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Article

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TOCCATAS: *SPIELFIGUREN*, VIRTUOSITY AND NARRATIVITY

SUMMARY: The term *Spielfiguren* was used by Heinrich Besseler (1956) and others to refer to figurations which are performatively idiomatic to a particular musical instrument. Piano toccatas from the 19th century onwards often feature specific pianistic figures to generate their motoric character (for example repeated notes), simultaneously shaping the musical substance. With reference to the toccata genre and Alfredo Casella's Toccata Op. 6 in particular, this article suggests ways in which signification may be thought to operate from contrasting viewpoints. From the perspective of the skilled pianist, the toccata's printed page may be regarded as symbolic of (and the sound in performance indexical to) a particular type of engagement with the keyboard, thus conveying corporeal (or haptic) signification. From the point of view of both work and performer, toccatas are usually virtuoso pieces which tax the pianist's playing mechanism, thereby augmenting the importance of the performer and reversing the usual "work > performance" paradigm. The perceived role of virtuosity in referencing death, the macabre and the sublime is also considered. From the point of view of the work itself, a toccata's tendency to depend on a single *Spielfigur* means that it will be topically limited and will not generally bespeak a complex narrative structure. However, toccatas are often cumulative with executive difficulties and dynamic intensity building as the end approaches, a feature that may be experienced as teleological, providing another, less self-referential, type of signification.

KEYWORDS: toccata, *Spielfiguren*, virtuosity and signification, narrative devices, Alfredo Casella, Franz Liszt.

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1. Introduction

This article was prompted primarily by a recent return to performing a work I had first learned several years ago, namely the Toccata in C-sharp minor Op. 6 (1904) by Alfredo Casella (1883–1947). In the relearning process, I was struck by the pattern-based pianism—here referred to as *Spielfiguren*—which, once understood, significantly aided the revision process.[1] Arguably much of the virtuoso effectiveness of the piece and its narrative trajectory towards the climactic final stages is rooted in the piano figurations at least as much if not more than in the musical content; indeed the two are inseparable, the generative piano writing being integral to any thematic, harmonic and textural material that is present. I will thus be using the Casella Toccata as a primary case-study but, with reference to other relevant examples as well, I will also explore the wider implications raised by this study and a consideration of these will take up a significant part of the central sections of this article. The focus will in particular be on the three perspectives indicated in the title: *Spielfiguren*, virtuosity and narrativity. The journey through these perspectives will be one of subsummation wherein the musical figures (the *Spielfiguren*) are, given the right circumstances, collectively seen to constitute the performance practice of virtuosity, and then together these are subsumed by the concept of musical narrativity.

2. *Spielfiguren*

In an article written for the 1957 issue of *Deutsches Jahrbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, Heinrich Besseler (1956) coined the term *Spielfiguren* to describe musical figures that were idiomatic to a particular instrument, thus chordal strumming is a *Spielfigur* for a guitar, glissandos for a trombone and string-crossing for a violin. The musical semiotician Eero Tarasti (1994) regards such figures as signs in themselves: "A certain musical figure may fit well say with the position of a hand on the keyboard; consequently the composer may choose that figure over another simply because it is more convenient for the player" (p. 55). Tarasti lists *Spielfiguren* under the Peircean sign category of icon, a category in which the sign resembles its referent, usually visually. In the present case the iconicity is based far more in the visual reality of the performer than is the case with most iconic signs in music (such as those representing fountains or clouds) where a process akin to Jakobson's "intersemiotic translation" (1966, p. 233)—or rather its musical equivalent—is needed to establish the referent. In the case of a *Spielfigur*, the resultant sound formation is so intimately linked with the players' movements that the iconicity is physically embedded. Thus, by ex-

[1] Pattern recognition is a well-known element of musical learning or relearning. As Lehmann and McArthur put it: "musical features are recognized as patterns and matched to pertinent information already stored in long-term memory" (2002, p. 144). They give the Alberti bass as an example; another is the split-octave rotatory figures used extensively in the Casella Toccata.

tending Peirce's second sign trichotomy of icon, index and symbol, it may be more appropriate, at least for the performer him or herself, to introduce the notion of a *Spielfigur* as a haptic sign, of which more below.

For the pianist, there are many such *Spielfiguren*: scales, arpeggios, repeated notes, octaves and the like, and the musical genres that in particular feature such figures are studies—one thinks of Czerny or Chopin—and toccatas, in their 19th rather than their 18th-century guise, the former often rhythmically driven by a single or a limited number of these figures. For example, one of the earliest of the 19th-century toccatas, the one by Schumann, is primarily driven by oscillating double notes, whereas the later one by Ravel (which concludes his *Tombeau de Couperin* suite) is often driven by repeated notes. Both of these, and other similar cases, bespeak a particular physical activity at the keyboard which emphasises the motoric aspect.

So how might these figures signify when worked into a composition? They do in at least three ways: 1. For general, non-specialist, non-musically-literate but attentive listeners who may not be aware of the technical or theoretical means behind what they are hearing, the kinetic force of the music, signifying the more vital feelings of energy, urgency or zeal, is likely to be felt; 2. To the musically literate and appropriately informed attentive listener, this first signification may be added to through knowledge of the means by which the effects are being achieved. Such an interlocuter will be able to "see" the hand (or other) actions required by reading the notational signs embedded in the score and can literally see them if watching a performance; 3. To the pianist-performer, added to the first two significations is the act of playing itself: knowledge and real-time experience of the motions needed to realise the score's notation, motions that will have been practised and prepared over a period of time. Arnie Cox has described this as "physical empathy that involves imagining making the sounds we are listening to" (2011). Cox uses the term "mimetic motor imagery", more specifically "intra-modal",[2] to describe the imagined actions currently under discussion but, in semiotic terms I would favour the notion of a haptic sign—one that signifies through bodily sensation. For the performer, it is of especial relevance because it can be experienced inwardly by looking at a score, physically empathised with when watching another's rendition and put into practice in actual performance.

In the case of the Toccata by Alfredo Casella, one of the principal *Spielfiguren* is that of right-hand split octaves and broken chords via forearm rotation (Example 1), rather along the lines of the figures in the outer sections of Chopin's *Fantasy-Impromptu* op. 66.[3] Another one features hand alternations (see Examples 2a and b on the following pages).

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[2] Cox uses the term "intra-modal" when the imagined reaction relates directly to the stimulus, his example being "finger imitation of finger movements" (2011).

[3] I am grateful to Simon Nicholls for pointing out the similarity. The two works also share the same key.

Example 1

Alfredo Casella, Toccata Op. 6*, Bars 1–9, Showing the Rotatory* Spielfigur

Allegro non troppo e molto deciso

sempre molto marcato

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

Example 2

Alfredo Casella, Toccata Op. 6*, Bars 102 and 145–148, Showing the Alternating Hands* Spielfigur

a)

b)

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

Both these pianistic figures, as with other similar ones in toccatas or motoric pieces generally, are used to generate momentum and energy. This may be conveyed to the first two types of listener identified above by means of what Stephen Davies (2011) has referred to as contagion, a process whereby musical representation of a particular emotional state is recognised but not necessarily shared (though it might be) by an attentive (or even non-attentive) listener. Da-

vies does not differentiate between live and recorded musical experiences and whilst it would be hard for even a novice listener not to latch on to the emotional excitement generated by such motoric means when listening to a recording, it would be even harder for an audience member to miss if attending a live performance where the pianist's physical engagement with the keyboard is visually as well as aurally apparent. Indeed, in the case of virtuoso repertoire, the visual element is integral to the conveyance of tension and excitement. David Lidov uses the metaphor of "flames leaping and dancing" (2012, p. 164) and less fancifully, Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli has noted that a "performer's expression is communicated to the audience through sound and body" (2023, p. 235). Turning to the third category identified above, naturally, for the performer him or herself, the physical aspect looms large, the need being not only to convey a sense of visceral excitement through sound but to have the necessary technical skill and dexterity, not to mention the temperamental aptitude, to convey the musical essence—of which more in the next section.

For the pianist, as noted above, the sign as seen on the page or witnessed in performance will immediately prompt a haptic response, an experiential and kinaesthetically sourced sense of how it will feel, muscularly, to play this music. Forearm rotation, required to play many of Casella's figurations, is a particular piano technique that involves a controlled rocking from one side of the hand to the other. Although not invented by him, the technique is often associated with the English pedagogue Tobias Matthay (1914; 2013) who analysed it closely and also emphasized the need for rotational freedom (that is, avoiding muscular tension as much as possible). The technique has since become absorbed into mainstream piano teaching and has been further elucidated by writers such as György Sándor (1981), Murray McLachlan (2014) and Penelope Roskell (2020). Likewise the hand-alternations can only be effectively performed if the playing mechanism is relaxed and the executant is able to "throw" each hand (and arm) into the keyboard in a seamless flow. Alexandra Pierce refers to this as "weight-throwing"—"tossed weight releases of the upper limbs […] the motions impelled are both deft and buoyant" (2007, p. 29). If a tense arm and, especially, forearm were maintained throughout a piece such as the Casella toccata fatigue possibly injury would almost certainly be the result.

So the *Spielfiguren* in this work, and others like it, act as signs in multiple ways, signifying, at one level of listening, momentum, energy or urgency; at the next level, additional visual and cognitive understanding of the physical actions involved; and, at the third level, a further haptic and muscle-embedded sensation. The *Spielfiguren* as they are used in the Casella and other toccatas, whilst signs in themselves, are also symptomatic of a more overarching performance practice: that of virtuosity. It may seem an extension too far to describe virtuosity as a performance practice—a term normally associated with HIP (historically informed performance)—but given that, in terms of piano performance, virtuosity has a particular resonance with 19th-century pianism, in particular that of Liszt,

the descriptor seems appropriate, as will become apparent. So it is now pertinent to consider this subject and its significations.

3. Virtuosity

3.1. Virtuosity as Work Property and Performance Practice

The early 19th century was a crucial period for the development of the piano as an instrument so it is no surprise that numerous methods by authors such as Cramer, Hummel, Czerny and Kalkbrenner appeared alongside studies (or exercises) by the aforementioned as well as by Chopin and Liszt. It is therefore unsurprising that the toccata as we now know it, as opposed to its baroque predecessor, evolved in tandem with these instrumental developments, the examples by Schumann and Czerny coming early on in the field. Indeed toccatas may be thought of as a sub-species of studies. Where studies can focus on any aspect of technique including, for example, chordal playing, legato playing, staccato or cantabile touches as well as on virtuoso techniques such as brilliant runs, chromatic scales and octaves, toccatas betoken the more technically extrovert side of piano playing. If a composer wishes to write a toccata the focus will almost certainly be on musical exuberance allied to technical brilliance, *Spielfiguren* often featuring prominently.

Clearly, toccatas raise the issue of virtuosity and its role as a musical signifier. It is often viewed as a phenomenon that, as a performance practice, draws attention to itself (more specifically the performer) rather than to the work in which it is featured. Jim Samson links virtuosity to the rise of individualism in the 19th century: "Virtuosity […] can be regarded as the natural outcome of the performer's quest for autonomy. It was the magnet […] drawing the listener away from the qualities of the work towards the qualities of the performer" (2003, p. 74), following on from which he writes: "[v]irtuosity presents rather than represents. It encourages us to wonder at the act rather than to commune with the work and its referents by way of the act" (p. 84). Such sentiments go back at least as far as the 19th century. Lucia Ruprecht argues that

> [n]ineteenth-century discourses on musical virtuosity can be characterised by their concern with the virtuoso as a *false artist*. Unfaithful to the composer's, or "true" artist's, will, virtuoso musicians drew much criticism for being more obsessed with their own personality than with the immaterial realm of musical imagination. (2013, p. 323)

It may be thinking such as this which has contributed to the bad name that virtuosity has, in more musically puritanical circles, tended to acquire. The phrase "empty virtuosity" [4] springs to mind, where seemingly all that matters is the

[4] The term "empty virtuosity" was used by Liszt's biographer Lina Ramann (1882) to describe piano playing in 1830s Paris.

executant's technique, the music itself being of little worth or, if it is of any worth, it is masked by the performer's ego.

The implication of such a state of affairs is that virtuosity and musical works are separable, the former, by drawing attention to the performer, somehow obscuring the latter. This may be true in the case of a performer whose exaggerated antics or facial expressions at the keyboard can be construed as self-seeking (although these are not observable if the performance is an audio recording), but if all the pianist is doing is performing what the work demands it is hard to sustain that s/he is drawing attention away from the work, since the virtuosity is embedded in the very fabric of such a work. Where this fabric is constructed, as it is in so many toccatas, by the motoric repetition of *Spielfiguren* it is more likely that by underplaying the virtuoso aspect of the work and failing to "wow" the receiver, the performer is falling short in his or her duty to that work. Lydia Goehr proposes the view that a *Werktreue* ideal is met if a performance achieves "transparency" which allows "the work to 'shine' through and be heard in and for itself" (2007, p. 232). Jane O'Dea states that "[t]here exists a large body of musical compositions whose central qualities do not include the display of virtuoso skillfulness. […] Technical skills are incidental in works like these" (2000, p. 49) and she identifies a Bach fugue or a simple Mozart sonata as examples. Virtuoso display of the exhibitionist sort is certainly not a particular feature in these cases but the expert handling of line, texture, mood and character in such music is also dependent on the technical skill of the performer, so even here, the performer's mechanical aptitude perforce advertises itself in the service of *Werktreue*. It is still not possible for the performer entirely to hide behind the work. However, in the case of avowedly virtuoso works such as Liszt's *Douze études d'exécution transcendante*, by emphasizing the virtuosity and drawing admiration from an audience, the performer is achieving work transparency more than would be the case in a performance of "tasteful" restraint. As a performance practice, virtuosity has, in the present context, some kinship with HIP, in that the attempt to reconstruct a sonic equivalence with past practices is put at the service of the work. After all, Liszt himself wrote in the 1850s that "virtuosity is not an outgrowth but an indispensable element of music" (as cited in Karosi, 2014, p. 7) and in an essay concerning Clara Schumann: "on its breath hangs the life and death of the artwork entrusted to it" (as cited in Larkin, 2015, p. 216). Likewise, Stephen Davies, in connection with the finale of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata Op. 106, believes that the technical demands made on the performing pianist are a feature of the work itself. In other words virtuosity signifies not just a performer's technical skill and a concomitant sense of difficulties overcome but an ability to realise and project the essence of a virtuoso work. In the process, this does indeed draw attention to the skill of the performer, but the one needs the other.

There is also a further signification for the live audience. Jim Samson has noted that virtuosity is a two-way process:

> Audiences shape it almost as much as performers; they mould it to their own needs […]. We can recognise already in the accounts of Paganini's concertising […] a type of listener familiar enough in today's world […] the aficionado of this or that celebrity performer, the disciple who fetishes the performer and the performance […] and in so doing feeds and catalyses a cult of virtuosity rather than a cult of the work. (Samson, 2003, p. 78)

In an article about the pianist-entertainer Liberace, critic Edward Rothstein shed further light on how this "cult" operates:

> Both then and now, in both Liszt and Liberace, the insistence on regal mythic powers in the midst of ordinariness, all this is not extraneous to the figure of the virtuoso, but part of his substance, the signs to an audience of the meaning in this nineteenth-century music, or its contemporary popular descendants […] what is dreamed of in the music is made real on the stage; what is heard is also seen. (Rothstein, 1984, pp. 25–29)

Rothstein suggests that the music's "meaning" is in part embodied by the figure of the virtuoso which parallels my arguments above concerning virtuosity's work-constitutive properties. There is a nexus of relations between all parties involved but one might nevertheless say that if, from the performer's perspective, virtuosity signifies a "look-at-me" attitude, for the live audience it signifies a "look at you" attitude, creating a mutual pact of admiration. So although as argued above, virtuosity can be integral to a work, with a sincere performance reflecting a virtuoso "cult" whilst simultaneously espousing a *Werktreue* ideal, its signification is nonetheless decidedly performer-centric.

3.2. Virtuosity and Death

There are however, other ways in which virtuosity has been thought to signify. Bálint Karosi (2014) has noted Liszt's use of virtuosity to signify a link with death, citing works such as *Totentanz* (1849) and *Funérailles* (1853, from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*). In *Totentanz*, a set of variations on the *Dies Irae* theme—*Dies Irae* being part of the Latin *Missa pro defunctis*—Karosi hears a "drama without words between the soloist and the plainchant theme, where virtuosity is central to the dramatic opposition between the piano, the orchestra and the chant" (2014, p. 8). He concludes by asserting that for Liszt, virtuosity "was a poetic rather than technical tool, essentially serving his artistic ideas of communicating emotional and metaphysical messages" (2014, pp. 9–10) and that "The development of virtuosity enabled […] composers to vividly depict individual struggle and drama" (2014, p. 12). So here Karosi is including individuality in his exegesis but he is taking the performer-centric aspect to another level. In the case of *Totentanz*, the virtuosity may be interpreted as a sign of a dramatic battle with death, the latter being essentially a macabre and destructive force to be confronted. Another example of the macabre in music is the same composer's

first *Mephisto* Waltz (1862) in which the death-figure is Mephistopheles or the devil, thereby extending the signifying field of virtuosity into the realm of diablerie—perhaps a legacy of Berlioz's *Songe d'une nuit du sabbat* which closes his *Symphonie fantastique*. Apart from the "love" episode in the middle of this "diabolical scherzo", as Vladimir Jankélévitch (1979, p. 52) characterises the *Mephisto* Waltz, it is a celebration of virtuosity or, to quote David Larkin, "an unabashed thematizing of the power of virtuosity" (2015, p. 216) and a popular candidate for inclusion in piano recitals, one with which performers can present their technical and narrative credentials, both being essential to the work.[5]

But to return to the subject of toccatas, these are natural homes for virtuosity and are rarely if ever overtly pictorial, the Casella Toccata being no exception. In the case of the Liszt pieces discussed above, there are some bespoke signifying features employed. For example: the use of a funeral march in *Funérailles*; the use of the *Dies Irae* chant in *Totentanz*; and the invocation of an episode from Nikolaus Lenau's 1836 version of the *Faust* legend as a programme for the *Mephisto* Waltz's narrative. However, programmes aside, there is always an element of "living dangerously" when a performer tackles a piece of virtuoso repertoire. This "danger" is amusingly expressed by Debussy's fictional Monsieur Croche: "There is always the hope that [when attending a virtuoso performance] something dangerous may happen: Mr. X may play the violin with Mr. Y on his shoulders" (1927, p. 22). Rather more in earnest, Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science* extolled the taking of risks: "the secret of realising the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously*. Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships out into uncharted seas!" (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 208). His examples all carry the risk of failure and death, and whilst rather less dramatic, the performance of virtuoso repertoire carries with it a risk of failure—of a metaphorical on-stage death—prompting poor reviews, conceivably a down-turn in career prospects. Despite these possible parallels between the real-life courting of death and its on-stage equivalent, the signification of virtuosity in toccatas, devoid of programmatic markers, is unlikely to embrace a more graphic index to death. However, in the Casella Toccata, the growling repeated low chords at bar 77 et al. (Example 3) which are subsequently combined in bars 92 and 98 with alternating G-sharp and D pedal notes—the tritonal "devil's interval"—clearly point to a topic of the macabre.

[5] The programme for the *Mephisto* Waltz is drawn from an episode in Lenau's (as opposed to Goethe's) *Faust*.

Example 3

Alfredo Casella, Toccata Op. 6*, Bars 76–82, a Macabre Topic*

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

3.3. Virtuosity and the Sublime

Both Lucia Ruprecht (2013) and Alexander Stefaniak (2016) link virtuosity to the notion of the sublime. As the latter has it, the sublime in late 18th- and early 19th-century philosophy

> elaborated the central belief that one experienced the sublime by observing phenomena of astonishing, even fearsome, power and grandeur, which, under the right circumstances, could supposedly overwhelm beholders' sensory and cognitive faculties and inspire a mixture of attraction, admiration, trepidation, even discomfort. (Stefaniak, 2016, p. 436)

—a sort of awe-inspiring beauty. The concept was primarily associated with nature and natural phenomena—as typically depicted by John Martin in, for example, his painting *The Destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii*. Edmund Burke (1757) explained it thus: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended" (p. 41). By a process of transfer—or "translation" which, according to Małgorzata Grajter is a "dynamic negotiation and mediation between different subjects" (2024, p. 24)—Stefaniak notes that the imagery used by contemporary authors writing about Liszt was infused with sublime terminology: "reviewers compared [Liszt] to Greek god-heroes (Atlas, for example) and powerful natural phenomena (including Niagara Falls) and reported feelings of trembling and awe" (2016, p. 436).

In a recollection of a Liszt concert given in 1842 in St Petersburg, the Russian critic Vladimir Stasov wrote:

> We had never in our lives heard anything like this; we had never been in the presence of such a brilliant, passionate, demonic temperament, at one moment rushing like a whirlwind, at another pouring forth cascades of tender beauty and grace. Liszt's playing was absolutely overwhelming. (as cited in Walker, 1983, p. 376)

Dana Gooley (2004) believes that

> [t]he sheer quantity of information [Liszt] put forth was far beyond what audiences were accustomed to hearing and seeing at a virtuoso concert and exceeded what their minds could reasonably process. Listening to him was the aural equivalent of experiencing the sublime. (Gooley, 2004, p. 47)

The above accounts tell of contemporary reactions to the Liszt phenomenon and it must be remembered that such audiences had never witnessed anything like the technical prowess, power or personal magnetism that, by all accounts, the young Liszt was able to command. So, in addition to the foregoing ingredients, novelty value may also be added. However, where pianistic virtuosity is concerned, at least in the context of current mainstream piano performance, the ingredient of novelty value has long since disappeared. Thus when assessing a quality such as the sublime in relation to the Casella Toccata—or indeed any virtuoso work—and modern performance, one perhaps needs to exercise some caution.

When Liszt first wowed his audiences with his then seemingly overwhelming virtuosity or when an unsuspecting public heard the 15-year-old Clara Wieck deliver the first performance of Schumann's Toccata Op. 7 in 1834, they may well have been overwhelmed by feelings of admiration, trepidation or even discomfort at the spectacle that was causing them astonishment. But in the twenty-first century such feats have become commonplace, sometimes even achieved by children. As Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us it would be foolish to aim for "a contemporaneousness with the author or original reader by means of a reconstruction of his historical horizon" (1977, p. 101). In any case, 19th-century sensibilities were very different from those of today and, with the passage of time and ongoing advances in technique, virtuosity has almost become a cliché.

Virtuosity may be unexceptional in modern performance and cynics may tire of hearing works such as the Liszt sonata, Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, Balakirev's *Islamey* or the *Brahms-Paganini Variations* which feature in the programmes of many an aspiring pianist, eager to display his or her virtuoso credentials. Nevertheless, if reviews are anything to go by, technical display is still capable of dazzling an audience. For example from Susan Miron reviewing a recital by Evgeny Kissin we read: "The clarity of his playing and voicing was revelatory, but at the service of making this overlooked piece shine with commanding brilliance […] technique to die for […] beauty, poetry and, yes,

unbelievable chops” (2023);[6] and from *New York Times*’s Zachary Woolfe on Yuja Wang: “playing, with electric mastery, all four of Rachmaninoff’s dizzyingly difficult piano concertos and his Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini […] the kind of feat for which the phrase ‘once in a lifetime’ was invented” (2023). One is reminded of David Huron’s explanation of how the familiar still has the capacity to surprise.

> A slamming door will typically evoke a startle [sic] response […]. Now consider what happens when you catch a glimpse of the closing door just before it is about to slam. In this case you *know* that the door is about to make a loud sound […]. Oddly you still experience a startle response. To be sure the response is often not as marked as when the door slams without any advanced warning […]. It is as though some part of your brain fails to get the message that there is no danger. (Huron, 2007, p. 226)

The rather playful analogy drawn here between a slamming door and an audience expecting but still being impressed by virtuosity when witnessing an expert performance of, say, Balakirev’s *Islamey* likewise suggests that performative “danger” and its capacity to thrill vicariously has not entirely gone away. Perhaps capitalising on this, composers have continued to add virtuoso showpieces to the piano repertoire, Ligeti’s study *The Devil's Staircase* (1988–1994) and, very recently, Graham Fitkin’s *Rapid Unscheduled Dissasembly* (2024)[7] furnishing good examples, especially with their references to the macabre and destruction. So we may still experience a certain awe at a taxing task carried out supremely well but are less likely to experience those quasi-religious feelings of transcendence conjured in the rapturous prose cited above which is, in any case, emblematic of a 19th-century world-view. Our astonishment is modified by foreknowledge but not banished, so an element of the sublime signification remains.

4. Narrativity

Spielfiguren have been shown to contribute to what I have designated the performance practice of virtuosity (albeit work-embedded) and all that this signifies. Earlier I wrote that these two areas may be further subsumed into a musical narration, so it is now time to address the latter idea. Much has been written in recent years about musical narrativity (e.g., Almén, 2008; 2020; Grabócz, 2014; 2020; Hatten, 2018; Klein; 2013), often in connection with complex musical structures and ways in which various agencies operate within these. Purely instrumental music’s ability to have a narrative function has during the early years of the twenty-first century become, in the words of Byron Almén “an established discipline, with scholars comfortably employing narrative approaches as part of

[6] “Chops” is a colloquial term for exceptional technical strength.

[7] Written for pianist Kathryn Stott’s farewell solo recital tour during which the work was premiered.

their theoretical/analytical palette" (2020, p. 170). Theories of musical narrativity have varied from the complex (Almén 2008; 2020) to the relatively straightforward as with the one from Eero Tarasti in which he posits narrativity as a "[human] competency that involves putting temporal events into a certain order, a syntagmatic continuum. This continuum has a beginning, development and end; and the order created in this way is called, under given circumstances, a narration" (1994, p. 24). Even more succinctly, Márta Grabócz defines it thus: "musical narrativity is the mode of organisation of signifying units within a musical form" (2021, p. 201).

Inevitably analyses employing a narrative method have tended to focus on large, composite works, a good example being Márta Grabócz's own masterly analysis of Liszt's Sonata in B minor (2009) in which topics such as "Macabre quest and struggle" or "Pastoral-amoroso" are identified as signifying units and which are seen to alternate and interact across seven sections; these in turn are subsumed into the narrative complex of sonata form with its usual five components (introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation and coda).

So can a toccata—not typically a musical genre characterized by multiple signifying units, complex syntax or grandiose design—be a vehicle for narrativity? According to Samson: "For the composer to prescribe virtuosity is to weaken or obfuscate any sense of an idea represented, a story told, a meaning rendered. […] The telling is destined to exceed the tale" (2003, p. 84). Toccatas are predominantly shortish pieces driven by a limited number of figures and tend to adopt the same affect throughout, so it is certainly difficult to see them as obvious channels for narrative-bearing music.

However, in terms of signifying units one can certainly identify virtuosity which, although a worldwide phenomenon in music of all sorts, in a piano composition signifies, as described above, a type of performer-centric pianism with the ghost of Liszt still present as well as, according to context, the macabre and the sublime. *Spielfiguren* are also, as argued above, signifying units, their alternation, interaction and morphing generating both the virtuosity and the musical substance. But what of a narrative structure and the drawing together of these elements into musical form? One can here turn to Kofi Agawu (1991) whose beginning-middle-end paradigm (pre-echoing Tarasti's) may be relevant to plot structure in many toccatas, because they tend to be cumulative, that is they start by presenting an idiomatic figure at a certain tempo (usually fast); in the middle, this is developed, possibly modified a little (but without losing the basic momentum) and then the end is reached, often a climax in which the technical difficulties are intensified—one thinks of the Ravel toccata from *Le tombeau de Couperin* (see Example 4a, b and c) or the finale of Prokofiev's 7th sonata (a toccata in all but name). This makes the genre seem essentially teleological.

Examples 4a, 4b and 4c

Ravel, Toccata from Le tombeau de Couperin*, Bars 1–8, 70–85 and 234–251, Indicating a Beginning-Middle-End Cumulative Effect*

a)

b)

c)

Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

Nevertheless, this need not blind us to the fact that a more formal design may also be present. In the Schumann toccata sonata form, one of the principal narrative devices of the 19th century, may be detected as it can also in the toccatas by Prokofiev and Ravel, even if only remotely in the case of the latter. The figures in Casella's toccata are likewise arranged into a type of sonata form although this is by no means a text-book example. Put briefly, this works as follows:

Exposition (bars 1–30): The introductory material features the forearm-rotation figure and scales; C-sharp minor is established; a second idea appears, extending the rotatory figure but essentially remaining in C-sharp minor. The exposition is repeated.

Development (bars 31–103): This develops the rotatory and scale figures but introduces new broken-chord patterns building to the first big climax; a fresh idea—hinting at the macabre—enters based on chordal textures within a limited pitch range; this joins forces with the rotatory and scale figures; it is combined with a prolonged dominant preparation building to the second big climax.

Recapitulation and coda (104–end): The exposition material is repeated which leads to a coda passage in the tonic major wherein the rotatory figures, the scales, the broken chords and the chordal patterns are extended and blended to form the third and biggest climax.

Because the piece lacks the strong contrasts of key and mood offered by conventional 18th-century sonata form design, this aspect of narrativity is somewhat weakened so, as hinted above, we need to look elsewhere for the chief narrative driver. It will be observed that, in terms of dramatic effect, there are three main climax points, the third being the most powerful. In this regard one is reminded of the role of high points (Agawu, 2009) as narrative markers. Kofi Agawu points out that

> a single high point typically dominates a single composition, but given the fact that a larger whole is often constituted by smaller parts, each of which might have its own intensity curve, the global highpoint may be understood as a product of successive local high points. (2009, p. 61)

Casella's toccata illustrates this depiction very well in that there are two main preparatory high points which lead the music to a crowning high point which essentially starts at bar 134 and gains in intensity as the end approaches.

This end-orientation is, as discussed above, a feature of toccatas in general but it would be worth examining in more detail how it operates in the Casella. There is a lesser high point at the end of the exposition (from bar 27), giving this section its own micro-narrative. For the performer the composer indicates at bar 27 *più f* and, in terms of content, introduces a greater degree of chromaticism than heretofore with the music moving rapidly through G-sharp^7, A^7, B^7, and F^7, a harmonic scheme that is presented four times, an octave higher on the third iteration and another octave up on the fourth, thus creating a heightened sense of musical urgency. This technique is further exploited in the development section where rotatory broken chords, frequently (though not exclusively) related by tones and thirds, are regularly featured, often in an upward trajectory, passing incidentally through many keys but without establishing a "home". From bar 62, descending chromatic scales are added to the mix inexorably preparing for the

first real high point which is reached, as mentioned, at bar 74 on the dominant of the home key. This is a tonal area conventionally related to exposition second-subjects but here it is tellingly delayed until half way through the development section, and approximately half way through the work as a whole. This means that all the major climax points are reserved for the second half of the piece, a significant element in the work's narrative end-orientation (see the intensity level graph in Figure 1). Over a lengthy tension-inducing dominant preparation (G-sharp), periodically interrupted with a threatening tritonal D, chromatic scales continue as a feature in this "macabre" passage (see Example 3), culminating at bar 102 in a powerful harmonized chromatic scale descent performed with the alternating hands *Spielfigur*, (see Example 2a) thus taking the intensity level a notch higher than heretofore. The lesser high-point preparation mentioned earlier is, after its reappearance in the recapitulation, capped by the biggest and most prolonged of the three principal climaxes (see Example 2b) in which the rotatory and chromatic figures are combined with fast-moving harmonies leading to a blazing ending firmly rooted in the tonic major (notated as D-flat major). All of this indicates a long-term goal reached, a strong sense of difficulties conquered and a narrative culmination. Michael Klein has observed that, prior to 1900, music was concerned primarily with "narratives of success" (2013, p. 19) and one could apply his thought to this toccata which, coming as it does from 1906, is still heavily influenced by a 19th-century paradigm.

Reduced to its essentials, we can in diagrammatic form (see Figure 1), plot the narrative described above, showing the overall sonata form design but, more importantly for the musical effect, the use of *Spielfiguren* and the way these are combined. For the listener, the intensity graph reflecting the dynamics and textural density, indicative of the narrative trajectory, is probably the most important feature of the diagram. The main structural sections are shown at the top, under that are the *Spielfiguren*, with the principal ones in bold. Below this are the main keys and lastly the intensity level graph.

5. Conclusion

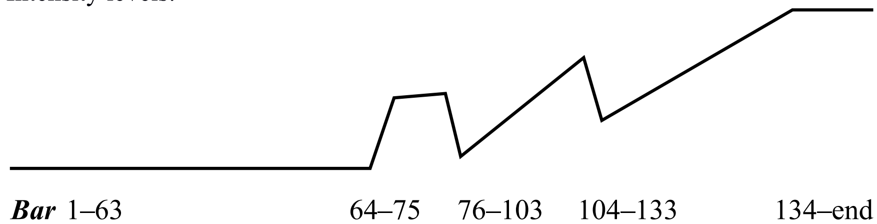
To summarise, this essay has traced a path from the identification of musical elements (*Spielfiguren*) drawn together into a performance practice (virtuosity) thence to a summation in musical form and narrative. The latter was shown to be teleological in nature and this is clearly illustrated in the graphic depiction at the bottom of Figure 1. In the hands of a skilful performer, the musical journey will bespeak a heady excitement, culminating in the coda with an orgy of sound and a definite sense of arrival and struggles overcome, a sense that is enhanced by the change from minor to major. The *Spielfiguren* and concomitant virtuosity are, along with their haptic signification for the performing pianist, crucial to this narrative journey, yielding the physical actions from which the musical energy is born and moulded.

Figure 1

Diagram showing the form, Spielfiguren *and narrative design in Alfredo Casella's* Toccata Op. 6

Exposition (repeated), bars 1–30	Development, bars 31–103	Recapitulation and coda, bars 104–end
***Figure*: Forearm rotation**	**Forearm rotation**	**Forearm rotation**
Scales	Scales	Hand-alternation scales
	Broken chords **Rhythmic chords**	Broken chords **Rhythmic chords**
Main keys: C-sharp minor	C-sharp minor C major + modulations (G-sharp pedal)	C-sharp minor D-flat major

Intensity levels:



Note. Source: author's own elaboration.

It was noted earlier that virtuosity has sometimes been understood to signify both death and the sublime. It may be unsafe to suggest that the combined effect of the elements used in this toccata signify either of these in any well-defined way although as previously noted the journey is tempered with macabre references perhaps signalling danger if not death. In performance, the advanced level of engagement with the keyboard and sense of athletic exhilaration tell of "living dangerously" (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 208) and, at the end, there is the sense of a battle won. More generally they also signify a virtuosity that draws attention equally to both the work and the performer with an ongoing tendency to "wow" audiences, despite the latter's expectations, so a hint of the sublime lingers on.

The work and the work in performance have demonstrated a crucial interface throughout this essay so I will end with a few thoughts about performing the Casella toccata, ones which may well apply to other toccatas as well. The performer needs to be a master of the *Spielfiguren*, with their demands in particular on forearm rotation and hand/arm alternation. S/he will need to be able to sustain the execution over an extended period—typically the toccata takes about 5,5 minutes to play—without muscular stiffening if the pianism is to remain fluent

and rhythmically even. My own preparation in this regard involved the equivalent of a sportsman going into training. If ever tiring or stiffness occurred, based on prior experience, the best plan was to stop playing and only go back to work once the muscles had rested and relaxed. Building up endurance this way, on a daily basis, was carried out until execution entered the stage of "unconscious competence".[8] This enabled the virtuosity inherent in the music to emerge in performance without undue effort. But virtuosity needs more than just ease of execution; it also needs projection, temperament and a willingness on the part of the performer to "show off" (or to live dangerously) if the musical exuberance inherent in the work is to be conveyed to full effect. Again personal preparation was paramount here. One way of achieving a sense of projection was to deliver practice "performances" imagining audience members in the room and their possible reaction. Using a camcorder to video a studio performance was another useful strategy giving me something to perform to and then to analyse. And finally, before taking the work on stage, performing to a critical listener and receiving feedback was of immense value. Technical mastery and virtuoso exhibitionism will however be less telling if these elements are not subsumed into the musical/performative narrative. Observing dynamic markings, yielding high as well as low points, undoubtedly aids the acoustic plot portrayal but attention especially to the three climax points identified above is vital for the teleology to be clearly communicated. So when the performer reaches bar 74 it would be as well for him or her to hold something in reserve for the next climax and then, at bar 102, to have still more in reserve for the ultra-climactic coda where all the metaphorical stops can be pulled out. To achieve this, one strategy I used in my own practice was consciously to underplay the two lesser climaxes and then play out in the third one. The next stage was to add a little more to the second one and finally to project the necessary gradations. A sense of ultimate arrival and conquest was thus more likely to be communicated to the listener. As already mentioned, Jim Samson averred that, with virtuosity, "the telling is destined to exceed the tale" (2003, p. 84). However I would contend, in the case of this toccata and probably others too, that whilst the telling is important, so is the tale told!

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[8] Noel Burch's Conscious Competence Learning Model (1970) identifies four learning stages from "unconscious incompetence" through "conscious incompetence" and "conscious competence", thence to "unconscious competence" whereby acquired skills can be taken for granted and no longer need be the focus of attention (Swart, 2022).

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