

"The scale passages alone can cause difficulty, but since the work was designed for the 5th tuning we have advantages over the guitar. I would say the extreme difficulty is for the right hand; to be utterly precise in such a work you have to have diabolical control over your right hand. Most of the runs are picked; very little is picked out with the left hand. Whatever you do with the mandolin, in the main, if it's a succession of fast notes, they have to be made by up and down strokes—completely matching. So the intimate detail of the right hand in the Chaconne is beyond compare. And you'll notice that the chords are played in a struck fashion—as they're written—but much closer to the block form than you can ever get out of a fiddle. The struck chord with a mandolin can be almost instantaneous."

Don't you think Bach would have enjoyed the Chaconne played on the violin, I asked. "I think not" replied Hugo, "and look at this; this here's an arrangement for violin and look at the tempo marked; it says allegro, and it's in four four. But you can't play it allegro, you play it adagio—and in eight eight. No, I find the unaccompanied partitas for violin a mockery because they can't be performed properly on the violin . . . that terrible scraping of the chords. And whether the proper bow is used or not all four notes are required to be played together and there's nothing in the music to allow the fingers to change. I say that Bach must have written them with his tongue in cheek. "I'll write the music for you—happily, but none of you will be able to play them as they should be played." Exactly the same with the cello—it's a diabolical noise. In my opinion Bach was so precise in his writing for organ and so on that there is no chance for error.

"Another thing which I would condemn various fiddlers for is the diabolical liberties they take with the tempo. I'm dead sure Bach wouldn't allow it. It isn't a precise tempo you begin and end with, it's the interrelation of tempo throughout the piece. Because it's convenient for some fiddlers to express more they take more and more time and they wildly distort the writing. But we are talking about precision—which is the first aim. Now I have to unbend because I don't want to sound dogmatic. Where you can afford to pull out of it and give a beauty and artistry. Okay, but you've had to break the rules straight away. But any exaggeration because of the difficulties of playing is right out—and if you're talking about the Masters, you must not distort them."

I asked Hugo how he tackles a new work: "The mystery is there in front of you, any composition, any series of notes is a mystery until you begin to unravel it. You very soon see which are your difficult points, any musician does, they probably don't overcome them in the first hour of practice. They envisage the whole thing as total—or if the thing is so difficult they use it as an exercise, brush it to one side until one day they can achieve the whole thing. If one looks at a Bach work one looks at it with the view that maybe in the very last days of your existence you're going to make it. And if you can make it in public so much the better; you've justified your existence, your study and doing a transcription of it. So in a work like the Chaconne I would take a long time listening to various fiddlers making it and then I would suddenly make up my own mind how it should be, and I would use that. Last year I gave a performance of the Chaconne and I thought nothing of putting one hundred hours study in it, to make sure that there were no gaps, loopholes, or anything incorrect; and that's all for a piece that I had studied twenty-three years ago."

My favourite country players all playing flat-backed mandolins I had often wondered about the virtues of the round-backed mandolin. On this Hugo was emphatic: "I've never seen a round-backed fiddle and if I did I wouldn't think much of the player. So if I hear a flat-backed mandolin I don't think much of the player. They use the same pitch but that's as far as it goes. Traditionally the mandolin has the round bowl—call it an off-shoot of the rebec or what you will—and this hollow shape inside causes this fundamental sound; and I prefer it to any other sound. I've heard all forms of sound in music and whereas I love them all my love is still more, unbelievably more, for the sound of the mandolin. Hearing all those other instruments hasn't unconvinced me, only convinced me further, that I have the right instrument in my hands. But it must be fundamentally mandolin, and by that I mean round-backed mandolin."

Hugo's own instrument, in his hands at least, is capable of a surprising variety of sound and dynamics; from great clanging swathes of brilliance to mere bell-like whispers. Hugo invited me out into his garden to demonstrate the carrying power of his mandolin at low volume, and as I stood at the end nearest the house Hugo walked down the end of the garden past the compost



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