





For some pieces of music, it feels more like we “meet” them rather than “discover” them; Johan Hel-mich Roman’s *Assaggi* fall into this category for me. His improvised lines are full of spontaneity, a form of fantasy oscillating from bright and light

to more subdued, and have a sense of intimacy strengthened by the solo voice. Like the vestiges of a dream, the music bears the traces of this violinist composer’s own improvised movements.

As though to reinforce this impression, there is practically nothing to describe or explain the music of the *Assaggi*; even their very name is difficult to translate¹. The term naturally evokes the Italian verb *assaggiare*, “to taste”, as well as the absolute freedom of form of the music itself. Quite simply, it would seem that Roman, through his writing, through his improvisation, wished to assuage his immediate cravings – music was rarer in his time, and should a mood for music strike while home alone, the only solution was to play it oneself. The *Assaggi* lean into this deep desire: from the heavy steps of the meandering walker to the light touches of the changing landscape, they create an infinite space in which the musician is at complete liberty to forge their own path in Roman’s wake. More so

1 • ... attempts to do so require some ‘blue-sky thinking’!

than other pieces, the *Assaggi* offer this comparative freedom – a trait specific to music of the period – which brings with it responsibility and intimacy.

The 18th century was a time for travel, when those who could, would. Roman set off on two such adventures, as alluded to in the title of this album. The term *hattar* (“hats” in Swedish) refers to a Swedish political movement which sought an alliance with Louis XV’s France – a nod to closer relations between the two countries. This was combined with “fancy”, which underscores the freedom in these compositions and the influence that Roman’s voyages in England and across Europe had on his style.

In 1758, the year of Roman’s death, Horace Bénédict de Saussure² was starting his own travels. Of his many occupations – at one point or

2 • Grandfather to the linguist, Ferdinand.

another, he was a physicist, mountaineer, politician, meteorologist, botanist, teacher, and geologist – one was to wonder at what made the sky so blue. This led to his inventing the **cyanometre**, a device to objectively assess the colour of the sky. With it, he concluded that the shade of blue shifted depending on how many particles were suspended in the air, and that a more intense azure hue during the day meant more remarkable astro-

nomical observations at night³... Johan Helmich Roman's *Assaggi* are full of serious yet joyful fancy, for music that is living, intimate, and powerful, echoing the glorious vastness of that bright blue sky.

Anaëlle Blanc-Verdin

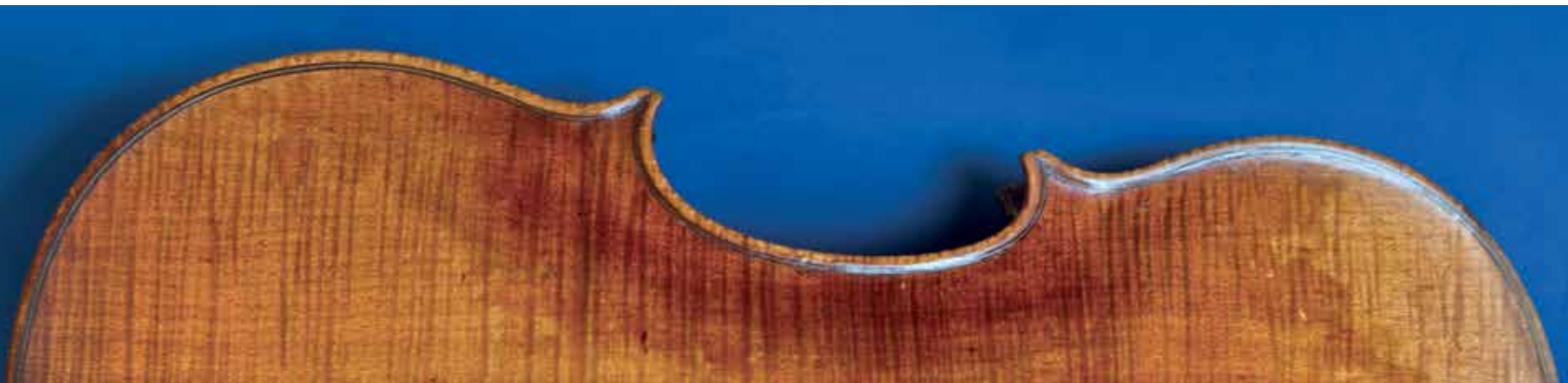
Anaëlle Blanc-Verdin

3 • The sky was much bluer and the stars much brighter for gazers in the 18th century than they are today, due to air and light pollution.

“Thinking, seeing, breathing with the heart, imbues me with a hue of blue. [...] Those who let blue in see it shining within them, and their dreams are true.

Names change, but essence remains. No matter the angle, blue opens up a space of pure intensity. From the top of the sky to the bottom of the heart. It deserves an ardent accolade.”

Zéno Bianu, *Petit Éloge du bleu*
[‘A little accolade to blue’]





Questions for Eva Helenius

— At what point of his life did Johan Hel-mich Roman (1694–1758) compose his *Assaggi*?

It's not easy to date the *Assaggi*. Many of them were probably written in the 1730s and early 1740s, some likely during Roman's stay in Italy in 1736. During this time, he met Girolamo Niccolò Laurenti (1678–1751), a violinist known to compose *ricercari* for solo violin without basso continuo. Roman also spent some time with Tartini in Padua. He may have been aware of similar pieces composed by Telemann, to which his own compositions bear some resemblance. He was about to publish them before changing his mind.

— Why were they not published in the end?

In 1739, Roman was elected as a member of the newly founded Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in recognition of his talents as a composer

and conductor. This was a great honour for him. He would have certainly been planning to dedicate his published *Assaggi* to the president of the Academy, and intended to follow up immediately by publishing pieces composed “in more usual keys”. This initiative was probably a way for him to express his gratitude to the Academy, by dedicating a novel piece of music to it. However, a twist of fate caused him to change his mind.

In 1740, he joined another newly created society, the Guild of the Swedish Language. While the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences initially welcomed the news with open arms, its attitude quickly cooled, as it considered the Guild to be in competition with its own work to preserve the Swedish language. It thus strove to ensure that the king rejected the application for privileges submitted by the Guild. Roman would presumably have been disappointed by the Academy's actions, and ultimately decided against publishing his *Assaggi*.

— If I'm not mistaken, the Academy of Sciences that Roman became part of in 1739 still exists to this day. What was Roman's role in the Academy's activities? What works did he translate?

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (*Kungliga Vetenskapsakademien*) does indeed still exist. In addition to its work in natural history, it also sought to promote the Swedish language until the foundation of the Swedish Academy (*Svenska Akademien*) in 1786. Roman demonstrated that Swedish was very compatible with sacred music, contrary to the prevailing opinion at the time which deemed it too "rough" a language for singing.

In the early 1720s, the king and queen entrusted Roman with the task of promoting music, with a view to raising it to the level of "art" in Sweden. The recent Great Northern War had left Sweden battered and bruised, including in terms of culture. Roman worked as Kapellmeister, conducting for the Royal Swedish Orchestra, where he eschewed French fashions to focus instead on the Italian style. He organised private

concerts outside the Court (1728), followed by public concerts a few years later (1733). He even considered founding a public music school. During his major tour of Europe (1735–1737), he gathered a significant collection of pieces adapted for orchestra, which he brought back with him to Sweden. There were no essays or treatises on music written in Swedish at the time, so he translated texts such as G. Keller's *A Compleat Method For Attaining to Play a Thorough Bass, Upon Either Organ, Harpsichord, Or Theorbo-Lute*, J. Chr. Pepusch's *A Treatise on Harmony*, and F. Gasparini's *The Practical Harmonist at the Harpsichord* around 1750.

— Roman used Swedish in his compositions. Should this be interpreted as a desire to make his music more understandable, more accessible?

By very Lutheran logic, translating sacred music into a local language helps strengthen devotion among followers of the religion. The Swedish Royal Chancery encouraged the use of Swedish at all its social events (rather than Latin

or German), at a time when vernacular languages were making great strides throughout Europe. This was also the period that saw the birth of Swedish literature.

— "Assaggio" is quite a mysterious name. How would you translate it?

Roman always referred to his pieces as *försök* ("one of my *försök*"), which can be translated as *Versuch* in German, *essai* in French, "attempt" or "trial" in English... and *assaggio* in Italian. Rather a humble choice for a work of art! The translation was clearly intended to denote a new genre of music, a novel style that had yet to be named.

Eva Helenius is a retired musicologist and archivist from Sweden who worked as a researcher in the Statens musikverk (Swedish National Collections of Music, Theatre and Dance) in Stockholm. Her research focussed primarily on the history of Swedish music, including keyboard instruments, musical life in the 18th century (particularly the life of composer Johan Helmich Roman), and music in Swedish religious art from the Mediaeval period. She is in charge of Klaverens Hus in Lövestabruk, which is a Centre for Swedish Piano Culture home to a major collection of Swedish keyboard instruments and documents relating to their manufacture.





Assaggi: a conversation between a violinist and a philosopher

Bernard Sève. You introduced me to Johan Helmich Roman's *Assaggi*; I'd never heard of them before. We think we know baroque music, but there are so many treasures still to discover. But you said that playing and listening to the *Assaggi* feels more like meeting them than discovering them, with all the emotions that such

a meeting brings with it. It's baroque music, and yet also something else entirely.

Anaëlle Blanc-Verdin. Indeed, and this meeting feels as charming as it does spontaneous. In *Assaggi*, we think of *assaggiare*, the Italian verb meaning "to taste" (and is tasting not also a form of

meeting?), but we could also translate *assaggio* as "attempt" or "trial". Roman used Swedish in his vocal music, and for me, the term *assaggi* represents this "elsewhere", the idea of novelty found in his work; it refers to the Italian influence imbued in him by his travels, denotes his own personal searches, and expresses the absolute formal freedom in his lines of music.

BS. With *assaggio*, Roman selected a word that was "available", one that was not already associated with a known style of music such as *toccata*, *sonata*, *fantasia* or the like. This name, *assaggi*, sends us a striking message: "prepare yourself, as what you are about to read, play, hear, is nothing like what you already know". Even words with broader meanings, such as *toccata* or *fantasia*, would be unsuitable, as they instill a "horizon of expectation", to use a term from literary theory. *Assaggio* is an unknown word, free from horizons of expectation, synonymous with an inventive "otherness". It invites us to have a little taste, should we be tempted!

ABV. Absolutely! The *Assaggi* are extremely original works. They contain very few performance indicators: no title, no tempo, few articulations, very little information on style or nuance. At the same time, they are not dances (in contrast to Bach's suites), and therefore cannot be associated with known styles that would suggest at least an inkling of interpretation.

BS. From the way you're talking, it sounds like this music was written outside of any context.

ABV. These pieces weren't commissioned, unlike many of Roman's other compositions. They don't have to conform to anything – not social norms, not stylistic conventions, not even time constraints (Roman was under no obligation to complete them for a specific deadline). Incidentally, there are very few direct or indirect references to them. The musician is thus faced with a bare score, in a way, containing nothing but notes. They have to do their best with just that.

BS. I did feel that these *Assaggi* were different from Roman's other work (concertos, symphonies, suites, ceremonial pieces), but also that they were different from what we tend to refer to, likely in too all-encompassing a manner, as "baroque music". I found in particular that the *Assaggi* were sometimes rather loose or uncertain in their tonality. They are of course not atonal, but the exact tonality of the music is frankly not always clear. Am I mistaken?

ABV. You're spot on. In some cases, these *Assaggi* don't really "stay put" in their key, presumably a consequence of their improvised nature. I picture Johan Helmich Roman alone, yearning for new and lively music, picking up his violin and playing freely (after all, he is bound by nothing). He would then write down his improvisation, sometimes cursorily, sometimes in more detail. The music is tonal, of course, but now and again a movement may finish in a different key from the one it started in, or the key may be maintained but shift from minor to major...

BS. Improvisation is always daring. At the base level, was the written score a sort of memento for Roman?

ABV. In a way, yes. Roman noted his improvising so he could remember it, potentially to play it again. He wrote down what he liked, while reworking it as he went along.

BS. So we can hear the musician in the throes of invention. It's rather mind-boggling to be so close to the act of creation, to feel the first ideas come to life before they are put into boxes.

ABV. Yes – and playing it is just the same as listening to it, there's a real sense of intimacy. I do wonder whether this situation of hearing the musician in his moment of invention explains the quite specific relationship to time when it comes to the *Assaggi*. Time has passed since Roman penned them, and yet this time doesn't seem to have distanced us from his music. You've examined the relationship between time in music and time in life – I'd love to hear what you think.

BS. What a question! All pieces of music belong to their time and cannot help but portray the moment of history in which they were composed. Incidentally, they also create their own "internal" time, an exclusively musical moment rooted in all the means music has at its disposal: melodies, themes, harmonies, rhythm, instruments, etc. At the same time, they embody the moment as lived by the musician and their listeners. While the *Assaggi* are a product of their time, they barely follow the musical codes of that era. From a historical standpoint, they are in a sort of grey area. When listening to them, you could almost think that they had been written in the 19th century, or even today. Realistically, this makes sense: that moment of invention to which we are privy when hearing the *Assaggi* is the part of musical composition which is the least affected by historical codes. The closer a piece is to its point of invention, to this act of creation in its rawest form, the more likely it is to transcend its period of history. On that note, I found that these *Assaggi* used a lot of syncopé, perhaps more than would be usual in music from the first half of the 18th century.





ABV. You're right! There is this freedom in tonality, rhythm, themes... the key feature of the *Assaggi* is imagination, whimsy, creative licence. The improvisation is rooted in a quest for virtuosity (Roman did meet Tartini in Italy, after all), and virtuosity lends itself well to freedom!

BS. You mentioned that some of his pieces are unfinished. You yourself decided to complete one *assaggio* using another standalone movement from Roman. It could be said from an "ontological" perspective that, in terms of the type of reality or the existence of a piece, improvisation, even when written down, retains something not entirely controlled, a sort of game of chance which is always present. An improvised piece can never be fully finished in the same manner as "strong form" such as a fugue, the finale of which is both logical and necessary.

ABV. That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I said that the *Assaggi* were

unfinished, but it's very interesting! I had actually meant that the musician – so the violinist, specifically – must really make Roman's music their own. It is their responsibility to bring the piece to life. And yet, this *assaggio* style doesn't follow the usual musical codes of the time, and so the musician cannot help but claim ownership of the *Assaggi* that they choose to play – their performance is by definition an interpretation. Let's not forget that, as well as there being no performance directions in the score itself, there are also no traditions for how they would have been played. This goes back to what you were saying earlier about them falling outside of a context.

BS. In your recording, you gave these *Assaggi* their own context for the first time by how you organised them. I'd like to really stress this point, as I think it's very important. You have created what I would call a "second-hand work", the source material of which is the *Assaggi*, the "first-hand work". By arranging them in a specific way, by playing them

in a specific order, you produce this “second-hand work”, your recording, which has a retroactive impact on the first-hand work – similarly to how, in a gallery, we might view a sculpture differently depending on the sculpture or painting placed next to it. You create context effects between the different pieces (contrasts, echoes, similarities and differences). You present each *assaggio* in the context of its peers, following a sen-

a responsibility toward each of the pieces individually, especially in this case where, as we said, the score is limited or lacking in terms of performance indicators. But we also have a responsibility toward the entirety of the pieces recorded in tandem, as well as one toward the listener who will discover them in this way. The recording creates an entity in which the various pieces each relate to one another. With this in mind,

tells the listener that the show is about to begin. And so it's not just the *assaggio* in question that starts like this, but rather the entire album. Of course, this was just a suggestion, my own personal interpretation of the *Assaggi* that I offer to listeners, but I do hope that it comes across as an invitation.

BS. If I'm understanding correctly, you didn't want to merely “play” the *Assaggi*, which are pieces that you like (we can't make music without enthusiasm and love); rather, you wanted to make them exist, truly and deeply, and bring them to a new audience. There's perhaps a sort of activism there, something very alive in your approach.

ABV. Exactly – as you say, we need to bring the work to life, share it, perform it. Music becomes more alive and true by being shared. And there's another very important point – we can have drastically different interpretations when performing, especially with pieces such as these. So others may vary great-

ly compared to my own! There is an infinite number of right answers, other interpretations that bring the music to life, and we need these other choices to exist. Of course, I strove to offer a “historically informed” performance where I could. But the music itself is so free. It was composed at the start of the 18th century, but it breaks free from the codes of that era. This may be why it seems so close to us, so modern despite its age, and why it evokes such specific emotions. It creates such a unique sense of intimacy. Each of us – and this is what I invite the listener to do – must make this marvellous music our own.

Bernard Sève is an emeritus professor of aesthetics and art philosophy with the University of Lille. His publications include *L'Altération musicale* (Seuil, 2002); *L'Instrument de musique, une étude philosophique* (Seuil, 2013), and *Les Matériaux de l'art* (Seuil, 2023).





Born into a family where imagination was heard, played with, compared, and shared, Anaëlle took up the violin, as it can “give any shape to sound”.

Through Claire Rapin’s open and curious teaching, Anaëlle had a range of musical and technical possibilities at her fingertips, while her discoveries of older music thanks to Matthieu Lussou, Caroline Pintoux, Emmanuel Schricke, and Wieland Kuijken instilled a long-lasting admiration.

After being awarded a university degree as a peripatetic musician from the training centre for peripatetic musicians of the University of Poitiers – an experience which significantly broadened her stylistic horizons thanks to eminent artists such as Dominique Pifarély and Jakes Aymonino – Anaëlle’s musical and human encounters with Guillaume Rebinguet-Sudre and Amandine Beyer sparked a decisive drive for her musical desires. Her violin took her to the Lyon National Higher Conservatory of Music and Dance (CNSMD), where she completed a Master’s degree in performance under Odile Edouard as well as

a Master’s degree in education. It was here that she met Sarah Dubus and Mathieu Valfré, with whom she created the group Ozio Regio, whose first album dedicated to Marco Uccellini was met with acclaim (earning a *Diapason d’Or* recommendation in the “new discovery” section in January 2023).

As a firm believer that public education must allow everybody to enjoy the wonder of discovering science, technical skills, and art, Anaëlle has been involved in a variety of projects and joint initiatives, from shared creations to teaching in music schools and workshops to writing for performances (*Nova 1610*, with Amandine Trenc and Mathieu Valfré,

on the astronomical discoveries of the 17th century, and *Entre deux chemins un violon*, a travelling solo show for young audiences). Her teaching and artistic work has been generously supplemented by her musical performances with a range of groups, including Les Surprises, Correspondances, Marguerite Louise, La Fenice, Les Talens Lyriques, Le Poème harmonique, Les musiciens de Saint-Julien, and Artifices.

In both her artistic practice and her teaching, Anaëlle Blanc-Verdin strives to unite the poetry and demands of imagination and reflection, allowing everyone to thrive within a shared culture.



a fancy hattar

JOHAN HELMICH ROMAN

Assaggi a violino solo
Anaëlle Blanc-Verdin

1. BeRI 350 [Toccata] 03:18
2. BeRI 317 – 1 [Luminoso] 02:57
3. BeRI 317 – 2 [Allegro assai] 04:33
4. BeRI 317 – 3 [Dolce] 03:01
5. BeRI 1-34 [Vivace] 02:02
6. BeRI 313 – 1 [Andante] 02:47
7. BeRI 313 – 2 [Allegro] 03:25
8. BeRI 313 – 3 [Con tenerezza] 01:14
9. BeRI 319 [Ondeggiando] 02:40
10. BeRI 324 – 1 [Maestoso] 03:52
11. BeRI 324 – 2 Larghetto 05:25
12. BeRI 324 – 3 [Allegro assai] 01:29
13. BeRI 320 – 1 [Spirituoso] 03:13
14. BeRI 320 – 2 [Cantabile] 03:25
15. BeRI 320 – 3 [Presto] 01:34
16. BeRI 311 – 1 [Largo] 003:16
17. BeRI 311 – 2 [Vivace] 02:36
18. BeRI 311 – 3 [Piacetvolmente] 02:21
19. BeRI 311 – 4 [Allegro] 04:35
20. BeRI 312 – 1 [Spirituoso] 04:13
21. BeRI 312 – 2 [Adagio] 02:47
22. BeRI 312 – 3 [Allegro] 02:57
23. BeRI 312 – 4 [Presto] 01:21
24. BeRI 312 – 5 [Allegro spirituosissimo] 04:11

En l'absence d'indications de la part de Roman, les intitulés des mouvements sont proposés entre crochets par l'interprète.

Violon anonyme XVIII^e siècle
Archets : Marie-Eve Geeraert, Claire Berget

