harp IRELAND

CRUIT ÉIREANN

MARCH 2022

HARP PERSPECTIVES

FOUND IN TRANSLATION:
TRANSCRIBING BACH'S D MINOR CIACCONA BWV 1004 FOR LEVER HARP

DR ANNE-MARIE O'FARRELL

the arts council an chomhairle ealaíon 71 BLIAIN

Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal.
One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our March edition, Dr Anne-Marie O'Farrell presents the process of transcription of J.S. Bach's famous Chaconne in D minor BWV1004 for Irish harp. She explains her preferences concerning timbre, sostenuto, chordal voicing, and interpretation in her transcription of this beautiful piece, with a particular focus on multiple harmonics and use of the semitone levers.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson
Editors
March 2022

FOUND IN TRANSLATION:
TRANSCRIBING BACH'S D MINOR *CIACCONA* BWV 1004 FOR LEVER HARP

Dr Anne-Marie O'Farrell

Introduction

The towering stature of certain compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is well known, and among these the Chaconne in D minor, as it is popularly named, stands out. Lasting around fifteen minutes, this final movement of his second violin partita explores theme and variation form overlaid with elements of fantasia. Containing substantial passages of contrasting tempi and tonalities, it is woven into a single movement, creating a cohesive thematic discourse. It brings the listener from the declamatory to the intimate, to the brightly atmospheric, to the inwardly probing, until finally it leads to a majestic conclusion.

The ubiquity of the chaconne as a genre resonates with the prominence of theme and variation form in the canon of harp repertoire, from the famous renaissance ground, *Les Folies d'Espagne*, to Edward Jones' (1752–1824) *Twenty-Four Variations on a Welsh Ground*[1], and the *Variationen über der Karneval von Venedig*[2] by Wilhelm Posse (1852–1925), in addition to numerous well-known baroque passacaglias. One reason for the abundance of such pieces is the chromatically limiting nature of the harp in its various forms, whether pedal, lever, or triple strung, the latter inherently favouring white note keys. Theme and variation form partners well with such comparative chromatic confinement. The chaconne form in particular features a repeated bass line, and in terms of chromatic demands, it can resemble those of theme and variation. Bach's *Ciaccona* is so varied in its harmonic colour, melodic invention and instrumental timbres, that it tears apart any notions of predictability of chromatic pattern, which is so characteristic of other theme and variations for harp before and since.

1 Jones, Edward. *Twenty-Four Variations on a Welsh Ground* in 'Ceinciau Telyn Cymru – Harp Tunes of Wales', ed., W.S. Gwynn Williams (Wales: Cwmni Cyhoeddi Gwynn, 1962).

2 Posse, Wilhelm. *Variationen über der Karneval von Venedig* (Leipzig: Zimmerman, 1919).

Several transcriptions of this piece have been created for a wide variety of other instruments, including for classical guitar[3], mandolin[4], for twelve recorders[5], for organ[6], and harpsichord[7], to name just a few. Its range of expression is such that even orchestrators Leopold Stokowski[8] and Maksimilian Steinberg[9] could not resist.

Source and Title

The question of source manuscript for Bach's violin partitas is considerably more straightforward than for his cello suites, for which no manuscript in Bach's own hand is extant. My transcription is based on the composer's manuscript dated 1720 and housed at the Amalienbibliothek, situated in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin[10]. While the work is popularly referred to as 'Chaconne', Bach used the Italian title, *Ciaccona* for his *Partia Seconda a Violino solo* BWV 1004, in his collection entitled *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso Accompagnato*. It seems appropriate to refer to the piece using the composer's own title, *Ciaccona*.

Considerations and Parameters

This article documents the significant questions which arise when transcribing an extended piece such as the *Ciaccona*. What follows is an account of this process of transcription, which was eventually but not immediately, for lever harp. Decisions were required concerning the type of harp to be used, the choice of key, dealing with the unrepresented bass register of the original, and approaches to the idiomatic violin writing, for example, sustained sound, perpetual motion and bariolage. In addition to these, there were many expected considerations relating to levering on the harp and questions of notation. Much has been written about J.S. Bach's solo instrumental

3 Bach, J.S. *Bach Chaconne for Guitar* transcribed by Andres Segovia (London: Schott, n.d).

4 Driscoll, Andrew. *Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Violin arranged for Mandolin* (Fenton: Mel Bay, 2014).

5 Eijkhout, Viktor. *Chaconne from the Second Violin Partita arranged for Twelve Recorders* (Online: Score Exchange, 2015, rev.2020).

6 Bach, J.S. *Chaconne aus der Partita nr. 2 BWV 1004 bearbeitet für Orgel*, Matthias Keller (Stuttgart: Stuttgarter Bachausgabe, 2011).

7 Bach, J.S. *Chaconne aus der Partita nr. 2 BWV 1004 bearbeitet für Cembalo*, Karl Heinz Pillney (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, n.d.).

8 Bach, J.S. *Stokowski Transcriptions Vol. 1* (1927–1939), Naxos CD cat. no. 8.111297, August 2008.

9 Bach, J.S. *Chaconne from Partita no. 2* arranged for orchestra by Maksimilian Steinberg (Berlin: Russischer Musikverlag, 1911).

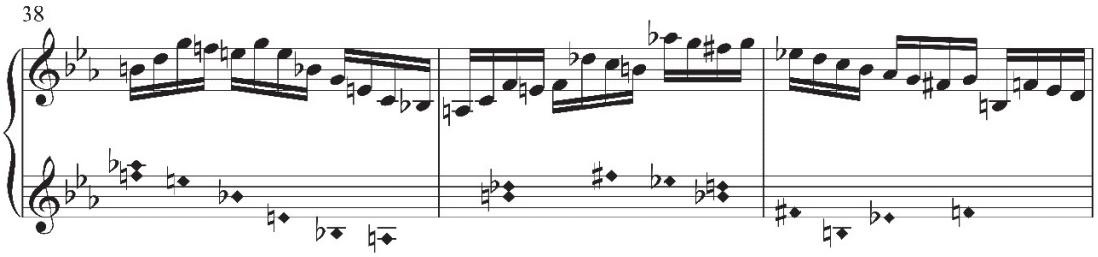
10 Bach, J. S. *Partia Seconda* in D minor, BWV 1004 from *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso Accompagnato* in Amalienbibliothek, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Mus.Ms.Bach P 967.

writing[11] and specifically on this piece[12] and so it is unnecessary to duplicate such work here. Equally, many fine recordings of the original version and of transcriptions are available[13], and substantial treatises providing harmonic and thematic analysis can also be found[14].

Choice of Type of Harp

Before outlining the explorations on different types of harp, a brief explanation of the lever harp mechanism is needed, along with an explanation of the capacities of the Chinese konghou. The lever harp or Irish harp (also known as Celtic harp, clarsach, or folk harp) has an individual semitone lever on every string, by which the pitch can be raised by one semitone, generally using the left hand. Unlike the pedal harp, it is possible to have C sharp and C natural pitches available in different octaves at the same time. This makes it particularly suitable for transcriptions of renaissance and baroque music, in which key changes frequently take place in one register, rather than across several octaves simultaneously. Since the texture of music for solo violin is comparatively light, it is possible for tracts of the music to be played by the right hand alone, while the left hand changes levers, as in the following example:

Example 1. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 38–40:



This example for lever harp bypasses the challenge for pedal harpists of damping resonating bass strings during pedal changes, since the pedal mechanism alters one note in every octave, while the lever alters one string only.

11 Ledbetter, David. *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing his Solo Works* (London: Yale, 2009).

12 Eiche, John F. *The Bach Chaconne for Solo Violin: A Collection of Views* (Harlow: Alfred Music, 2010).

13 To these ears outstanding examples would include those of violinist Amandine Beyer: J.S. Bach. Chaconne from Partita no. 2, 10 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ6iGNa8Gts; and guitarist Kanahi Yamashita: J.S. Bach. *Chaconne* from Partita no. 2, 27 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1_b_Isdelw

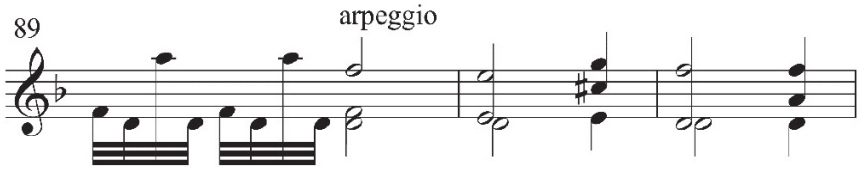
14 Ledbetter, David. *Unaccompanied Bach: Performing his Solo Works* (London: Yale, 2009), pp. 137–145. Ledbetter traces detailed harmonic functions above every bass variant of the complete *Ciaccona*, along with a comprehensive account of the historical and European lineage of the patterns and styles referenced in the melodic figuration.

Figure 1, Chinese lever konghou

The Chinese lever konghou has the same semitone mechanism as described above for the lever harp, but with the significant difference of having two parallel rows of strings, normally tuned diatonically. The single lever engages both strings, for example, raising the middle C lever makes a middle C sharp on both rows of strings at the same time. This creates a heavy and stiff mechanism which is not conducive to rapid, complex lever changing, but which is nevertheless successful for a great deal of repertoire[15].

Finding solutions to issues of resonance, sustain and arpeggiation with doubled notes in the *Ciaccona* pointed me towards a transcription for the konghou. This double-sided lever harp facilitates repeated notes easily and provides very considerable resonance for its size. I looked forward to the possibility of vibrato, achieved on the konghou by shaking one string while plucking its counterpart on the parallel row. This would be especially suitable for some of the longer notes at the top of rolled chords. The extended arpeggio passage starting in bar 89 is particularly suggestive of some of the effects possible on the konghou, and it proved to be the most challenging section of the piece in terms of finding a representation to do justice to the music. Here is the original notation of the first few bars:

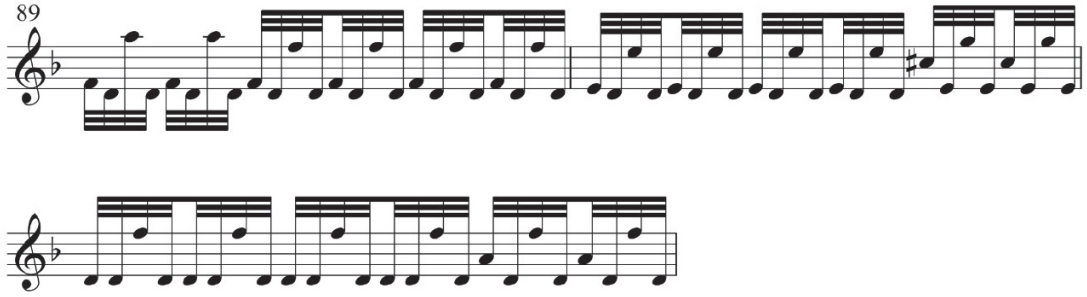
Example 2. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91 as notated for violin:



15 A performance by the author of the *Prelude* from Bach's Cello Suite no. 1 BWV 1007 on konghou can be viewed here. This recording was part of Harp Ireland/Cruit Éireann's *Harps for Hope* series in 2020. https://vimeo.com/404610031

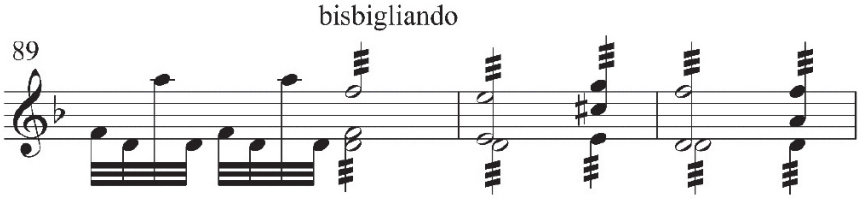
It is normally played thus:

Example 3. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91, execution on violin:



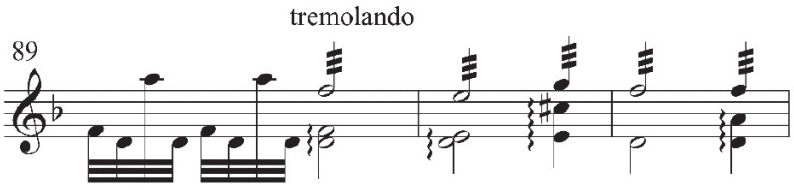
This manner of voicing on violin is not possible to sustain on the lever harp due to the many lever changes required later in the passage. As part of my investigation I explored use of *bisbigliando*, but as with the original violin demisemiquaver voicing, the left hand was not sufficiently available for subsequent lever changing.

Example 4. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91, *bisbigliando*:



I also tried *tremolando* using two different approaches to on the uppermost notes, which would in theory sustain pitches, while also freeing the left hand to change levers.

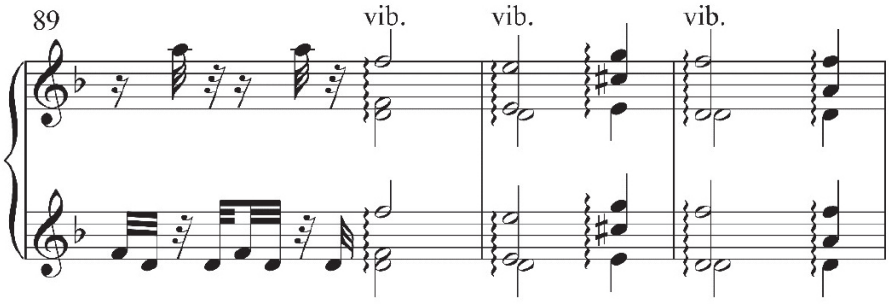
Example 5. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91, *tremolando*:



Firstly I used rapidly changing fingers 4 3 2 1 in quick succession, and secondly, I used a plectrum for the upper notes. Chinese konghou players frequently use a plectrum attached with elastic to a magnetised ring worn on the second finger, so the plectrum can be stored on the side of the finger, when it is not needed elsewhere in the piece. Some of these approaches were more successful than others, but they nonetheless yielded inconsistent results.

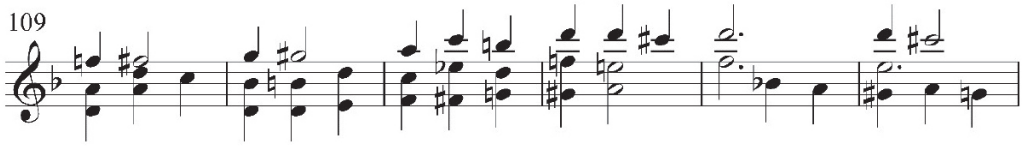
Finally, I endeavoured to exploit the double rows of strings to augment the sound, while arpeggiating the doubled chords in both hands:

Example 6. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91, using double rows of strings on konghou:



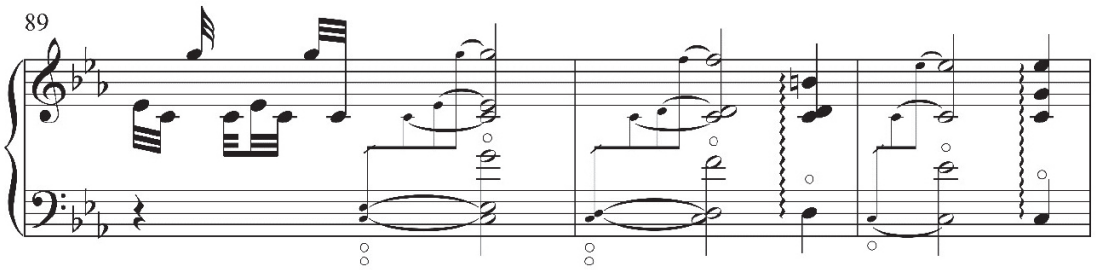
The challenge with all of the approaches shown above was maintaining consistency of tone colour, and momentum throughout the entire 32-bar passage, while also handling the extent of chromaticism later in the same passage shown here:

Example 7. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 109–114:



None of the techniques outlined above enabled the fluent levering necessary for the chromatic harmonic progressions shown in Example 7 above. This created a strong reason to focus instead on the lever harp, giving rise to the extensive use of left hand harmonics[16] in bars 89–91 and following:

Example 8. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 89–91:



The relative success of this version confirmed the viability of extensive left hand harmonics to fill chords with duplicated rather than added pitches, creating an attractive but subtle increase in resonance. Furthermore, the freedom to choose one's own dynamics is most complementary to the necessary arpeggiation in the longer

16 Harmonics on the harp are notated one octave lower than the sounding pitch.

chordal passage beginning at bar 89. The result is an adjustment of character from conventional interpretations on violin, but it nonetheless succeeds, given the chromatic limitations of the instrument.

A compelling reason why I did not pursue the konghou transcription of this piece further is that it is not yet a widely played instrument, and it would better serve the lever harp community if a successful way of transcribing this piece for lever harp could be found.

An additional reason to explore this piece on lever harp was to establish if gut strings would complement the resonance. Konghou strings are a mix of synthetic materials, including a metal core and thread, creating a slightly metallic sound. While I find the timbral response of gut satisfying in its range of expression, the *Ciaccona* can also be successfully realised on synthetically string lever harps. The decision to transcribe the piece for lever harp was confirmed by the current wide availability of generally good semitone levers, almost any of which would enable the necessary chromaticism without compromise, albeit with variable levels of ease.

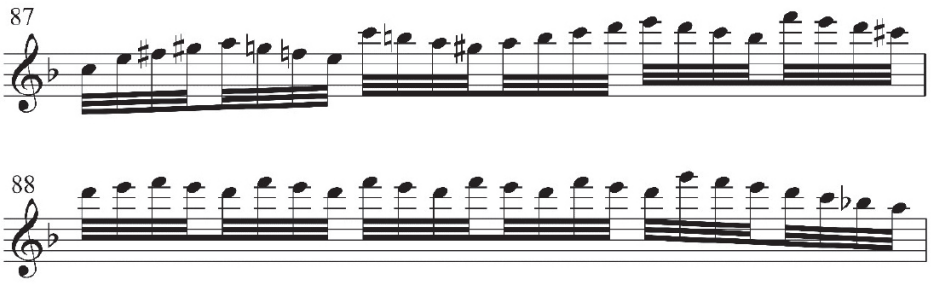
Choice of Key

At this point in my explorations, I was still working in the original key of D minor, because the konghou in B flat major tuning has sufficient open strings in this key to sound resonant. The first outcome of switching to the lever harp, was the slight reduction in resonance in D minor, due to there being three or four levers in every octave engaged[17]. Resonance would be reduced even further during the passages in D major, when six out of every seven levers would be engaged.

The concern remained about thinness of tone at the top of either the konghou or the lever harp in high florid passages in which the violin sounds extremely brilliant and bright.

17 Most lever harpists tune in E flat major, so to reach the key of D minor, levers on E, A, and C strings would be engaged, thereby slightly reducing resonance on those notes.

Example 9. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 86–87:

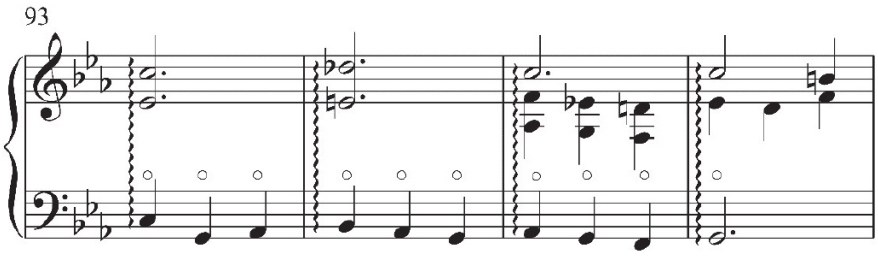


One solution was to transpose the piece down a tone to C minor, creating more open strings, and greater body in the tone during the very high passages. Another advantage of the C minor transposition is that slightly more of the mid-register of the harp would be heard. It is usually with reluctance that I change the key from the original when creating a transcription, as the composer's choice of key is deliberate: aspects of colour and character may be compromised or lost in an alteration of key. However, a transcription by its very nature is a transferral to a new instrumental context; a piece which sounds at home in one key on a particular instrument may be unflatteringly presented in the same key on a different instrument. When changing a key is unavoidable, keeping the interval between old and new keys as small as possible helps to retain more of the character and colour of the original.

Register

Having settled on the resonant key of C minor on the lever harp, the problem of confinement to the upper register and consequent lack of resonance remained. Early in the process I had decided that this piece of work was to be a transcription and not an arrangement, ruling out the addition of pitches to existing and finely balanced chordal voicings of Bach's original. It seemed therefore that the best way of increasing resonance was to double many of the existing pitches with left hand harmonics, as shown in Example 8 above. The konghou or even a triple-strung harp would have an automatic solution in the second row of outer or diatonically tuned strings, but for a single-strung standard lever harp, harmonics, sometimes grouped in chords, provided the best solution. The result was more than simply doubling or replicating, but rather the addition of a completely new timbre, still without actual bass pitches but rich in resonance and overtones. This was extremely beneficial to the creation of a distinctive timbre in the 'bass' line in bars 93-96.

Example 10. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 93–96:

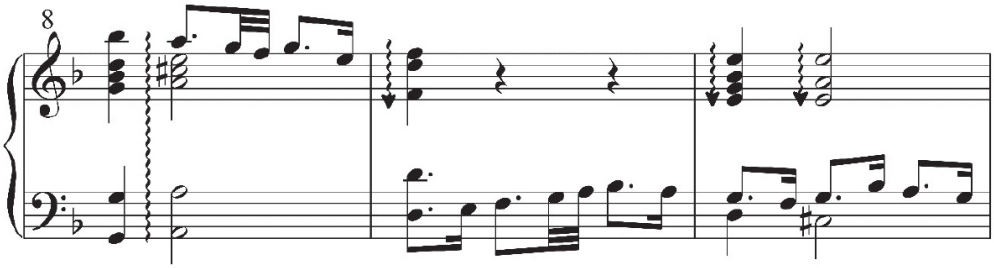


Other solutions to the problem of the absence of a low register have been found in settings for other instruments which are arrangements rather than transcriptions. These feature liberal addition of bass notes, filling out of chordal voicing, and extending the original registers of the piece to exploit, for example, the lower half of the piano in arrangements for that instrument[18], or of the pedal harp arrangements by American composer and harpist, Dewey Owens[19] (1925–2006) and UK harpist Skaila Kanga[20]. A more literal approach would involve omitting pitches beneath the lowest open G of the violin, but omitting use of almost half of the harp's range would be an unsatisfying prospect for a player.

Harmonic Voicing: comparisons with transcriptions for pedal harp

In transcribing the work for lever harp, I could see no compelling reason to alter the given registers or to thicken the harmonic texture, since the lever harp itself is an instrument beautifully characterised by a lightness and clarity of timbre.
While this is the first transcription for lever harp, two transcriptions exist for pedal harp, one by the Skaila Kanga, and the other by Dewey Owens. Kanga's transcription fills out the harmonies across the bass register, but not densely:

Example 11. Skaila Kanga, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 8–10:



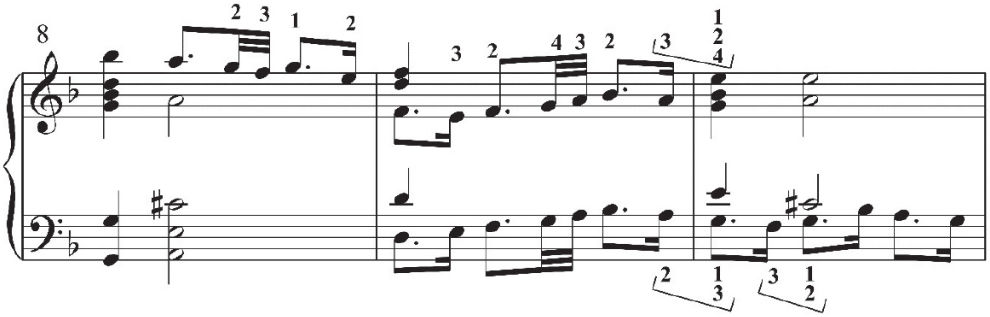
18 Bach, J.S., Busoni, F. *Chaconne in D minor* arranged for piano (Munich: Henle, 2018).

19 Bach, J.S. *Chaconne in D minor* arranged for harp by Dewey Owens (New York: Lyra Music, 1975) p.1.

20 Bach, J.S. *Chaconne in D minor* arranged for harp by Skaila Kanga (London: Maruka Music, 2019) p.1.

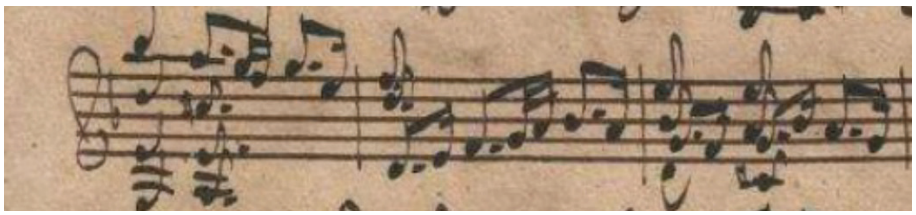
The transcription by Owens uses even fuller harmonic voicing throughout, creating a richness more characteristic of the arrangements of Bach's solo instrumental music by Marcel Grandjany[21] (1891–1975) or the *Ciaccona* arrangement by Ferruccio Busoni[22] (1866–1924).

Example 12. Dewey Owens: transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 8–10:



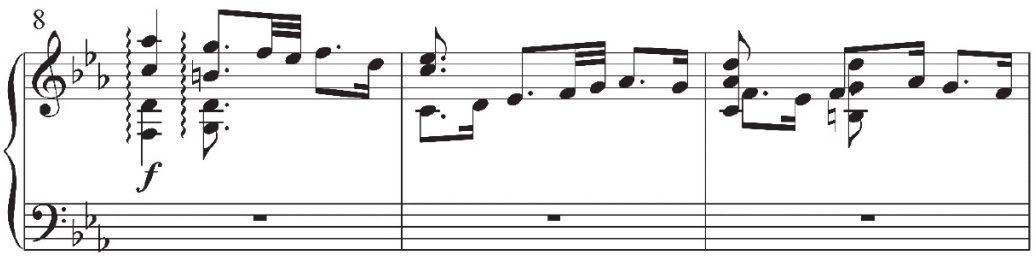
A comparison between Bach's original and the arrangements by Owens and Kanga demonstrate linear voicing using lower registers of the pedal harp, and the altered harmonic layout:

Example 13. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 8–10:



Here are the same bars in my own transcription:

Example 14. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 8–10:



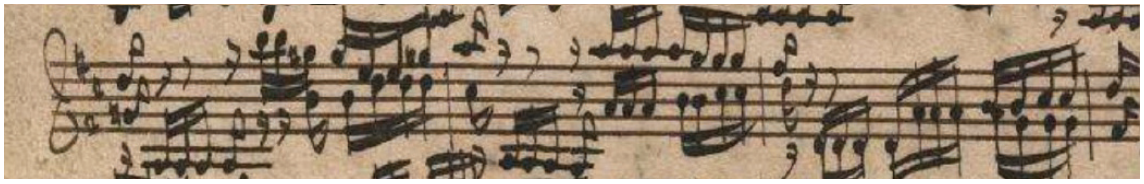
21 Bach, J.S., Grandjany, M. *Études for harp* transcribed by Marcel Grandjany (New York: Fischer, 1970).

22 Bach, J.S., Busoni, F. *Chaconne in D minor* arranged for piano (Munich: Henle, 2018)

Inherent Differences of Instrumental Character

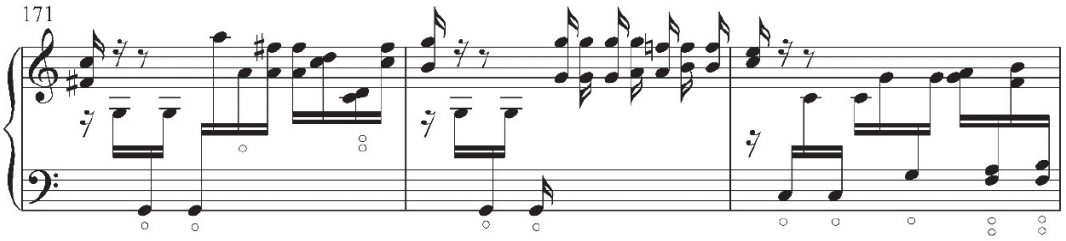
The violin yields rich possibilities of distinctive colour including stylistic repetition of notes and bariolage between strings. Repeated notes on the harp, however, and in classical style at least, are much less idiomatic. One response to Bach's arpeggio marking in the score is the *arpeggiando* combined with left hand harmonics as shown in Example 8 above. A different use of repeated notes arises later in the central major key section, in which the repeated notes this time are semiquavers rather than demisemiquavers:

Example 15. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 171–174:



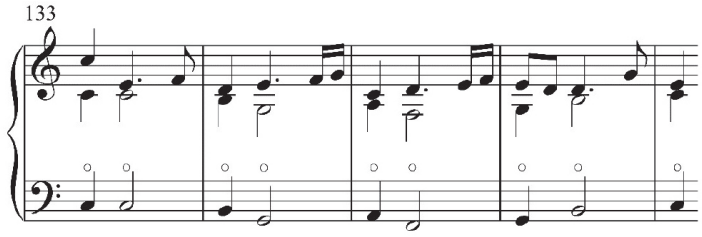
Use of harmonics on the harp in this passage creates a resonant result which suitably reflects the accumulating timbres of original.

Example 16. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 171–174:



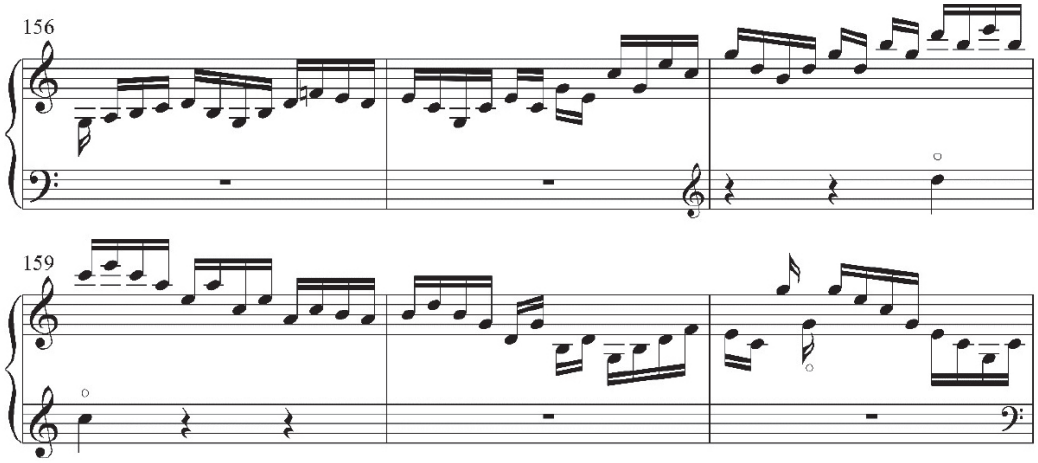
Of some concern, however, was the challenge of representing the inherent sustain in the timbre of the violin. On the harp, this is difficult, if not impossible to replicate. The harpist is required to judge phrasing and speed with sensitivity to the fading sound of plucked rather than bowed strings in passages such as this:

Example 17. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 133–137:



Arpeggiation as shown in Example 18 below is irresistible to the harpist, and is extremely idiomatic on the instrument.

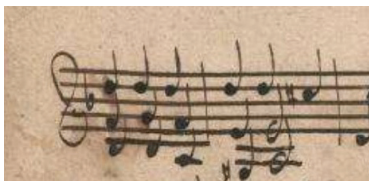
Example 18. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 156–161:



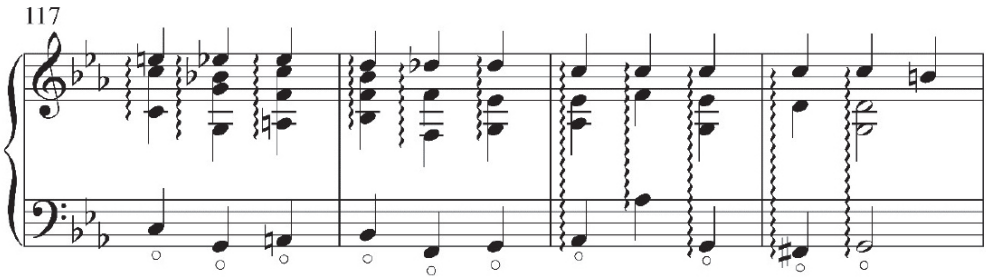
Notation of Thematic and Melodic Elements

I have endeavoured to adhere within reason to Bach's own notation of voices and rhythmic duration. The benefit of illustrating the contrapuntal voices exactly as he has written enables the harpist to enunciate different lines more clearly, and to be aware of the violin's four open strings as the basis of the original layout. This is why, for example, three-note chords are not filled in, even though it would be easy to do so on the harp. By retaining the linear voicing exactly as Bach wrote it, more of the original character of the music is retained. The following chordal passage illustrates a series of four-note chords moving to three-note chords, where it is evident that from bar 118 onwards it would no longer be possible for the violin to include four pitches in these chords:

Example 19. Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 119–120:



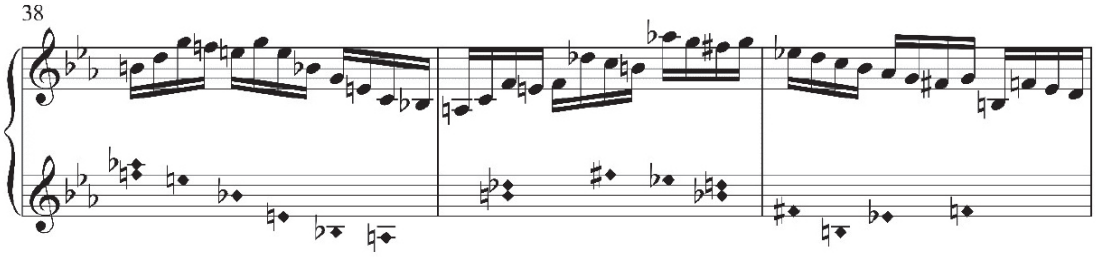
Example 20. O'Farrell, transcription of Bach, *Ciaccona*, bars 117–120:



Considerations of Levering

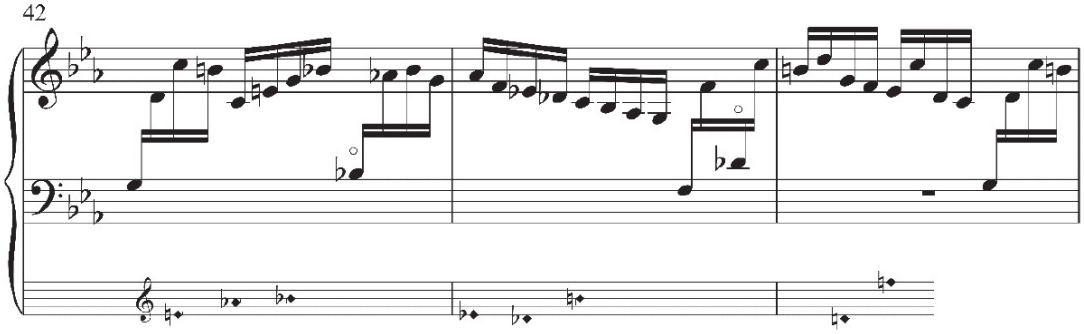
Ciaccona contains colour of many kinds, including chromatic and harmonic colour, but these aspects do not overshadow its execution on the lever harp to the same extent as in the Chromatic Fantasy BWV 903. In much of the *Ciaccona*, the lever changes are straightforward, if numerous. For the most part, they do not require ground-breaking techniques, and are possible to execute on most levers in current use. It can be advantageous for the player to examine the possibility of changing levers in groups for ease of movement, as well as convenience of memorising, but this is not essential. Example 1 is replicated here to illustrate one of the more dense passages for lever changing in the piece.

Example 1/21. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 38–40:



It is possible to reduce the number of lever changes by using a harmonic, as shown in the D flat harmonic at the end of bar 43 preventing disruption of the D natural at the beginning of the following bar:

Example 22. O'Farrell, transcription of *Ciaccona*, bars 42–44:



As ever, it is easier to change levers in groups using Salvi levers, particularly those on their Livia and Egan models, designed for recital performance. All the lever changes in this piece are possible on most current designs available, but they may require more individual left hand movements.

Conclusion

My process of transcription documented here is borne of my continuing search for substantial recital repertoire for lever harp, for pieces which not only contain thematic discourse, and harmonic interest and colour, but which also demonstrate larger structures creating more satisfying interpretative challenges. This *Ciaccona* — along with other solo works such as Bach's Chromatic Fantasy BWV903 — is in some respects an obvious choice. Its structural scale and inherent contrast of movements, together with vibrant textural contrasts throughout has made its transcription for lever harp a most rewarding endeavour, which one hopes will lead members of the harp community to greater enjoyment of this magnificent work.

A recording of Anne-Marie O'Farrell's transcription of Ciaccona is recorded on her album ***Embrace: New Directions for Irish Harp*** *(2021) and can be listened to here:* https://annemarieofarrell.bandcamp.com/album/embrace-new-directions-for-irish-harp.
The sheet music publication of this transcription is in preparation with 80 Days Publishing. https://80dayspublishing.com/

Dr Anne-Marie O'Farrell

A leading harpist of her generation, Dr Anne-Marie O'Farrell from Dublin has performed all over the world as a solo artist, accompanist and in ensembles, and is regularly featured in broadcasts. On lever harp, she is particularly recognized for her expansion of repertoire and levering techniques, as a result of which the world's leading harpmakers Salvi Harps redesigned their lever harps to become concert instruments. She has performed with numerous orchestras, including the Irish Baroque Orchestra, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, the Irish Memory Orchestra, and the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra with whom she premiered Ryan Molloy's Concerto for lever harp, *Gealán*. A prolific recording artist, she has released several CDs, including *Just So Bach*, *Harping Bach to Carolan*, *The Jig's Up*, *My Lagan Love* and *Embrace: New Directions for Irish Harp*; *Double Strung* and *Duopoly* with Cormac De Barra; and *Harp to Harp* with harmonica player Brendan Power.

She is frequently invited to give recitals, workshops and masterclasses at international conferences and festivals around the world, in addition to performance at several World Harp Congresses and has recently been appointed harp teacher at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Dedicated to the expansion of repertoire for the lever harp, she has published critical editions for lever harp of Bach's cello, keyboard and lute repertoire.

Anne-Marie holds a PhD in composition with Piers Hellawell at Queen's University Belfast and masters degrees in performance, musicology and composition. She has recently completed several large-scale commissions featuring the harp, including a lever harp concerto commissioned by RTÉ Lyric FM, and a five-movement work for large harp ensemble commissioned by Harp Ireland/Cruit Éireann.

https://www.annemarieofarrell.com