Giuseppe TARTINI

30 SONATE PICCOLE FOR SOLO VIOLIN
VOLUME FOUR, SONATAS NOS. 19–24

Peter Sheppard Skærved

FIRST COMPLETE RECORDING
It is hard, today, to grasp the importance which the playing, music, theories and imagination of Giuseppe Tartini held for his generations and those which followed. Something of his stature can be gleaned from an account written by Ole Bull (1810–80), the most celebrated Nordic violinist of any age. In August 1834 Bull was in Padua, where Tartini had died 64 years earlier, and met a 90-year-old violinist who had been a student of Tartini. He wrote to his mother:

I sought him out, and begged him to take his violin so that I might hear him play. With the greatest amiability, he took out an old Amati. The very sight of it made me begin to weep. And then he drew his bow, so I could hear the tone through which I understood answered all of Tartini’s Method just as could be seen in the letter from the famous master.¹

The letter to which Bull referred was written to the violinist, composer and singer Maddalena Sirmen, née Lombardini (1745–1818), and circulated widely after Tartini’s death in 1770 (in 1779 Charles Burney organised its publication in London²). To this day, there is no more important piece of writing on the use of the bow, and on how to practise. The disciples of Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824) regarded it as a touchstone; they built a school of violin-playing around its principles. In 1834 one of these musicians, Pierre Baillot (1771–1836), remarked:

It is filled with details which contribute most to variety of expression than to variety of bowing, with regard to what is understood today as ‘feeling’.3

Charles Burney, who arrived in Padua shortly after Tartini’s death, admitted that much of Tartini’s work and theoretical writing was beyond him:

Tartini soars above the reach of my conceptions; and in this case I am ready to apply to him what Socrates said to Euripides, upon being asked by that poet how he like the poetry of Heraclitus – ‘What I understand is excellent, which inclines me to believe that what I do not understand is excellent likewise’.4

In the last twenty years of his life, Tartini became increasingly concerned with the theory and physics of music. He wrote major works on harmony and mathematics, the first of which, _Trattato di musica secondo la vera scienza dell’armonia_, was published in Padua in 1754. In 1750 there is the first mention of _Sonate piccole_ in a letter he wrote on 24 February5 to the poet-philosopher Francesco Algarotti (1712–64), who was employed at the court of Frederick the Great. The complete set of _Sonate piccole_ forms one of the largest integrated sets of sonatas for any instrument, and the gradual change of handwriting in the source indicates that Tartini worked on this set for a number of years, perhaps into his old age.

At first glance, the initial works in the cycle of _Sonate piccole_ appear to be variously scored for violin alone and _violino e violoncello o cembalo_. But Tartini himself noted in his February 1750 letter to Algarotti that in these sonatas, the cello (_bassetto_) part was there as a formality, or as he put it, ‘per ceromia’. Tartini noted: ‘I have played these without _bassetto_, and that is my true intention’. It is that ‘true intention’ I have followed in these recordings.

The pioneering Tartini scholar Paul Brainard wrote:

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5 Held in the Biblioteca civica, Bassano.
The whole tendency of the Piccole Sonate, as compared to Tartini’s sonatas with obbligato bass of the same period, is toward the utmost stylistic simplicity [...] – a consequence of Tartini’s recent and avid espousal of the aesthetics of Nature-imitation.6

Tartini built this idealist ‘nature-imitation’ around something very real, and very ‘natural’, the phenomenon of the ‘third sound’, or what would come to be known as ‘Tartini’s notes’ amongst violinists. In 1754 he wrote:

The 3rd Sound is the real physical fundamental bass of any given interval, and of any given pair of melody lines; the successive 3rd sounds produced by the combination constitute the true fundamental basso of melody. Any extra bass would be ridiculous, or at best, a constraint.7

By then it was clear that in Tartini’s heart the true music was that in which the true bass was implied, ‘in the air’; and so to compose music with a written bass would be a betrayal, perhaps even heresy. The eventual manifestation of the Sonate piccole was proof of this thesis, one which few of Tartini’s contemporaries were prepared to accept in toto.

What material exists for these ‘small sonatas’? In terms of publication, there is only a two-volume edition of 26 Piccole Sonate, brought out by Edizioni G. Zanibon in 1970, and there is an uninformative edition of one of these works, in D major (No. 20 in this survey), by Schott & Co. from 1973.8

There is no critical edition of the Sonate piccole,9 a situation no doubt arising from the assumption that Tartini was not a first-rate composer, or that the sources for this cycle are problematic. But they are not – there is a wonderful manuscript. This document,

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7 Tartini, Trattato di Musica, nella Stamperia del Seminario, 1754, p. 175.
8 Luigi Dallapiccola’s Tartimiana Seconda (1956) for violin and orchestra, or violin and piano, culled material, with merely cosmetic changes, directly from four of the Sonate piccole. As far as I can tell, Dallapiccola’s ‘transformations’ of these movements marked the first publication of any of this music.
9 My own critical edition will be published by Toccata Music in due course.
MS.1888, is held in the Library of the Basilica of San Antonio in Padua, Tartini’s home for most of his life, and also his employer.

The manuscript is the only substantial sampler of Tartini’s own handwriting. But what a sampler! Any composer’s approach to the page is instructive, and can provide clues to any number of aspects of his output. The manuscript of the *Sonate piccole* provides the richest imaginable array of these clues, ranging from the painstaking sequence of experimentation, composition, editing and rewriting familiar to any writer, through to the ‘white heat’ of inspiration, instrument close by, when, caught up in the moment, the composer forgets the number of beats on the bar and writes on furiously, improvising, as it were, pen in hand, until he catches his mistake, rewinds the two or three errant bars, and goes on correctly. The manuscript does not provide a ‘final version’ (certainly not an Urtext) but offers multiple routes, and renumberings (which appear unresolved), that the composer-performer developed and explored over time for himself. This series of recordings, then, is my reading of the source, an option, and I certainly do not think of it as ‘right’.

At first glance, it appears that there are 26 sonatas, as published. But the Sonata numbered ‘26’ in the source is actually the 27th in sequence. The Zanibon edition avoided this anomaly by ignoring the last sonata in the numbered sequence altogether. But even that ‘extra’ sonata finishes on page 88 of the manuscript: there are eighteen more pages, not of notes but of finished works, numerous extra movements, second and third versions and vocal material, scattered across the whole sequence of pages. Thus there appears to be material in Tartini’s hand for 30 sonatas. There are a number of entries in what seems to be a later hand, written in a compositional style which is, to my ears, different from Tartini’s. These works are therefore not included in my reading of the Padua manuscript. It’s up to today’s performers to take on the mantle of Tartini, and make these decisions for themselves. It will be noted that, from Sonata No. 15 onwards, my numbering of the Sonatas is at one remove from that in the manuscript. This discrepancy results from my use of the linking passage which Tartini inserted at the

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10 Sonatas Nos. 1–6 are recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0146, Nos. 7–12 on TOCC 0208 and Nos. 13–18 on TOCC 0293.
end of what originally was Sonata No. 14. As a result, Sonatas Nos. 14 and 15 became one extended G major piece, and the numbering, from then on, is one out.

Since the Padua manuscript bears the marks of work over time, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discriminate between work which one might call ‘composition’ and that which might be seen to be ‘performance notes’. Indeed, when one looks at a score which was clearly written by an improvising composer for his own use, it would be naïve to expect that there would be any difference between the two. There are therefore many possible ‘avenues’ through the score, partially resulting, in my understanding, from Tartini’s long re-evaluation of the material, both ‘at the desk’ and in performance. Similarly, over the years of extended study, performance, recording, and more performance of these Sonatas, my own understanding of what they might be and how they fit into Tartini’s œuvre has developed and shifted. This evolution is inevitable, and right. Music is a fluid, morphing thing, as we are, and it would be tragic were we to respond to uncertainty with rigidity of ideas. Recently, my conception of this work, or cycle of works, has been enhanced by playing Tartini’s most purely ‘violinistic’ composition, his L’arte del arco: 50 Variations on a Gavotte from Corelli’s Op. 5. Both pieces are from the same hand, the same bow, and there is evidence that his extended work on the 50 Variations and the Sonate piccole may have overlapped at times (these were clearly both works that occupied him over years, even decades). The differences between these two cycles offer a glimpse of Tartini’s sophisticated approach to violin-writing.

The 50 Variations are a masterpiece of restraint. For all their drama, and technical complexity, they stay within a narrow compass on the violin (only two-and-a-half octaves) and never leave the harmonic scheme of Corelli’s theme (not even to move to the minor). The rhetoric and violinistic approach is deliberately restricted to that which Corelli, Tartini’s great forebear, would have understood, and indeed used. It’s a strictly classicising, almost Spartan, gesture, as if Tartini were saying to his audience, to Corelli and about himself: ‘Look, I can use the laconic language of the past, pay homage to the great Corelli, and with all that, there is no limit to the adventure and drama I can access’. In his Sonate piccole Tartini proffered something completely different. The approach to the instrument, to harmony, to drama, to tonality is contained only by the reach of
his protean imagination. The *tessitura* of the Sonatas is well over three octaves, and the composer allows free rein to his invention, while also offering an extended primer into his ‘new’ harmonic system, his attempt to rationalise the mathematics and music of Pythagoras and Euclid with the actuality of harmonics (Pythagoras eschewed all the harmonics which produced the major or minor third). In these two manifestations of ‘himself’, Tartini provided the curious with a model of the human condition.

**Sonata No. 19 in E minor**

Tartini, like Mozart after him, seems to have found poignant melancholy in the key of E minor. His generation was often in dispute as to ‘whether certain keys, either major or minor, have particular individual effects’\(^{11}\) – thus Johann Joachim Quantz, writing in 1752, in refutation of Johann David Heinrichen, who, fifteen years earlier, had written that the key in which a piece was composed had no impact on its expression or character.\(^{12}\) It is clear from this sonata that, however much Tartini found E minor to have a melancholy ‘affect’, he did not allow this consideration to restrict the variety of characters he found in the violin.

The tenor of this Sonata is what one might call ‘folk military’. The whole Sonata is clearly ‘out of doors’, with trilling birdsong and imitations of hurdy-gurdy and bagpipe throughout. The outer movements[1][5] are marches in all but name, and the reiterated dotted rhythms and ‘signal-like’ gestures imitate trumpets and drums. Here Tartini was referring back to earlier writing for the violin, particularly that of Giuseppe Colombi (1635–94) and Johann Jacob Walther (c. 1650–1717), which features the imitation of brass instruments. However, the gesture which dominates these five movements is the repeated use of chordal unisons and semitones, especially the open E string and its adjacent notes on the A string (E and D sharp) – the very first gesture. This device was close to an obsession with other composers: J. S. Bach returned to it again and again in his Sonatas and Partitas – the *Fuga* from Bach’s A minor Sonata begins thus, and it returns, to teeth-jangling effect, again and again in the E major Partita. The minuet

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movement does not appear in the manuscript at this point, but is inserted (and then crossed out) at the end of Sonata No. 6 (which can be found on page 17 of Tartini's manuscript), with the instruction 'vicine 67'. My reading of this ambiguity is that Tartini had various versions of these E minor Sonatas; sometimes bringing this No. 19 (in my numbering) and No. 6 into one large piece, or inserting this minuet movement here (at page 67) between the two Allegro assai movements, as a moment of calm, which is what I have elected to do in this reading.

**Sonata No. 20 in F major**
This F major Sonata is almost entirely in two parts, although the nature of the two-part writing varies from movement to movement. In the second,[7] the technique is mostly confined to an ornamental turn in thirds, with the exception of a rare example of syncopation (at the semiquaver) on a descending line. The effect is mainly imitative, either of birdsong or of a pair of 'echo flutes'. It's unsurprising, perhaps, that this F major Sonata shares so many features in common with the Corelli Variations, which are in the same key. The use of two-part 'answering' double-stops is found in Variation 36 of that set; in addition, in Tartini's extraordinary variations the use of double-stopping is primarily two-part, in similar motion (both parts moving in the same direction), as heard here. The finale of this Sonata[9] includes a new twist on Tartini's 'devil's trill' technique; in this instance, it is not the sustained pedal which is decorated with trills but the moving line beneath the held note. In his famous letter to Maddalena Lombardini/Sirmen, Tartini emphasised the importance of practising trills carefully: 'You must attentively and assiduously persevere in the practice of this embellishment'.[13]

**Sonata No. 21 in A minor**
This Sonata begins with a melancholy minuet[10], before launching into a pair of dramatically descriptive movements, both of which are clearly set in the 'tempest' referenced in a motto from Metastasio inscribed above the second movement: 'Tra l'orror dell tempesta' ('Amidst the horror of the storm').[11] This storm at sea is depicted

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with swirling ornaments and scales – as Tartini notes between the third and fourth movements: ‘Senti la fonte / Senti lo mare’ (‘Feel the fountainhead, feel the sea’). The drama of the third movement, where there’s a sense (to me, at least) that human bravery and determination have got the better of the elements, is enhanced by the use of ‘leaping’-style bowings which violinists such as Giovanni Battista Vitali (1632–92) had pioneered. Tartini was proud of his ability to evoke the natural world. In 1749, he wrote: ‘I should say that I seek the greatest possible affinity with nature and am least at home in matters of Art: for if I possess any art at all, it is that of imitating nature’.14

**Sonata No. 22 in E major**

In 1755, Tartini’s friend and correspondent Francesco Algarotti summed up the relationship between poetry and music, which he and Tartini had discussed, and fought about, for years:

> Music produces its best effects when it ministers to poetry. Its proper function is to subordinate the mind to receive the impressions made by the verses, and so to stir the emotions [...] in a word, to give the language of the Muses greater vigour and energy.15

It may then be significant that this Sonata, like a number of others in the cycle, includes quotations from Tasso and Metastasio written above, or to the side of, the music, in Tartini’s substitution alphabet. Like the five-movement work which follows, this Sonata is built around two lyrical movements, an *Aria* and a *Grave*, which each quotation the opening lines of an aria, ‘Se tutti i mali miei / Io ti potessi dire’ (‘If I could tell you all the evil things I have done’), by Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), sung by Princess Creusa in the opera *Demophon*. It was one of Metastasio’s most successful librettos: by 1800 it had been set by over 70 composers, most famously by Mozart, in the year of Tartini’s death.

What drew Tartini to these quotations, or to the memory of them, I suspect, were the lines that he left out. The verse perorates:

se tu fossi un sasso,
   Ne piangeresti ancor.\(^{16}\)

If you listen carefully to the last two bars of the fifth movement\(^{18}\), you will hear this weeping, a descending chromatic scale, made all the more plangent by the symmetrically rising line beneath, up to a painfully dissonant second.

**Cantabile in A major**

At a number of points in the cycle, Tartini inserted ‘bridge’ movements and devices. This exquisite singing movement\(^{20}\) has a simple purpose, to move from E major to D major through a simple ‘cycle of fifths’, without his having to write an entire sonata to span the gap. Each time I play the cycle and use this ‘bridge’, I am reminded of the lost linking passages that Robert Schumann wrote to render his three String Quartets one work.

The movement is filled with an almost unbearable lightness. Tartini wrote:

The beginning of the sound that emerges shall be like breath and not a blow on the strings. This is achieved by lightness of pressure, followed immediately by the bow stroke which may not be reinforced as much as one wishes, because after the light leaning there is no further danger of harshness or crudeness.\(^{17}\)

**Sonata No. 23 in D major**

In all of the Sonatas recorded here, Tartini’s indefatigable hunger for experimentation, even for research, can be sensed. The Sonatas seem to have been written in the same period that saw the publication of his brilliant, if flawed, theoretical works, the *Trattato di Musica* (1754), the *Risposta di G… T… alla crittica del di lui Trattato* (1767) and, perhaps, the anonymous *Risposta di un anonimo al celebre signore J… J… Rousseau*

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\(^{16}\) ‘If you were a rock, surely you would weep even more’: *Opere del signor ab. Pietro Metastasio poeta cesareo […], Tomo primo*, Venice, 1835, p. 336.

(1769). Although the focus of these treatises was the relationships between harmonics, mathematics and the theory of harmony, they also posited theoretical rationalisation for the function of melody and rhythm within the world of a strictly regulated acoustic. It’s Tartini’s interest in such restriction that I observe here.

All five movements of this Sonata are based on a rising scale over a perfect fourth, either rising from the dominant (A) to the tonic (D), or from the mediant (F sharp) and to the submediant (B) and reaching out to the tonic (D) above. It is not a contradiction to observe that this is one of the more lyrical Sonatas of the set. The third movement, marked *Aria cantabile* [23], includes a poignant superscription from Metastasio’s *La Galatea*, written in Tartini’s own substitution alphabet: ‘With the new season, the swallow returns from a distant shore, and sees its nest again [cont.: ‘abandoned for the winter’].’[18]

**Sonata No. 24 in D minor**
The whole of Sonata No. 24 is built around the high D on the *cantina*, the E-string of the violin. The first two movements explore predominantly two-part textures, which at this *tessitura* produces the low ‘resultant harmonics’ that have come to be called ‘Tartini’s notes’. There’s a feel of the countryside, and birdsong, throughout, but the first movement [26] has a martial air, which is continued in the second [27], although with the addition of a slightly exotic, almost Balkan, ‘twang’, with augmented intervals in the first section. Tartini uses the insistent [2] time-signature to set up a rhythmic trick in the second half, tricking the listener into thinking that the high syncopated trills are on the beat. This moment is one of the very few places in the entire cycle that ends on a minor chord; it seems to me that Tartini gave himself that licence by adding a chromatically inflected coda to this otherwise straightforward binary movement. Otherwise, the movement is simple and imitative, consisting of three elements: a high (top D) trilling lark, a low rushing-stream effect and two-part rustic pipe, almost as if he were imagining the effect of ancient *auloi*.

The manuscript for this Sonata, which covers only two pages, is a model of clarity and confidence. It’s not designed for another player; the last movement uses a shorthand notation from bar 7, with no explanation, and so has been clearly laid out for Tartini’s own use. But it’s not a *Reinschrift*, a fair copy: only three bars into the second half of the *Allegro* second movement, there’s a slight blemish. Tartini had changed his mind: evidence of composition going on, the mind of this extraordinary man at work.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau defended the sometimes uneasy balance between Tartini’s theorising and his Enlightenment stance as a ‘man of nature’:

> If the system of the celebrated Tartini is not that of nature, it is at least that of which the principles are the most simple, and from which all the laws of harmony seem to arise in a less arbitrary manner, than in any other which has been hitherto published.\(^1\)

Tartini was fascinated with constructing a new syntax, even a new architecture, for music. He found it in the ‘extra material’, the overtones and harmonics which are the daily world of a violinist, with the instrument hard up against the face. A violinist does not only hear the sound of the violin but also *feels* the vibration, through various direct contacts – the collarbone, the chin, the hands (on both the neck and string), and on the stick of the bow. Tartini’s fascination with almost inaudible sounds is, in part, the result of this close contact, as I, too, hear and experience them for hours every day. Tartini’s later disciples sought to find ways to enhance these sounds for the listeners, worried that, as halls grew, these acoustic felicities would be lost. Pierre Baillot recommended sticking a key on to the violin, so that its rattling would amplify the effects! I am not prepared to do that (as it would damage the table of the instrument), but the extraordinary precision of modern microphones, and the artistry of my engineer, Jonathan Haskell, enables this material to be heard. We have endeavoured to find a sound that Tartini would have relished; not the violin at a distance, but up close, the grain and fibre of bow on string manifest, the extraordinary, and sometimes disturbing, resultant harmonics more

\(^1\) Quoted in Charles Burney, *The present state of music in France and Italy: or, The journal of a tour through those countries, undertaken to collect materials for a general history of music*, T. Becket, London, 1773, p. 142.
apparent. I hope that you enjoy it, as this proximity is my experience of the violin and was, I feel, one which inspired the composer.

Peter Sheppard Skærved is known for his pioneering approach to the music of the past and of our own time. Over 400 works have been written for him, by composers Laurie Bamon, Judith Bingham, Nigel Clarke, Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Peter Dickinson, Michael Finnissy, Elena Firsova, David Gorton, Naji Hakim, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, Sidika Özdi̇l, Rosalind Page, George Rochberg, Michael Alec Rose, Poul Ruders, Volodmyr Runchak, Evis Sammoutis, Elliott Schwartz, Peter Sculthorpe, Howard Skempton, Dmitri Smirnov, Jeremy Thurlow, Mihaïlo Trandafilovski, Judith Weir, Jörg Widmann, Ian Wilson, John Woolrich and Douglas Young. For Toccata Classics he has recorded two albums of David Matthews’ music for solo violin. Peter’s pioneering work on music for violin alone has resulted in research, performances and recordings of cycles by Bach, de Bériot, Tartini, Telemann and, most recently, his project, ‘Preludes and Vollenteries’, which brings together 200 unknown works from the seventeenth century, from composers including Colombi, Lonati, Marini and Matteis, with the Wren and Hawksmoor churches in London’s Square Mile. His work with museums has resulted in long-term projects at institutions including the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, Galeria Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, and the exhibition ‘Only Connect’, which he curated at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Most recently his ‘Tegner’, commissioned by the Bergen International Festival, is a close collaboration with the major Norwegian abstract artist Jan Groth, resulting in a set of solo Caprices, premiering at Kunsthallen, Bergen, and travelling to galleries in Denmark, the UK and even Svalbard/Spitzbergen. Peter is the only living violinist to have performed on the violins of Ole Bull, Joachim, Paganini and Viotti. As a writer, Peter has published a monograph on the Victorian artist/musician John Orlando Parry, many articles in journals worldwide and, most recently, Practice: Walk, part of the Camberwell Press ‘Walking Cities: London’ series. Peter is the founder and leader of the Kreutzer Quartet and the artistic director of the ensemble Longbow. Viotti Lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music, he was elected Fellow there in 2013. He is married to the Danish writer Malene Skærved and they live in Wapping.
‘a performer who has really got to the heart of this body of work. Above all he honours Tartini’s experimental harmonies, his dissonances, and his radical approach in these works.’
—Jonathan Woolf, MusicWeb International
Recorded on 12 January 2011 in St John the Baptist, Aldbury, Hertfordshire
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### GIUSEPPE TARTINI 30 Sonate piccole, Volume Four – Sonatas Nos. 19–24

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<td>26 Andante cantabile</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Allegro</td>
<td>2:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Allegro assai</td>
<td>1:58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peter Sheppard Skærved, violin  
TT 74:09  
FIRST COMPLETE RECORDING