

Student Work Sample

Music History/Literature Final Project

Music Education

Above Standard

Music History and Literature I

14 December 2009

### Heinrich Biber: The Mystery of Scordatura

Heinrich Biber (1644-1704) was one of the most well known violin virtuosos and composers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Biber wrote in various styles, including masses, requiems, sonatas, and even opera; however, he is best remembered for his solo violin compositions. In particular, the *Mystery Sonatas* have captured the interest of modern listeners of early music. This set of fifteen sonatas and one unaccompanied passacaglia makes repeated and innovative use of scordatura tuning technique, and each was originally written alongside an engraving of one of the fifteen “mysteries” of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, or the Rosary. This set is interesting not only for its use of scordatura, but also for its effective and emotional illustration of the programmatic events associated with each piece; specifically, Sonata X (“The Crucifixion”) and Sonata XI (“The Resurrection”) stand out as intriguing and valuable examples of Biber’s music.

Biber was born in the small town of Wartenburg, near Reichenburg in northern Bohemia. His parents, Martin and Maria, likely brought him up in a quite humble and unprivileged lifestyle, and his father was most likely a gamekeeper at the estate of the local Count, Christoph Paul von Liechtenstein-Kastelkorn. His early musical training was likely undertaken with the local organist Weigand Knoffe, who was known as a “drunkard and rabblrouser,” (Chafe 1) and he also likely underwent studies at a Jesuit

school in Bohemia (Dann/Sehnal). Other details of his early life are murky, and his journey from birth to becoming one of Europe's most skilled masters of the violin is largely unknown.

It is known, however, that before the year 1668, Biber was employed by Prince Johann Seigfried Eggenberg at the chapel in Graz (Dann/Sehnal), and after that year he spent at least two years in Kromeriz. There he worked as a *valet de chamber* under the Archbishop Karl Liechtenstein-Kastelkorn, who took an unusual interest in the musical events of his realm of influence. Biber composed many works in this brief period, most likely including several of the *Mystery Sonatas*, and the Archbishop seemed to have an affinity for the solo violin style that characterized Biber's playing and written work. Indeed, after Biber left his employ, the Archbishop began to seek musicians possessing similar characteristics, even specifically mentioning *scordatura* tuning technique (Chafe 8). Although it seems that Biber was musically valued in Kromeriz, he left in 1670 when Liechtenstein sent him on a trip to Absom to purchase new instruments for the chapel ensembles; Biber instead "escaped" and entered the service of Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph von Khuenburg in Salzburg. One of Biber's contemporaries, Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, went so far as to call this deception a "disgraceful abuse," (Chafe 9) and Liechtenstein was indeed hurt by Biber's apparent dishonesty and lack of loyalty (Dahn/Sehnal).

Salzburg would then remain Biber's home for the remainder of his years, and he rose rapidly in the social order there amongst the other *valets de chamber*. The Archbishop Khuenburg seemed to have a particular taste for string music, and Biber composed and published four collections of music dedicated to the bishop from the years

1676 to 1684 (Dahn/Sehna). In 1672, Biber married Maria Weiss, daughter of a Salzburg merchant, and in 1677 he was given an audience with the Emperor Leopold I, where he performed and was presented with a gold chain in appreciation. This performance eventually led to Biber being appointed as Kapellmeister in 1684, one of the most prestigious musical posts in all of Europe, and Biber was eventually knighted in 1690, thus joining the ranks of the nobility and gaining the title of Biber von Bibern. Finally in the last years of his life, Biber composed sacred music, school dramas, and opera, of which only one opera, *Chi la dura la vince*, survives to this day (Chafe 26).

Returning to Biber's signature genre, scordatura violin music, the *Mystery Sonatas* are indeed the most well known works of the composer. Sonata X, also known as "The Crucifixion," is illustrated with a picture of Christ on the cross, and the tuning directions dictate a tuning of G-D-A-D, bringing the highest string down a whole step. Since the sonata is in the key of G minor, this tuning facilitates the opening passage of the Prelude, with repeated notes played on the top string, punctuated by multiple stop chords played on the beats. This motif has been described as representing the hammer blows suffered by Jesus as he was being nailed to the cross. The overall mood of the prelude is indeed sorrowful, and the repeated dotted rhythm on the top string is a persistent reminder of the pain and suffering endured during the Crucifixion. Another notable section of this sonata is the swift and furious conclusion, with rapid sixteenth-note arpeggios and repeated notes on the top string, with the range of the harmony widening as if to represent a crack in the earth as a result of the earthquake following the crucifixion (Gilman 46).

The next sonata, number XI, is referred to as “The Resurrection,” and employs the most radical scordatura tuning of the entire set, G-G’-D’-D’’, meaning that the strings are no longer in ascending order from bottom to top. This necessitates the violinist to either switch the inner strings, or more interestingly, to cross the inner strings over each other, creating symbolic cross shapes behind the bridge and at the pegbox. This tuning also lends itself to the reinforcement of the tonic and dominant chords, with the open G and D strings often vibrating sympathetically and increasing the resonance of the violin on those particular notes (Wright and Simms 311). Indeed, the tone quality provided by this tuning gives the strings a sound reminiscent of bells ringing over each other (Gilman 46).

Opening with a lengthy introduction, the sonata at once has a joyful, improvisational air, with the continuo playing a very simple, almost drone bass outlining tonic and dominant chords. The violin begins with a dotted rhythmic figure, suggesting Christ’s return as King, then descending scale passages repeated in octaves. This octave repetition continues for the remainder of the introductory movement, and gets more excited with each phrase, as if the violin is imitating the joyful news of Christ’s resurrection traveling by word of mouth from person to person.

Finally, the introduction gives way to the second movement, a chaconne built on the hymn *Surrexit Christus Hodie*, or “Christ has risen today.” The continuo begins this movement by itself, setting up the chaconne bass, and the violin joins in, as if the organ was calling the church congregation to song and the violin is the voice of the people’s joy and elation at the risen Christ. The sonata continues on its improvisatory path with the hymn as a basic structure, until the violin plays the main hymn melody at the of the movement in octaves, a task made easier by the alternate tuning of the top strings as an

octave (Wright and Simms 311-12). The third and final movement is a simple Adagio, with the violin playing a two-part melody composed almost entirely of double stops. This sonata is a great example of not only conveying the subject matter in a musical illustration, but also in mood and atmosphere, and the scordatura tuning allows the piece to have a brilliant, consonant quality.

The music of Heinrich Biber, while not the most common Baroque music heard today, definitely is deserving of study and examination. Biber rose from relatively humble and poor beginnings to become one of the great instrumental virtuosos in history, and rose to the height of nobility through the quality of his work and music. Indeed, his compositions for violin are now important parts of the repertoire, and his *Mystery Sonatas* represent the height of scordatura tuning technique in violin music. Biber's music is also important for his use of programmatic elements to make the music invoke a certain image to the audience, not just a mood or feeling; a listener of "The Crucifixion" can imagine the scene illustrated by the rhythmic and harmonic motives repeated in the opening movement. Biber uses his signature scordatura to make his music distinctive in sound, mood, and structure, and this uniqueness is what he is remembered for.

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Music History and Literature II

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Samuel Barber, born in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1910, is one of America's most well-known and oft-performed composers. Barber was known for charting his own course in the diverse world of twentieth century classical music; rather than follow the fashionable course towards Serialism and atonality, Barber's compositions are often a continuation and affirmation of Romantic aesthetic ideals. Indeed, there is always an element of melodic lyricism in his music, and there is no better example of this characteristic than his song cycle *Hermit Songs*. These songs perfectly portray many elements of Barber's unique style, from the delicate setting of intimate text, to extended and creative use of harmony. Throughout, the *Hermit Songs* are an example of Barber's deep understanding of the human voice, and his ability to put the meaning of the words forth in a truly beautiful, passionate, and sensitive manner.

At a very young age, Samuel Barber's musical talent was obvious to those around him. Barber was enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia at the tender age of 14, and there he studied composition with Rosario Scalero, in addition to piano and voice. Barber's musical career was quite successful early in his life, making a name for himself not only as a composer, but also as a naturally gifted baritone. His compositions gained widespread notoriety when Toscanini conducted his *Adagio for Strings* on a televised NBC Symphony Orchestra performance, allowing him to compose mainly on



commission for the rest of his career (Heyman, "Barber, Samuel"). Barber continued to write music in almost every classical genre, from symphonies and concertos, to full-scale opera, to smaller scale chamber works and art songs (Wright and Simms 736). Indeed, his vocal works are among his most frequently performed pieces, representing an understanding of how to effectively write for the voice garnered by his own work as a performer.

Commissioned by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge in for performance at the Library of Congress, the *Hermit Songs* are settings of medieval Irish poetry of an intriguing origin. The texts are the translated writings of Irish monks, brief poems or statements often written into the margins of books or documents that they were working to copy (Heyman, *The Composer and His Music* 334-339). This fascinating source gives the songs a charming, personal intimacy, with the subject matter ranging from the profoundly religious to the delightfully down-to-earth. These songs bring home the fact that the writers of the past were real people, not just names and collections of artifacts, and they give us a reminder that our ancestors of the distant past were just as concerned with not only death and heartache, but also with lighter matters that we would view as more modern. Barber's musical setting of these writings capture the mood and feeling of the words, with the textures changing from sparse and desolate to complex, dense, and rapid. Two songs in particular, "The Crucifixion" and "Promiscuity" can be viewed as representative of the variety of styles that are incorporated into the *Hermit Songs*.

The fifth song of the cycle, "The Crucifixion," deals with the subject of Christ's crucifixion in an intense and personal way. The poem treats the event not only from a narrative point of view, but also from the perspective of a mother in mourning for her lost

son. The text of the first half of the song reads: "At the cry of the first bird/They began to crucify thee, O Swan!/Never shall lament cease because of that./It was like the parting of day from night" (Barber, *Collected Songs* 75). The piano begins the song with a quiet introduction, creating tension through its use of a high register tritone leap, as well as through the alternation between the dissonant seconds in the bass resolving to the more consonant tonic sixth. This texture sets the stage for the melody's entrance, echoing the piano's introductory phrase at first, then continues forward in a more lyrical fashion. This first section effectively sets the stage for the listener, describing what the emotional landscape of the moment must have felt like at the moment of the crucifixion.

Next, the accompaniment leads the soloist up into a crescendo, with the next phrase entering on the words, "Ah, sore was the suffering borne/By the body of Mary's son." Here, the music peaks in depicting the pain endured on the cross, and the piano plays extended chords wider in range. Finally, the dynamics fall back to a tender whisper as the soprano sings, "But sorer still to Him was the grief/Which for his sake/Came upon His Mother." It is here that we get a sense for the personal nature of the text, realizing that the worst suffering for Jesus was in seeing his mother's anguish. The music here returns to the original texture, the persistent tritone reappearing again to remind us of the initial scene. The song ends much as it begins, sparsely and with sorrow, and the listener is left with a feeling of deep empathy and emotional engagement. The interesting part of this song is its ability to convey the message of an event so seemingly distant and storied in a way that brings the listener right into the scene. The words are not openly descriptive or explicit in terms of physical details, but they focus on the emotion of the moment. The music perfectly complements the text, with the characteristic falling tritone

remaining a constant throughout the song, perhaps representing the incessant, unceasing pain suffered on the cross (Barber, *Collected Songs* 75).

In “Promiscuity,” Barber turns his focus to a much less serious and emotional topic. The text reads: “I do not know with whom Edan will sleep, but I do know that fair Edan will not sleep alone” (Barber, *Collected Songs* 76) and this song seems to truly capture the idea of taking text from a message scrawled in the margin of a manuscript. The text seems as if it could have been taken from a note passed between classroom students, or from a message written on a bathroom wall (although it is a bit more tactful than typical graffiti). The song is comically short, consisting of two main phrases of melody, almost like a joke’s set-up and punch line. The melody, comprised of a cycle of only four pitches, seems to circle around the tonal center without ever really finding it, and it maintains a rhythmic consistency that is reminiscent of childhood playground teasing. The song is distinctly chromatic dissonant in its harmonic structure, with the piano accompaniment providing the music with an unsettling instability that makes it seem quite risqué and ominous. All of these things combine to create an impression that the performer is engaging in gossip, talking about the subject with a reproachful tone.

These two songs, while only a brief selection of those contained within *Hermit Songs*, can give an impression of Barber’s gift for effectively creating music that is creative and innovative in its harmonic and rhythmic structure, yet still manages to be lyrical and passionately melodic. This music is supremely appropriate in its depiction of the emotions and moods alluded to in the text. Indeed, these unique sources seem to have given Barber raw material for truly intimate and inspiring music, giving the listener a vivid sensory experience using only voice and piano. The *Hermit Songs* remain an

important part of the vocal repertoire for all of these reasons, while representing a challenging undertaking for any musician to take on in performance. Even the legendary soprano Leontyne Price, who sang the premier of the song cycle in 1953, described Barber's music as "always a challenge; but the end product is so rewarding and so terribly vocal, you can't wait to pick up another piece of his" (Heyman, *Composer and His Works* 341). For performers and listeners alike, the most demanding aspects of these songs are the rhythmic complexity and ambiguity of meter, since Barber neglects to include any time signatures throughout the entire cycle. This detail, along with the often hazy and heavily modal tonal writing, lends itself to giving the music a sense of perpetual movement and unstable context, a sign of Barber's increasing progressive compositional tastes. Barber, in his distinctive style, uses these elements not for their own sake, but as a means to an end. The *Hermit Songs* manage to walk the line between the progressive use of musical structure and a melodic lyricism that makes these works so accessible for listeners, and it is for this reason that the cycle has remained popular for so long.

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