

GERHARD TASCHNER: THE EARLY 78 RPM RECORDINGS

It was a "historical concert": The year was 1841, and the program included Bach's Chaconne, wedged between the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue, played by Felix Mendelssohn, and the Crucifixus from the B Minor Mass. The violinist was Ferdinand David, Mendelssohn's friend and concertmaster of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra. The Chaconne is the last movement of the D minor partita from the *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato* (1720). It was long considered solely a technical study, as was the entire cycle of solo sonatas. 1840 marked David's first attempt to present the Chaconne as part of a Gewandhaus chamber music concert. Mendelssohn was at the piano, and according to Schumann he "rendered the original with lots of voices, making it a pleasure to hear". It might upset adherents of modern historical performance practice to see how the musicians performed the work out of context and blithely disregarded Bach's *senza Basso accompagnato*. It was a historical event nevertheless.

Ferdinand David's student Joseph Joachim chose to perform the solo sonatas closer to their original format. This tradition was continued by a student of Joachim, Jenő Hubay, who produced an edition of the sonatas for Harmonia-Verlag in Budapest (1910) that is still remarkable today. Another student of Joachim, Bronislaw Huberman, included solo sonatas by Bach in his permanent repertoire. Even around

the turn of the century, however, this was still so unconventional that a critic would surmise that Huberman had "banished" the pianist from the stage during the Chaconne because the pianist had failed him during the preceding Tchaikowski concerto.

In 1941 Bach's Chaconne was heard in a symphonic concert of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, between Reger's Mozart Variations and Dvorak's Fifth Symphony. The violinist was a student of Hubay and Huberman by the name of Gerhard Taschner, now First Concertmaster of the orchestra at the prime age of 19. In a retrospective of the 1941/42 season, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* spoke of a "genuinely musical, spontaneously convincing interpretation" and ranked the performance as "an event of unique importance". At his audition for the Concertmaster position, Taschner had deeply impressed Wilhelm Furtwängler with the Chaconne, and he now did the same for the audience. Soon the orchestra was using Taschner's image on its program covers. A 78 rpm recording was made the same month, which now makes its first appearance on CD. Our CD cover reproduces the image from the orchestra's programs.

Of course Taschner was not primarily a Bach interpreter, nor is his interpretation of the Chaconne "the" one for all ages. It is simply another historical milestone on the road from the romantic virtuoso tradi-

tion to historically informed performance practice. His career was founded predominantly on performances of the great violin concertos, from Beethoven to Brahms and Bruch, and including modern composers (archiphon ARC-126, EMI 7243 5 66524 2 2). Like all the greats, he returned time and time again to chamber music.

This CD replicates a typical program from a Taschner violin recital in the 1940s. At the heart of the recital we find a work by Bach and a major classical or romantic sonata. Virtuoso literature by composers ranging from Paganini to Sarasate follows after intermission, and the opener is a baroque work, such as Tartini's "Devil's Trill" Sonata or Handel's Sonata No. 13 in D major from the *15 Sonate da camera* (1731) with its proud opening movement. At times the *Affettuoso* was considered a solemn intrada, and at other times a latecomer's fashion march - but no one will deny that Handel, the opera and oratorio composer, knew about big musical gestures. Even Mozart, whose fifth violin concerto can be likened to an opera without words, had to confess: "Handel is best at knowing what has a big effect". Such was the case with Taschner too: He turns the four movements of the D major sonata into four atmospheric scenes, launching *quasi attacca* into the swirling final movement in its then popular abridged (or better: intensified) version from the first edition. "The Adagio resounded with celestial beauty, the final bars of the Larghetto announced the hereafter, and the Allegro was simply splendid! In these two works [Handel and Bach's Chaconne], Gerhard Taschner's imploring bowstrokes bring out every-

thing that a violin can ever hope to say," reported a critic from the Bukarester Tagblatt on February 5, 1943.

César Franck dedicated his *Sonate pour piano et violon* to his friend Eugène Ysaÿe on the occasion of the latter's 1886 wedding to Louise Bourdau in Arlon (Belgium). Ysaÿe considered it the most beautiful and noble gift, and he played the sonata with the pianist Marie Bordes-Pène, a guest at the wedding. The work was officially premiered by Ysaÿe in 1887 at the *Société Nationale de Musique* in Paris. The society was founded by Franck in 1871 with the singer Bussine and composer Saint-Saëns to promote new French music. This premiere brought César Franck closer to his first major public success.

On this 1943 recording, Gerhard Taschner and Cor de Groot captured an unusual interpretation that will either spellbind you or provoke your disapproval, broad acceptance being the domain of the habitual and pleasant. Pleasantness was a foreign concept to the young Taschner - a trait he retained into his post-performing years, when he devoted himself to teaching. The conversations he sought out with the young people around him (including the author) would start out casually, with no apparent aim, before suddenly plunging into the profound, frequently violating personal boundaries, and sometimes leading to the darkest realms of the unspeakable. He had no desire to "please", and would have been deeply insulted had anyone said: "It was nice to talk to you". Such is the case with the Franck sonata. The

violinist responds to the questioning piano figures of the opening with a casual question of his own, followed by agreement. The ensuing "conversation" is difficult to surpass in terms of its drama and expressive power.

"Franck also grew up between mountains – as did Ysaÿe", Taschner once said. Taschner was drawing a parallel with himself, since Franck and Ysaÿe both hailed from the foothills of the Ardennes range and he grew up in the foothills of the Altvater range. But there is more at stake here than just a sentimental love for the mountains: "As a child you want to know what's behind the mountains. And that feeling stays with you your whole life." Listening to the Franck sonata, one is struck by this drive, by a penetrating desire to go further and to want more. Every note is shaped and situated within the larger musical context, while the intensive vibrato pushes expression to the limit. Not just the *Recitativo* but the whole sonata becomes a conversation that draws in the listener – whether pleasant or not – and demands that he or she take an inner stand. Taschner and de Groot manage to create this space via a 78 rpm recording, while others might fail to do so via the more direct route of the stage.

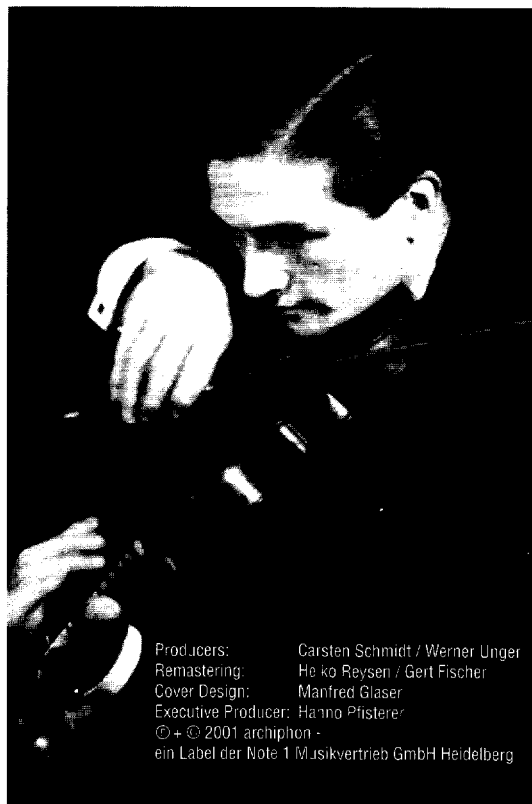
During an actual Taschner recital, the intermission would have softened the sudden contrast on our CD of the little Paganini sonata, originally composed for violin and guitar. Taschner plays the *Andante innocentamente* with a sweetness most listeners would never expect after the Franck sonata. The *Allegro vivo e spiritoso* begins the virtuoso portion of

the program. A critic who attended a 1944 recital was clearly enchanted, first characterizing Gerda Nette-Taschner as a "sure and careful accompanist" and then going on to say about Taschner: "No doubt the best part of his playing is the clear, even sound he produces as soon as he lays the bow on the violin [...] From this perspective, it was only natural that the smaller virtuoso works by Sarasate and Paganini at the end of the program would provoke roaring applause demanding multiple encores."

"Virtuoso workshop"

Such was the title of a 1912 lecture by Bronislaw Huberman at Vienna's "Volksbildungsverein", a private education institute (German title: "Aus der Werkstatt des Virtuosen"). It is also an apt description of the second (bonus) CD included here. The virtuoso pieces and fragments of the Bruch violin concerto are from the private collection of Ms. Gerda Nette-Taschner, whom we thank greatly for providing them. The recordings were made near the end of the war and were never released commercially. No one knows for certain what version the artist would have chosen for production. But they do provide a unique insight into the inner workings of virtuosity.

There is another story behind the Tchaikowski violin concerto. It was transferred from an LP produced in the United States by Eli Oberstein and released in 1952 on the *Royale* label (no. 1265). The performers: "Fritz Malachowsky, violin with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra under Joseph Balzer". These are clearly made-up identities, it being a known fact



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that Oberstein released a great deal of material under pseudonyms (see Ernst A. Lumpe: *Pseudonymous Performers on Early LP Records: An Update* in *ARSC Journal*, Vol.27, No.1). In one case (*Ring des Nibelungen*), the true origin was determined and Oberstein was sued for damages. In the case of the Tchaikowski violin concerto, conclusive evidence is still lacking, but there are many indications that the recording is actually by Gerhard Taschner. Taschner performed the concerto on April 11, 1948 in the morning and on April 12 in the evening at Berlin's Titania-Palast with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Artur Rother, and also on the evening of April 11 in a radio concert hall for live broadcast. Oberstein's pirate recording with its less than ideal sound quality thus preserves this performance for posterity. Taschner's marathon of three performances in two days may explain the occasional fault in the execution. But the spirit captured here is contagious, so even doubters of Taschner's involvement are sure to appreciate the recording.

Burkhard Braach, Januar 2001
Translation: Gary Hess

GERHARD TASCHNER

- 1922 Born on May 25 in Jägerndorf (Krnov),
Czechoslovakia
Begins violin lessons at age of four
Debuts as a seven-year-old prodigy in Prague
- 1930 Studies with Jenö Hubay in Budapest
- 1932 Accepted into Vienna Conservatory,
class of Professor Adolf Bak
Private studies with Bronislaw Huberman
- 1939 Concertmaster at Stadttheater Brünn (Brno)
- 1941 First Concertmaster of Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
- 1943 Marries pianist Gerda Nette-Rothe
- 1945 Flees to Thurnau (Franken)
- 1946 Settles in Rüdeshelm
Based on contact with composer Wolfgang Fortner,
a violin sonata and violin concerto come about,
both premiered by Taschner
Forms trio with pianist Walter Giesecking and cellist
Ludwig Hoelscher
- 1950 Returns to Berlin
Professorship at Musikhochschule
Appearances as soloist in Western Europe,
South America (1953), Yugoslavia (1955)
Jury member at violin competitions, e.g. Concours
International d'Execution Musicale, Geneva 1956;
Henryk Wieniawski competition, Poznań (1957);
Concours International Marguerite Long – Jacques
Thibaud, Paris (1957 and 1959); Paganini
competition, Genoa (1960); Concours Reine Elisabeth
de Belgique, Brussels (1963)
- 1962 Taschner's last verifiable public performance
Chooses to focus on teaching
- 1976 Dies on July 21 in Berlin



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Gerda Nette-Taschner

- 1906 Born on November 21 in Norddeich (Ostfriesland)
Student and adopted daughter of Professor Robert Teichmüller in Leipzig
Debuts as 16-year-old in Gewandhaus Leipzig under
Wilhelm Furtwängler
Appearances as soloist with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, Berlin
Philharmonic Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, etc.
Performances in major European concert halls including Queens Hall in
London (Promenade Concerts), Salle Pleyel in Paris, in Amsterdam,
Göteborg, Bergen, Warsaw, Rome, Bucarest, Sofia, Istanbul, Ankara
- 1943 Marries Gerhard Taschner. Numerous joint recitals until the early 1950s
Occasional subsequent appearances as soloist; still active as piano
teacher in Berlin (1999)

Cor de Groot

- 1914 Born on July 7 in Amsterdam
Initial studies with Egbert Veen, then with Ulfert Schults (piano) and
Sem Dresden (composition) at the Amsterdam Conservatory
Graduates at age of 18 with honors
- 1938 Professor at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague (through 1942)
Piano concertos, solo recitals, acclaim as interpreter of Chopin
Involvement with contemporary composers
- 1947 Begins international concert touring
- 1959 Malady of the right hand
Begins work as studio engineer for Radio Hilversum
(Nederlandse Radio Unie)
Performs compositions for the left hand such as Ravel's piano concerto
and modern works composed for him
- 1966 Artistic director of the Netherlands radio choirs
- 1970 Archivist in the music history archive of the Nederlandse Omroep
Stichting
- 1993 Dies on May 26

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