 1724. Last but not least, I would like to mention that the third

movement of the work (without variation) was published in Telemann's volume "Der getre Music-Meister" in 1728 in Hamburg. I think dating the creation of the sonata ahead of 1716 may be disregarded and considering the above viewpoints Pisendel could have been inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach's solo sonatas and partitas at the time of composing this work.

### 2.3. Instrumental and Compositional Interrelations

Although Pisendel titled the Sonata a "violino senza basso", the work could be described as a fantasy consisting of suite movements rather than a sonata. As well, instrumentally and harmonically, we find many similarities between Johann Sebastian Bach's B-minor partita and Pisendel's A-minor sonata.



Fig.1. J. G. Pisendel's violin sonata *Allegro*



Fig.2. J. S. Bach's b-minor partita for solo violin  
*Corrente*



Fig.3. *Harmonic resemblance*

In the eighteenth century, it was not typical to include in the sheet music the possible ornamentations, in fact, the composer left to the artist's ingenuity or virtuosity the addition of ornamentations (of improvisational nature!). Pisendel, like Bach, includes rigorously and meticulously all the ornamentations in his scores (Fig.4, Fig, 6, Fig.7). There is almost a visual similarity between Bach's sonatas and Pisendel's sonatas. The dotted rhythm (Lombard) that occurs at the beginning of the first and second movement of the work plays an important role in the Pisendel Sonata's creation date mentioned above (Figures 4 and 5).



Fig.4. J. G. Pisendel's sonata Largo



Fig.5. J. G. Pisendel's sonata Allegro



Fig.6. J. G. Pisendel's sonata Largo



Fig.7. J. S. Bach's b-minor partita, Allemande

Last but not least, I found a rather interesting similarity in the Gigue movement of Pisendel's a-minor solo sonata. In the first four beats Pisendel uses the same descending bass line – in a-minor – as J.H.I.F. von Biber in his Passacaglia in g-minor, written for solo violin (Figures 8 and 9).



Fig.8. J.H.I.F. von Biber's Passacaglia from the Mystery Sonatas (Rosenkranz)



Fig.9. J. G. Pisendel's sonata, Giga

### 3. Conclusion

Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that Pisendel's A minor solo sonata can safely be called one of the most prominent gems of the eighteenth-century solo violin repertoire. Analyzing Pisendel's sonata, whether written earlier or later than the Bach sonatas, we find an obvious, close link between the two composers. For me, Pisendel embodies the perfect eighteenth-century violin virtuoso. Unfortunately, the term virtuoso has become somewhat commonplace nowadays, but in the eighteenth century it did cover quite a few things. In addition to instrumental techniques, there had to be a process of conscious composing for a particular instrument. In Pisendel's autobiography, we seem to discover many things which refer to an almost clear picture of the composer's moral conduct, benevolence, and modesty. I think Pisendel's personality had these capabilities which made possible the fulfillment of a great musician, violin virtuoso and composer.

### 4. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank to Ulrike Titze, leader and concertmaster of the Dresdner Barockorchester, who helped me with different kind of information about the musical life of Dresden in the 18th century.

### References

- Boyden, David D. 1965. *The History of Violin Playing from its Origin to 1761*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Donington, Robert. 1978. *A barokk zene előadásmódja*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó.
- Jung, H. R. 1956. *J. G. Pisendel (1687 – 1755), Leben und Werk*. Jena.
- Manze, Andrew. 2007. *Strings (A Performer's Guide to Music of the Baroque Period, ed. Burton, Anthony)*. London: ABRSM (The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) Publishing.