

Parisian Gamba duets (France, circa 1750)

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Six early Classical sonatas by an unknown composer for two bass viols -
Collection Vm⁷ 6297 of the National Library in Paris

*Pariser Gambenduos – Sechs frühklassische Sonaten eines unbekanntes Komponisten für
wei Bassgamben*

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The sheer quantity of repertoire for the viol as a solo instrument is remarkable. We violists have discovered Ortiz, Simpson, Marais and Bach and often we forget just how much wonderful repertoire lies dormant scattered in libraries and private collections all over the world. The research and subsequent performance of hitherto unknown music for our instrument is primordial and guarantees the longevity of the revival of the most noble of instruments.

We must therefore congratulate Günter von Zadow for publishing this special music for the very first time.

The present edition is in three volumes. Each volume contains two sonatas and separate parts for each viol, as well as a score. The handsomely presented edition is extremely clear and legible and the editor has carefully planned the page turns in the solo parts, so one need not turn a page quickly in the middle of a movement. The only regret I have is that a facsimile of the whole original manuscript is not included (except for two pages in the each volume). This is unfortunate as the original is :

1 - Extremely clear, “edition” quality and not just a “fuzzy” manuscript.

2 - A large format (26 x 33.5 cm) and only 45 pages

3 – Contains markings in pencil that are not reproduced in the present edition.

This manuscript was mentioned as early as 1963 by Karl Heinz Pauls who assigned the music to the Viennese Classic school. For years copies of this manuscript have crept in to our musical libraries. Everyone speculated as to who possible might have written this difficult and rococo style music. Names such as Jean-Baptiste Forqueray (son of Antoine), Carl Friedrich Abel, Mozart, Roland Marais (Marais’ son) Ernst Christian Hesse, Johann Gottlieb Graun,

Johann Christian Bach and even Marais' grandson Nestor-Marin Marais were proposed.

I'd like briefly to examine a few of the most plausible proposals :

To start with it is quite obvious that the person who wrote this music was a virtuoso on the viol. This was someone who was intimately familiar with the viol's technique and possibilities and not just a François Couperin or even a J.S. Bach writing beautiful music for an instrument they weren't particularly acquainted with.

For those who propose Jean-Baptiste Forqueray (1699 – 1782), he certainly was active in Paris at the time this music was written. Personally I do not find this music to be in his style. First, in Antoine Forqueray's *Pièces de Viole* (1747), Jean-Baptiste adds three of his own pieces to his father's collection (*La Angrave, La Du Vaucel and La Morangis ou La Plissay*) . Second, in a recently discovered manuscript "*Pièces à trios violes par Monsieur Forcroy*" (Lille, Archives du Nord) we can study a small suite by this composer. The style is flagrantly different from our present sonatas in a later Rococo style.

As for Mozart (1756 – 1791), the second movement of the Sonata Quinta in G minor in the present edition contains a theme that is found in Mozart's D minor piano concerto. We also know from correspondence with his father that Mozart wrote a solo for the Viola da Gamba (lost), named "*Excellence*" listed in a catalogue by Leopold Mozart (Vienna, 1768). I would argue, however, that attractive themes were often "borrowed" by another composer for his own works. I need not mention how many themes or entire pieces such a Pergolesi's Stabat Mater were entirely "borrowed" by J.S. Bach. Another point is that the present composer was intimately familiar with the viol's technique, which is not the case with Mozart (as stated above).

Roland Marais's (c.1680-c.1750) published suites are very much in the tradition of his father, in the typical French suite form, and I find no real reason to think that these present sonatas were composed by him.

One of the most plausible possibilities is Carl Friedrich Abel (1723 - 1787), who besides being a model for Mozart spent much time in Paris. What speaks against this theory is that the present music strays in style from the extant music for solo viol which we know Abel composed.

Johann Gottlieb Graun (1702 – 1771), who as far as we know never ventured into France, is the closest in style to this music. The double-stopping, large chords, arpeggios and triplet figures in Graun's music are highly reminiscent of the present works. Another possibility is Ludwig Christian Hesse (1716 – 1772), who was at the court of King Friedrich in Berlin and was a representative in Germany of the "French tradition," as his father had studied with both Marais and Forqueray in Paris. Are either one of these composers possibly the violist who wrote this music?

The most absurd proposition was that the music is by Marais' grandson Nestor-Marin Marais (c1715--1753), who was acclaimed by D'Aquin de Chateau-Lyon in 1753 as being the equal of Antoine Forqueray. This theory was based on the letters "N.M." appearing on the lower left corner of the first page. In fact, after months of pondering and correspondence, I realized that

the person who was proposing this had misread the library shelf number “V.M.” for “N.M.” (as in Vm⁷ 6297)!

On the other hand the watermarks in the present manuscript are from France from this period, as well as the ornament symbols and bow strokes (“t” = t^{ir}er (pull) “p” = p^{ouss}er (push)). These were standard in French viol music after Marais, and in the present manuscript are ubiquitous. The manuscript also contains French tempo indications such as “lent” (slow), “lentement” (slowly), or “Fin” (the end) as well as “T.S.V.P pour la Reprise” (Please turn for the next section). Therefore it is certain beyond any doubt that the music was copied in France. However, there are many precedents of a clear copy of “foreign music,” such as the Philip Falle’s manuscript housed in Durham of Sainte Colombe the younger’s music which is the only source of his music. One must now speculate on how, why and by whom the present manuscript was compiled in France if this theory holds up.

In any case more research is needed to establish with certitude who wrote this music.

The music itself is in the typical “Berlin school” style of *Sturm und Drang* as well as the *Empfindsamer Stil*. The first five sonatas each have four movements (slow – fast – slow – fast), and only the last sonata (Sonata Sesta) contains three movements. Certain movements are marked “Cantabile” or “Presto” but the composer also uses the older style Suite references such as “Corrente,” “Sarabanda” and “Giga.”

The music is presented as duos, but in fact the first viol has a much more prevalent and virtuoso role compared with the second viol. The first viol contains large chords, double stops, subtle articulation and arpeggios that encompass a large tessitura. This music is technically on par with the music of Forqueray or Abel. Punctually the second viol responds to the first in a flourish of thirty-second notes, or a held double stop. But in general the role of the second viol is an accompaniment and reminds me of the second viol’s role in the music of Louis de Caix d’Hervelois. The bass is not figured, although one might imagine adding more harmony if one was so inclined.

The first sonata in G major contains four movements; the first three have been assigned the names (by the editor) (Siziliano), (Allegro), (Rondeau) and the last is an Allegro with variations. Except for the last movement which contains difficult arpeggios and thirty-second notes the first three movements are on a “G major Bach sonata” level.

The second sonata in A major contains four movements: Andante, Corrente, Sarabanda and Giga. Again we have a “mixed bag” in terms of the technical level, and with a little practice the slow movements are feasible for a moderate level violist while the Giga taken *a tempo* would require much higher proficiency.

The third sonata in F major contains an Andante, Presto, Andante (in a-flat), and finishes with a Cantabile. If the violist is at ease with a high d on the top string, all but the first movement should be possible for somebody with a medium/high level of skill.

The fourth sonata in D major contains four movements, Andante, Allegro, Aria and Allegro. Here we find a prevalent use of double stops even in high positions as well as many arpeggios. This sonata would be for a more experienced player.

The fifth sonata in G minor contains four movements, Largo, Allegro, Largo and a Giga - Allegro. With some practice a moderate level player will find satisfaction in the slow movements, but the fast movements require a more skilled hand.

The sixth and last sonata in A minor contains only three movements, Allegro, Aria – Cantabile (with variations). Chock-full of large chords and arpeggios this sonata would lend itself to the more experienced violist.

Lastly, I would also like to suggest that those who would like to listen to this music and give themselves an idea of its beauty should consult the breathtaking and sumptuous recording by Wieland Kuijken of the Sonata Sesta. (Accent “Les Maisons de Plaisance” *Music for Two Viols* ACC 99132 D).