

Kieren MacMillan

Chaconne
for unaccompanied violin

(2001)



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Composer's Note

As a musical form, the chaconne has been around for at least five centuries. Chaconnes have been written for everything from solo instruments to full orchestra, by composers from John Blow to John Adams. Balanchine found inspiration for an entire ballet in a chaconne extracted from a Gluck opera.

What is it about this form that has proven so compelling, so universal, so fertile a creative soil?

First, it is an inherently interesting musical structure: it ensures unity through the repetition of a single harmonic progression, while encouraging diversity by way of the continuous variation and embellishment that happens above that repeated foundation. Like a good Cubist painting, a chaconne unveils its subject gradually, each new perspective revealing previously unknown and surprising views of increasingly familiar material.

Perhaps more importantly, the chaconne is formally rigorous and well-defined. Greater restrictions often inspire greater creativity: having chosen to write a chaconne, the composer—freed from formal concerns—can focus on filling that old bottle with whatever new wine seems appropriate.

This *Chaconne* consists of a series of thirteen embellishments over a basic harmonic progression, framed by nearly-identical statements of the principal material. Not surprisingly, it owes much to the great *Chaconne* from J. S. Bach's *Partita No. 2 in d minor*: each variation presents (more or less) a double statement of the harmonic progression; a sarabande rhythm, stressing the second "beat" of each measure, features prominently throughout; and the harmonic pattern undergoes a modal adjustment midway through the piece, eventually returning to its original mode as the work nears its conclusion.

Notation & Performance

Like many works for unaccompanied violin, this *Chaconne* relies heavily on an implied—and, in some cases, explicit—use of simultaneous melodic lines.

In notating the score, I did my best to clearly indicate my compositional intentions regarding voice-leading, musical gesture, phrasing, and so on. As a result, many choices were made for the benefit of study and interpretation, and not with the final performance as the primary concern.

While every attempt should be made to honour the note durations and phrasings as written, strict adherence to the score should never come at the expense of gracefulness and a general ease of delivery.

In particular, double- and triple-stops should be executed with an ear towards elegance, and where the sustaining of longer notes above moving lines would cause awkwardness or tuning problems, the sustained notes should simply be released at the last possible moment (however much shorter than their written duration that might be), allowing the moving lines to continue undisturbed.

Duration

10 minutes

commissioned by Dr. Jonathan Swartz

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THEME

Stately ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 48-52$)

Violin

p *poco cresc.*

mf *p* *cresc.*

mf *sub. mp* *poco f* *poco dim.*

VAR. I

mf *mp*

mp

mf *cresc. poco a poco*

VAR. II

f *mp* *cresc. poco a poco*

The musical score is written for a single violin. It begins with the 'THEME' section, marked 'Stately' with a tempo of approximately 48-52 beats per minute. The theme consists of several measures in various time signatures (7/4, 3/2, 7/4, 3/2, 7/4, 3/2, 7/4, 3/2). The dynamics range from piano (*p*) to mezzo-forte (*mf*), with a *poco cresc.* marking. The first variation, 'VAR. I', starts at measure 10 and features a variety of time signatures (3/2, 7/4, 6/4, 7/4, 3/2, 7/4). It includes markings for *mf*, *mp*, *sub. mp*, and *poco f*, with a *poco dim.* marking. The second variation, 'VAR. II', begins at measure 17 and uses time signatures 3/2, 7/4, 3/2, and 7/4. It is marked with *f*, *mp*, and *cresc. poco a poco*. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic hairpins.

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20 *f* *cresc. poco a poco*

23 *f*

VAR. III

Reflective ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 72-80$)

25 *p* *mp*

27 *mf sub.* *poco rit.*

A tempo

pressing forward

30 *p* *cresc. poco a poco*

32 *ff*

VAR. IV

With a little motion; poco rubato ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 132-144$)

35 *f*

37

39 *p* *molto* *molto*

41 *pressing forward* *cresc. poco a poco*

44 *f* *ff* *(♩ = 180+)* *(non rit.)*

VAR. V

48 *f* *poco cresc.* *sf* *poco dim.* *Quasi tempo primo (♩ = ca. 60-66)*

52 *mp*

55 *dim. poco a poco* *poco rall.*

VAR. VI

58 *p* *mp* *rf* *With a little freedom (♩ = ca. 66-72)*

60 *f*

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62 *dim.* *molto*

64 *f* *molto dim.*

VAR. VII

More strictly (♩ = ca. 60-66)

66 *mp*

68 *mp*

70 *p sub.* *cresc.*

72 *f* *mf*

74 *mp* *cresc.* *f* *molto*

VAR. VIII

Animated (♩ = ca. 72-76)

77 *pp* *sempre*

79

81

83 rall.

VAR. IX

Gently moving, poco rubato (♩ = ca. 48-60)

86 *p* *legierissimo*

89 (poco stringendo) *poco cresc.*

92 (poco rall.) *poco dim.*

94 (a tempo) (poco stringendo) *p* *pp* *poco cresc.*

97 (poco rall.) (molto) *poco dim.* *ppp*

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VAR. X

Like a cadenza; very freely (♩ = ca. 52-72)

100 *f* dramatic

103 *f*

107 *pp* *mf* *f* *molto*

more impassioned

111 *f*

slowing greatly

113 *sfz* *mf* *cresc.* *ff* *molto dim.*

VAR. XI

In tempo (♩ = ca. 69-72)

115 *p*

117

119

(non rit.)

121 *poco cresc.*

VAR. XII

Steady (♩. = ca. 69-72)

123 *pizz.*
f p

126 *f*

130 *f*

133 *poco f*

136 *f*

139 *dim.*

VAR. XIII

With motion; starting slowly, then picking up momentum (♩ = ca. 96-112)

143 *arco*
pp

145

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147  *cresc. poco a poco*

149 

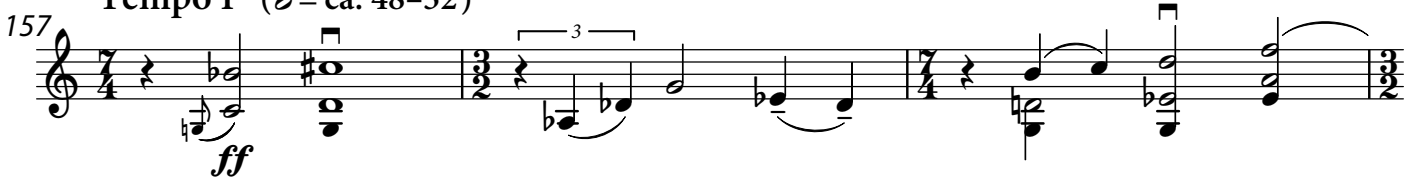
151  *mf*

153  *cresc. poco a poco*

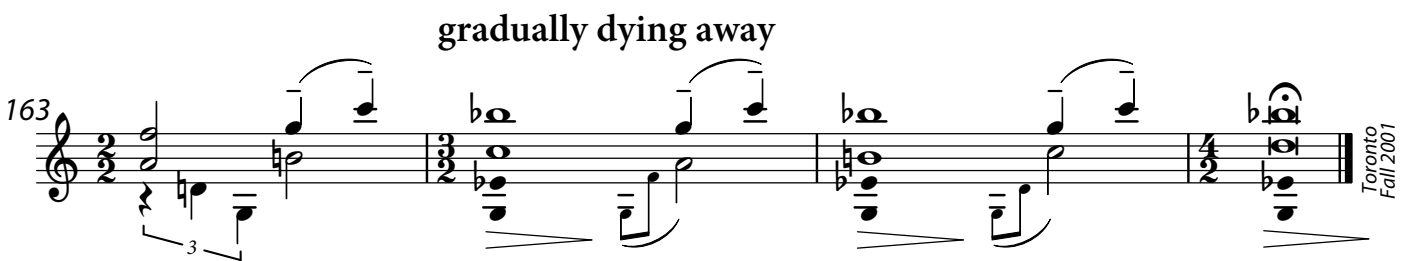
155  **broadening dramatically**

FINALE

Tempo I° (♩ = ca. 48-52)

157  *ff*

160  *poco a poco dim. al fine*

163  **gradually dying away**

Toronto
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Colophon

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