

Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* continue to inspire and fascinate modern violinists, particularly for their unique use of scordatura. **Elena Chernova-Davis** examines these cryptic 17th-century masterpieces



The 15 Mysteries and Virgin of the Rosary, by an unknown Dutch artist, c.1515–20

A RIDDLE INSIDE AN ENIGMA

The Bohemian–Austrian composer and violinist Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644–1704) was a trailblazer whose groundbreaking violin writing – high positions, polyphonic texture, daring tunings – reshaped the violin's expressive potential. His works remain a cornerstone of Baroque virtuosity and spirituality, replete with theological symbolism, Jesuit-influenced naming and a mischievously cryptic personality.

While Biber's *Mystery Sonatas*, also known as the *Rosary Sonatas* – comprising 16 works – remain his most iconic creation, the circumstances of their composition is a mystery in itself. The title and dating (between 1670 and 1687) are a result of tradition and scholarly reconstruction. The collection likely

grew over several years, drawing on devotional images and symbolic tuning to serve both musical and spiritual ends.

The name of the collection derives from the contents of the only extant manuscript copy, held at the Bavarian State Library in Munich. It is undated and missing its title page, but each of the first 15 works (for violin and continuo) is prefaced by a copperplate engraving illustrating one of the 15 mysteries of the original Catholic rosary meditation cycle. These mysteries – and, by extension, the sonatas themselves – may be grouped into three thematic groups: the Joyful Mysteries – focused on early events in the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary; the Sorrowful Mysteries – centred on Christ's Passion and the Crucifixion; and the Glorious Mysteries – depicting the

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Resurrection and events following it. The final solo Passacaglia of the cycle does not align with any of the 15 rosary mysteries; it is prefaced by an ink drawing of the guardian angel St Michael (for the 16 engravings, see figures 2–4 on the following pages). Scholars have suggested that it may have been a late addition to the set connected to the new Feast of the Guardian Angels, which was added to the church calendar around that time.

The Italian term *scordatura* translates as ‘mistuning’, and refers to the non-standard tuning of an instrument. Scordatura first appeared in the early 16th century and was used by Italian lutenists before becoming one of the central technical features of violin playing. It was typically notated in one of two ways. In the first method, examples of which are extremely rare, the composer would simply write the desired pitches and it would be left to the performer to determine how to execute them on their instrument. The second method, which later became common practice, was for the violin to be treated as a transposing instrument and the music notated so that the fingerings remain the same as if they were notated in the standard tuning by 5ths. In both methods, the desired scordatura was usually indicated either at the beginning, as is the case in the *Mystery Sonatas*, or at the end of the piece.

Composers such as Biber used scordatura to facilitate playing difficult intervals, to alter the timbral characteristics of an instrument, to explore alternative harmonic possibilities, to imitate other instruments, to emphasise particular keys and to increase projection – often all at the same time. A total of 14 scordaturas are used by Biber in his 16 *Mystery Sonatas*, with two of the pieces (the first and last) employing normal tuning (see **figure 1**).

SONATAS NOS.1–5: THE JOYFUL MYSTERIES

The *Mystery Sonatas* begin with the normal, universally adopted tuning of perfect 5ths. In his *L'art du violon* (1834), Pierre Baillot describes the quality of the tuning by perfect 5ths as ‘Simplicity... Richness’ (see **example 1**). By choosing to begin and end the *Mystery Sonatas* in the same tuning, Biber frames the set as a whole and gives a reference point against which the other tunings may be compared.

The transformation of the violin begins in Sonata no.2, ‘The Visitation’, where the effect of tuning the two lower strings up a whole tone brings a higher level of energy to the sound.



EXAMPLE 1 Sonata no.1, ‘The Annunciation’, bars 13–17, demonstrating the fullness and evenness of the normally tuned violin

The greater resonance of the A3–E4–A4–E5 octaves underlines the key of A major and highlights the optimistic quality of the music. In Sonata no.3, ‘The Nativity’, a strained bass timbre, where both the G and D strings are raised two whole tones to B3 and F#4, combines with a greatly muted top register to reverse the natural qualities of the strings. The tense tuning of this sonata outlines the main notes of B minor – the key historically associated with sorrow and introspection. Biber’s approach aligns with a long tradition in Christian art which incorporates symbols of suffering in scenes of Christ’s birth including visual elements like the Virgin Mary posed in mourning, crucifixion symbols near the infant Christ, and juxtapositions of nativity and Passion imagery in the same work.

In Sonata no.4, ‘The Presentation in the Temple’, the scordatura is much more relaxed than in the previous sonata. Biber instructs the player to move the G string up but also limits its usage; in fact, the few notes provided for the lowest string may be played without the retuning of the string at all. However, the lowered tuning of the top string results in a loss of colour in the instrument as a whole. James Clements (in his 2002 PhD thesis) emphasises the connection between the tuning and the subject: ‘The scordatura used here, a, d’, a’, d’’, is one of the ▶



FIGURE 1 Biber's required violin tunings for the 16 pieces in the set of *Mystery Sonatas*



FIGURE 2 The five engravings accompanying the Joyful Mysteries cycle of the *Mystery Sonatas* on the manuscript held at the Bavarian State Library, Munich (l-r) 'The Annunciation', 'The Visitation', 'The Nativity', 'The Presentation in the Temple', 'The Finding in the Temple'

most resonant tunings in the set and evokes the resonant Temple in which the Presentation took place.'

In the last sonata representing the Joyful Mysteries, 'The Finding in the Temple', the euphoric mood continues with a move to a scordatura that is even more decisively rooted in A major. The colour created by this scordatura is like that of Sonata no.3 but less intense, as the bottom two strings are raised by only one whole tone. The reason for choosing this particular scordatura in the last movement perhaps lies in relating the tuning to the subject, where the brightness of the key reflects the ease and youth of Jesus speaking to the elders.

SONATAS NOS.6–10: THE SORROWFUL MYSTERIES

The Sorrowful Mysteries open with Sonata no.6, 'The Agony in the Garden', in a tuning where the bottom two strings are raised by a semitone and the top two are lowered by a whole tone. Biber uses the muted atmosphere created by this scordatura to establish the beginning of this new cycle within the set and to underline the shift in the nature of the subject matter by portraying the interior suffering of Jesus.

The tunings of the next two sonatas, 'The Scourging' and 'The Crowning with Thorns', are quite similar to each other and to that of Sonata no.3, but much more extreme. In these two sonatas the bottom G string is moved up by not just two whole tones, but by two whole tones and a semitone, and three whole tones and a semitone respectively. With such tension in the bottom register of the instrument, the top range loses much of its strength. The scordatura of these sonatas is clearly uncomfortable and punishing for the instrument – very appropriate to the subject of the physical punishment of Jesus. Although these mostly light and cheerful sonatas seem musically disassociated with their subject matter, their painful nature is expressed through the scordaturas.

The last two sonatas of the Sorrowful Mysteries are much freer in the scordatura manipulations. In Sonata no.9, 'The Carrying of the Cross', the bottom strings are raised up to C4 and E4, creating a tuning less intense than those of nos.7 and 8.

THE SCORDATURA IS CLEARLY UNCOMFORTABLE AND PUNISHING FOR THE INSTRUMENT

The muted top register brings a covered, sorrowful atmosphere, effectively depicting the continued suffering of Jesus. In Sonata no.10, 'The Crucifixion', Biber nearly returns to normal tuning, as if in expectation of the coming relief from all sorrows.

SONATAS NOS.11–15: THE GLORIOUS MYSTERIES

By finishing the tenth sonata in G minor and opening the eleventh in G major, Biber emphasises the shift in the subject and mood between the Sorrowful and Glorious cycles, much like the shift between the Joyful and Sorrowful ones. This first sonata of the last five mysteries, 'The Resurrection', comes with an innovative scordatura completely unique in the violin repertoire and represents one of the most profound intersections of musical ingenuity and religious symbolism effected by Biber. The tuning of this sonata requires the performer to switch the placement of the two middle strings without changing their positions on the tailpiece and pegs. The tuning creates pairs of adjacent open strings in octaves, allowing the performer to play octaves by pressing just one finger across the strings. Owing to the middle strings being in contact with each other in this scordatura, their vibration is reduced, allowing for clearer echo passages – such as that which begins in bar 18 of the first movement of 'The Resurrection' – and the enhanced sympathetic resonance of the outer strings for the pedal effect. Although they're not visible to the audience, the cross shapes created by switching strings are spiritually significant for the performer – reinforcing devotional intent. ▸



FIGURE 3 The five engravings on the manuscript accompanying the Sorrowful Mysteries cycle (l-r) 'The Agony in the Garden', 'The Scourging', 'The Crowning with Thorns', 'The Carrying of the Cross', 'The Crucifixion'

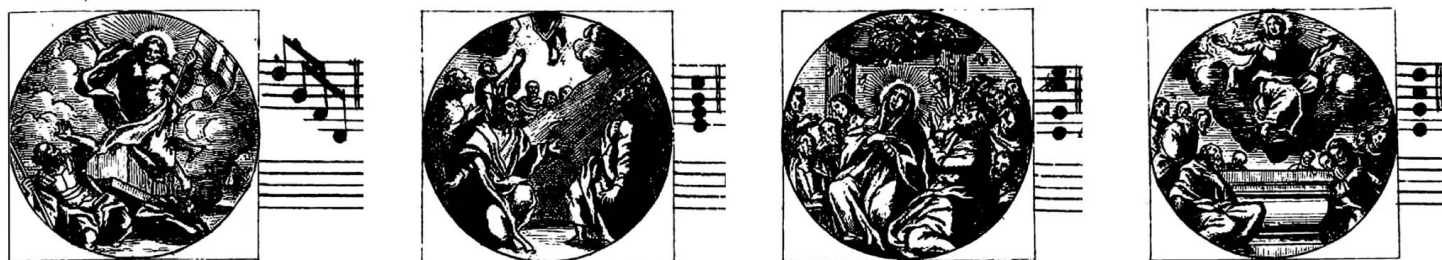


FIGURE 4 The six engravings accompanying the Glorious Mysteries cycle and the Passacaglia (l-r) 'The Resurrection', 'The Ascension', 'The Descent of the Holy Ghost', 'The Assumption of the Virgin', 'The Coronation of the Virgin', 'The Guardian Angel St Michael'

The tuning of C major in Sonata no.12 is a deliberate choice that reflects the subject of the sonata – 'The Ascension'.

Clements writes: 'The bright mode with its exuberant resonance used in combination with fanfare-style trumpet music is used in Biber's mass settings to accompany the text *'et ascendit'*. It would have been a recognised symbol in 17th-century Salzburg for the Ascension, and has a parallel in contemporary art.'

The A major chord scordatura of Sonata no.13, 'The Descent of the Holy Ghost', empowers the projection and responsiveness of the strings across all registers. It enables the performer not only to play with ease the 3rds and 6ths that appear frequently in this sonata, but also to execute the technically challenging up-bow staccato, owing to the greater liveliness in the strings (see **example 2**). Not only is this facilitation of technical challenges practical, but also it enables greater potential for creativity in depicting the subject of the sonata. According to Eric Chafe (1987), 'Almost certainly the rapid 3rds and 6ths of Sonata XIII depict the great wind of Pentecost.'

The relaxation in the tension of tuning seen after the Eighth Sonata occurs once more in Sonata no.14, 'The Assumption of the Virgin', where Biber prescribes a tuning with the bottom register to be raised a whole tone higher, the top E brought a whole tone down, and the A string left tuned normally. In his PhD thesis (2008), Daniel John Edgar describes the effect of this scordatura thus: 'This creates a particularly delicate, flute-like tone quality in the treble register which, while still able to project, has a characteristically graceful lightness.' The atmosphere created by this scordatura elegantly portrays the graceful motion of Mary's elevation as she is surrounded by clouds, much as it is depicted in the engraving accompanying the piece.

The final sonata of the Glorious cycle, 'The Coronation of the Virgin', uses a scordatura unlike any of the others, with three strings moved down and none raised. The muted effect that results from losing so much tension expresses the unearthly,

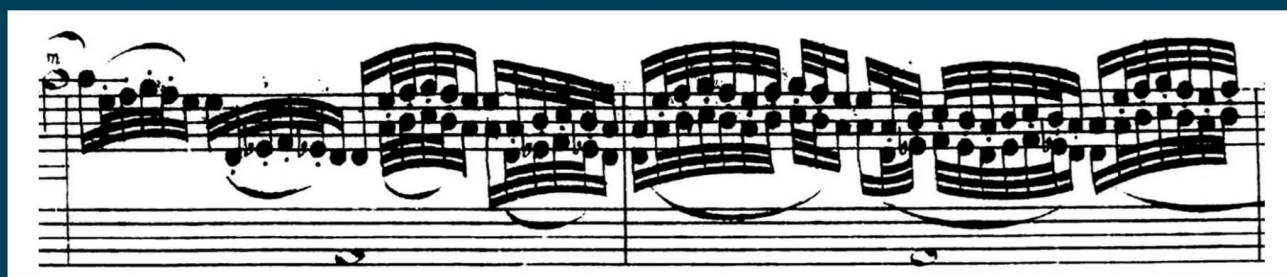
elevated tone of the subject matter. This further relaxation of scordatura serves as a bridge to the final Passacaglia and the return to normal tuning.

PERFORMANCE CHOICES – ONE VIOLIN, OR SEVERAL?

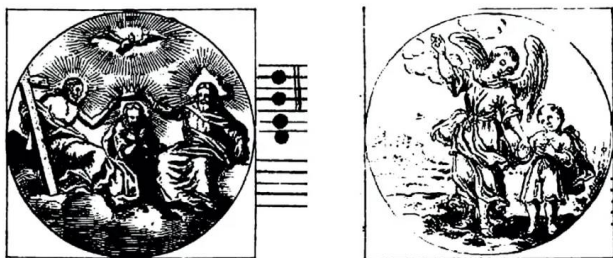
Given the importance of the various scordatura tunings and the unique colours and timbres they create, the violinist is left with the uneasy task of deciding on the number of instruments to use for performance. Although using different instruments for each tuning might seem more practical and desirable, a compelling case can be made for using a single violin.

All violins have their own unique and individual basic sound. As instruments respond quite differently from each other when subjected to the changes of tension caused by a scordatura, the continuity of a single instrument would better represent the subtle and drastic changes in timbre that occur through the course of the *Mystery Sonatas*. The use of a single instrument is also more suited to the musical concept of the set, reflecting the dramatic arc of the sonatas in the changes in sonority as it gradually progresses through the various tunings. Edgar notes that the function of the violin here is that of a narrator, and if the performer chooses to use one violin and a single set of strings, 'The physical changes brought about by the scordaturas are emphasised and enable the violin to experience the events it describes.'

THE VIOLINIST IS LEFT WITH
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EXAMPLE 2 Sonata no.13, 'The Descent of the Holy Ghost', bars 48–50 showing a passage featuring up-bow staccato (from the manuscript held at the Bavarian State Library, Munich)



ARCH FORM, CHIASMUS AND SYMMETRY

Biber uses scordatura not just as a device to facilitate technical difficulties but also as an expressive tool to explore new sonorities. He arranges his tunings carefully, using the progression of string tension and release as a formal device to bring all 16 pieces together as a unified set. The central sonata of each of the three cycles (Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious) reaches the peak of tension in the tunings of that cycle, and the overall central Sonata no.8 possesses the scordatura with the highest tension of all the sonatas. These centralities within the cycles, the capstone of Sonata no.8 in the set as a whole and the contrasts between the sonatas at the meeting points of the cycles all lend a graceful arch to the set's form as well as a continuity to the dramatic structure of the narrative.

Biber uses the Cross symbol, known in rhetoric as chiasmus, as a central motif interwoven throughout the *Mystery Sonatas*. The relationship between music and rhetoric, rooted in classical traditions such as those of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, serves as an essential framework for understanding how these works convey not just emotional but also theological and philosophical meaning.

In the *Mystery Sonatas*, jagged, leaping zigzag structures in the music, reflecting the shape of the Greek letter x or the Z-shape representing the z of *Kreuz* (German for 'cross'), appear frequently in dramatic descending figures, octave leaps and other visual shapes such as the crossed inner strings of the scordatura in Sonata no.11. These phenomena are not just stylistic flourishes but are deeply tied to the Christian theological narrative of Christ's life. The use of these gestures at key points – such as in 'The Carrying of the Cross', 'The Crucifixion' and



EXAMPLE 3 How Biber's choice of notes on the staff reflects the shape of the cross: a) Sonata no.9, 'The Carrying of the Cross', bars 1-3; b) Sonata no.10, 'The Crucifixion', bars 1-2; c) Sonata no.11, 'The Resurrection', bars 1-2

BIBER ARRANGES HIS TUNINGS CAREFULLY USING THE PROGRESSION OF TENSION AND RELEASE AS A DEVICE TO BRING ALL 16 PIECES TOGETHER AS A UNIFIED SET

'The Resurrection' sonatas – emphasises pivotal moments of the Christian narrative while inviting a deeper reflection on the spiritual symbolism of the Cross (see **example 3**).

This use of chiasmus, both musically and symbolically, also creates a structural symmetry that aligns with the Christian significance of the cross. Biber employs the chiastic gesture at the start of the first sonata as well as at the end of the final Passacaglia, framing the arch of the form with a subtle elegance (see **example 4**).

Biber's clear intention is that performers with trained ears and deep musical understanding of the material should find expressive ways to bring out these rhetorical figures. These connections between the visual, aural and intellectual representations of the cross offer unique opportunities for a multilayered approach to both the performance and the understanding of the work. The *Mystery Sonatas* become not just an intellectual or theological exercise but an interactive one, where performer and listener engage in a dynamic exchange of meaning.



EXAMPLE 4 Biber's use of chiasmus to frame the whole set of *Mystery Sonatas*, creating a symmetry: a) Sonata no.1, 'The Annunciation', bars 1-2; b) Passacaglia, bars 130-2

Publishing sonatas in a set was not a new idea in the 17th century. Collections of sonatas by composers such as Dario Castello, Biagio Marini, Giovanni Antonio Pandolfi Mealli and Marco Uccellini exist and played a significant part in the development of the form, but they did not incorporate the same level of symbolic narrative and technical experimentation as those by Biber. These composers also did not make a special effort to tie the separate works together, or to organise their sets with an overarching structure. Thus Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* are unique and revolutionary in their intense programmatic character and extensive use of scordatura. ●