

## **A New Viola Arrangement of Old Baroque Music**

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Johann Hieronymus Kapsberger, or Giovanni Girolamo as he was known in Italy, was most likely born around 1580 in Venice. His father was a Colonel of the Imperial House of Austria settled in Venice. Later in his life, J. H. Kapsberger moved to Rome where he worked amongst the higher Papal circles. Apart from his marriage in 1609, little else is known about his life.

Kapsberger was known as “Il Tedesco della tiorba” (The German of the theorbo) being an acknowledged virtuoso on lute and theorbo. He is generally regarded as one of the composers bridging the late renaissance and early baroque periods. In 1604, one of his earlier works was published called “Libro I d’involutura di chitaronne” (Book I of tablature for chitaronne). This book immediately showed that his music was, on more than one level, very innovative for that time. Firstly, rather than using the lute or theorbo as an accompanying bass instrument, the pieces in this collection use them as a solo instrument. As a result this collection early on was already considered as one of the most successful Italian works for plucked string instruments. Secondly, the music frequently does not follow the usual rules of counterpoint. This is most likely why, after over 400 years, Kapsberger’s music still feels very expressive and full of musical tension to us.

This musical tension becomes especially apparent in the six toccatas of the “Libro I d’involutura di chitaronne”, of which the Toccata Arpeggiata is probably the best known one. Toccatas (from the Italian “toccare”, to touch) are virtuosic instrumental compositions made to show off the performer’s “touch”, often with an improvisatory character. With these toccatas, Kapsberger contributed to the development of arpeggio styles using small chromatic changes to add to the musical tension. Toccata Arpeggiata’s score is written in full chords adapted to the plucked stringed instruments (tablature). The performer is expected to improvise using rhythm, optional bass notes, tempo and even the order of the notes. This has resulted in very different musical visions of this piece up until this day: slower romantic interpretations contrasting with fast and nearly country-western-like performances, all to be found on the internet.

Arpeggios, where a melody is hidden among a sequence of broken chords often accompanied by a bass line, are frequently used in music for string instruments. Famous of course are the arpeggios in the Chaconne from Partita no 2 BWV 1004 from J. S. Bach. Although arpeggios might easily be associated with baroque music, they are still used in contemporary compositions e.g. by Gavin Bryars and Philip Glass, where arpeggios contribute to a meditative feeling by repetition as often found in minimal music. Given the wide use of arpeggios in string instrument music, it was surprising that a link between Kapsberger’s Toccata Arpeggiata and string instruments could not be found. Although an arrangement of this piece for violin might be a first thought, the result would change the character of the Toccata significantly caused by the sharper, higher sound of the violin compared to theorbo or lute as well as the impossibility of playing the original bass notes on violin. The viola, however, with its more rounded sound and lower range is perfect for performances of Toccata Arpeggiata, staying close to its original atmosphere. In addition, the wider dynamic range of the viola and other bowed string instruments, compared to many plucked string instruments, may contribute a better experience for 21st century people, providing the expressive style originally recommended by Kapsberger in his introduction to “Libro I d’involutura di chitaronne”.

If you would like to listen to Toccata Arpeggiata on viola, please go to:

<https://youtu.be/7OU516iRoGY>.

Sheet music is available on:

<https://www.scoreexchange.com/scores/550235.html>