

The Viol No 22, Spring 2011

C. F. Abel, Sonata for Solo Viola da Gamba and Bass in G major, WKO 152 (Edition Güntersberg G188, ed. Günter and Leonore von Zadow)

This new publication offers a sonata in the Classical style, suitable for intermediate to advanced players. The illuminating introduction by Peter Holman lays out the context for the piece in terms of its composition, copying and eighteenth-century performance history (the introduction is provided in English and in German translation). Carl Friedrich Abel (1723–1787), son of the likely dedicatee of J. S. Bach's gamba sonatas BWV 1027–9, was a prolific composer of chamber music, not least of viol sonatas. Holman suggests that the sonatas that have survived may represent a modest selection that once ran to several hundred, designed either for teaching or for Abel's own performances. The final three decades of Abel's life were primarily spent in London, running a concert series with J. C. Bach, that, though eventually financially disastrous, provided the two virtuosi with ample opportunity to promote their own music. The Sonata in G major WKO 152 can be found at the beginning of a collection of music that belonged to the Countess of Pembroke, Elizabeth Herbert; she may have learned the piece, but it is significantly more challenging than others in her collection. Annotations within the manuscript, such as fingering suggestions, imply that it was used in a teaching context.

Stylistically, the music is typical of the late eighteenth century. The Sonata opens with an elegant and melodically graceful *Allegretto*. The beginning is lyrical, and scalic semiquaver passages fall well under the fingers; the pitch range of the *Allegretto* is wider than the middle and final movements, and players need to be prepared to go above the frets to a top d². On the other hand, the leaps and changes of position are relatively straightforward and carefully prepared: it would make a good piece to test the waters above the top fret! The *Adagio* that follows is quite intricate and graceful, with decorative twists to the melodic line that demand a relaxed, unhurried approach. It requires some legato, slurred bowing that may be unfamiliar to players of earlier repertory, but again this movement is playable by an intermediate gambist – and this section does not move above the frets. The final movement is a rather flashy *Allegro*, full of the sort of semiquaver figures, especially alternating thirds, that are so effective on the instrument and can often sound more difficult than they really are. This is a satisfying movement to practise, and one that would no doubt impress any audience in a solo recital, without the need for those fiddly ornaments and complex chords that characterise French Baroque music for bass viol.

The typesetting is clean, easy to read, and comes with versions of the solo line in treble clef as per the original manuscript (the player would take it down the octave), and alto clef, both over the bass line. A very small number of helpful fingering suggestions are given, as in the original source, and I would have appreciated a few more editorial suggestions. The keyboard realisation of the bass (by Angela Koppenwallner) is unfussy, and playable by anyone of a good Grade 5 standard or above. Holman points out that by the 1770s a harpsichord may have been omitted in performance, with the bass provided by a cello rather than as part of a bowed bass and keyboard continuo. As such, this new edition would make an ideal purchase for a viol player with either a keyboard or cello-/gamba-playing friend, especially one who is ready for the challenge of solo repertoire.

Lisa Colton