

Introduction

The very mention of unaccompanied violin music is almost certain to call to mind the six sonatas and partitas of J. S. Bach, works that are indispensable for violin students and lovers of violin music alike. In recent years, thanks on the one hand to the interest in early music and its historically informed performance, and on the other to academic studies that explore music's wider contexts and precedents, violinists and audiences may also be familiar with the German virtuoso violinist-composers of the late seventeenth century. Bach's sonatas and partitas build on a tradition we find in the music of Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644–1704), Johann Jakob Walther (1650–1717), and Johann Paul von Westhoff (1656–1705), and for many years scholars assumed that the music of Thomas Baltzar (?1631–63) could be included in this virtuosic tradition. Such an assumption seems plausible at first, since Baltzar arrived in England from the Continent in the mid-1650s and astonished audiences with his use of multiple stops and higher positions. However, Baltzar left Germany (never to return) well before the virtuosic violin tradition had developed, so the idea that he brought the tradition with him to England is untenable. An alternative theory, backed by stronger textual evidence, is that Baltzar adapted the virtuosic English viol idiom to the violin, although this hypothesis too, as we shall see, leaves some questions unanswered. Baltzar's surviving works for unaccompanied violin, many published here for the first time, are not only compelling, challenging, and beautiful, but also represent an important contribution to the complicated early history of the unaccompanied violin.

Biography

Thomas Baltzar was born into a family of musicians in Lübeck in 1630 or 1631.¹ His father, David, was a town musician (*Ratsmusikant*), and his two brothers, Joachim and David, were both town lutenists (*Ratslautenisten*). Since Joachim learned composition and the violin from Nicolaus Bleyer—who was the only composer in Lübeck to have written for unaccompanied violin—it is likely that Thomas also studied with Bleyer. Gregor Zuber and Franz Tunder, other composers active in Lübeck at the time, may have had an early influence on Thomas as well.²

By 1653 Thomas Baltzar was in Sweden, employed as a violinist at the court of Queen Christina. Later that year the English statesman Bulstrode Whitelocke arrived at the Swedish court on a diplomatic mission, beginning a year-long stay that involved not only Whitelocke but an entire household, including musicians. It is likely that this provided Baltzar's first opportunity to interact with English instrumentalists and to make connections that would later facilitate his move to England. After Queen Christina abdicated her throne in June 1654, Baltzar returned to Lübeck, being listed in the town records in early 1655 as a *Ratslautenist* like his brothers. His return, however, was brief; John Evelyn described hearing Baltzar in London less than a year later on 4 March 1656:

This night I was invited by Mr. Rog: *L'Estrange* to heare the incomperable *Lubicer* on the Violin, his variety upon a few notes & plaine ground with that wonderfull dexterity, as was admirable, & though a very young man, yet so perfect & skillfull as there was nothing so crosse & perplex, which being by our Artists, brough[t] to him, which he did not at first sight, with ravishing sweetnesse, & improvements, play off, to the astonishment of our best Masters: In Summ, he plaid on that single Instrument a full Consort, so as the rest, flung-downe their Instruments, as acknowl[e]dging a victory: As to my owne particular, I stand to this houre amaz'd that God should give so greate perfection to so young a person: There were at that time as excellent in that profession as any were thought in Europ: *Paule Wheeler*, Mr. *Mell* and others, 'til this prodigie appeared & then they vanish'd.³

Evelyn's account highlights Baltzar's most significant innovation in violin playing: he created the impression of several simultaneous voices on one instrument, or as Evelyn put it, "he plaid on that single Instrument a full Consort."

It seems that Baltzar was already well known, since Evelyn referred to him only as "the Lübecker." Further evidence that he was already among England's most distinguished instrumentalists lies in his participation in Sir William Davenant's production of *The Siege of Rhodes* in the summer of 1656, for which the music was performed by only six players.

Baltzar caused wonderment wherever he played. The diarist Anthony Wood, describing Baltzar as "the most famous Artist for the Violin that the World had yet produced," gave the following account of a performance in Oxford in 1658:

Afterwards he came to one of the weekly Meetings at Mr. Ellis's house, and he played to the wonder of all the Auditory: and exercising his Fingers and Instrument several wayes to the utmost of his power, Wilson thereupon the public Professor (the greatest Judg of Musick that ever was) did, after his humoursome way, stoop downe to Baltzar's Feet, to see whether he had a Huff on, that is to say, to see, whether he was a Devil, or not, because he acted beyond the parts of Man.⁴

Indeed, Roger North (whose tutor was Baltzar's colleague John Jenkins) claimed that Baltzar's playing had given the violin—formerly an instrument of lowlier status than the treble viol—a "lift into credit":

One Baltazar [*sic*] a Swede, about the time of the Restauration came over, and shewed so much mastery upon that instrument, that gentlemen, following also the humour of the Court, fell in *pesle mesle*, and soon thrust out the treble viol.⁵

That Baltzar may have, in fact, transferred the virtuosic viol idiom of his English contemporaries to the violin is suggested by consideration of the manuscript collection that contains the majority of his unaccompanied violin works (see "Sources" below): some of the manuscript's fifty-five pieces have concordances with music for solo viol and may be violin transcriptions of viol music. Even so, this evidence does not completely explain the extraordinary sensation Baltzar caused when he first arrived in England, before those virtuoso viol players became his colleagues. It is, of course, possible to speculate that his contact with English musicians in Sweden during the embassy of 1653–54 inspired him to borrow the violists' style; but this explanation again offers little help in understanding the astonishment of a well-traveled, cultured, and educated listener such as John Evelyn, who might easily have recognized a borrowed musical idiom. A closer comparison of Baltzar's unaccompanied violin music with his ensemble music suggests rather that he may have adapted his own music in three parts (two violins and basso continuo) for solo violin, quite literally playing "on that single Instrument a full Consort."

Court documents following the Restoration of Charles II show that Baltzar was appointed to the King's Private Music in the summer of 1661 at the very high salary of 110 pounds a year.⁶ In just six years, Baltzar's career had begun an exceptional trajectory; one can only imagine what might have happened had Baltzar not died a mere two years later, at the age of thirty-two. Wood attributed his death to his social habits:

This person being much admired by all lovers of Musick, his company was therefore desired: and Company, especially musical Company, delighting in drinking, made him drink more than ordinary, which brought him to his Grave.⁷

He is buried in the Cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

Sources

The works collected in this edition are drawn from four sources, two manuscript and two printed. Most of Baltzar's unaccompanied compositions are found within a manuscript of violin music held in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Mus. Sch. F. 573, which also contains works by other composers active during and shortly after his lifetime, including John Jenkins, Theodore Steffkin, and Charles Coleman. Although a number of the manuscript's fifty-five pieces appear only in this source and thus seem to be original compositions for violin, many others have concordances with music for solo viol and may be violin transcriptions of viol music.