

# THE VIOL Autumn 2012

## **Johann Christian Bach *Vier Sonaten für Cembalo/Pianoforte und Viola da Gamba. Sonatas III and IV*** Edition Güntersberg G227

This volume is part 2 of 2, with a review of Sonatas 1 and 2 appearing alongside this one. Johann Christian Bach arrived 1762 in London and set up the famous Bach-Abel concerts together with Carl Friedrich Abel, with whom he also shared a flat. The Sonatas, in different hands, are now part of the Elias N. Kulukundis Collection in New York and were made available for research to the Bach-Archiv Leipzig for a limited period.

The obvious likely players of these pieces are JC Bach and CF Abel, but the preface also suggests Gainsborough and Queen Charlotte as possible performers, however, not in a duet formation in the same room at the same time. Abel would be the more likely accompanist to the Queen who was a good keyboardist and had lessons with JC Bach. The title pages vary in their specifications: some ask for Cembalo or Harpsichord, but some for Piano Forte or Forte Piano. Johannes Zumpe, a former apprentice of Silbermann, came to London in 1756 and started making small pianos, presumably what we now call square pianos, which were so popular that he couldn't produce them fast enough. Anyone owning a harpsichord and living in an average-sized English house nowadays would understand this fashion very well, as these days we have the problem of there never being a wall long enough that doesn't have a door, fireplace or radiator on it (the latter not an 18<sup>th</sup> Century problem). Of course, most customers wealthy enough in the 1760s to buy a piano wouldn't have lived in a terraced Victorian house, which didn't exist then, but still, space has always come at a premium in England compared to the continent and big instruments would perhaps only have been purchased by true professionals or connoisseurs, or for the purpose of a status symbol. Presumably the smaller pianos were more affordable and would have served the average cultured music lover in a medium-size house or flat very well. JC Bach bought a Tafelclavier for £50 around 1768, so it is likely that these Sonatas were written around and/or after that time.

I always wondered about the Bach-Abel friendship and their respective characters. JC Bach's keyboard music is definitely better than some of his chamber or orchestral music which can be quite shallow at times. Was he also a shallow character, or was he simply a good business man who provided the amateur market with what they wanted? Was he the quieter and more boring of the pair, or perhaps simply the more sensible one, whereas Abel found solace in a good bottle of burgundy? Whatever his character, what seems clear is that he benefited from the pre-classical fashion of de-cluttering music, getting away from the overly complicated compositional style towards something much more plain and predictable. JC Bach's compositional style has always seemed to me like the epitome of pre-classical music, solidifying a fashion

that the occasional composer topped with something more interesting which then developed into the passion-driven 19<sup>th</sup> century style of music (think his brother, Carl Philip Emmanuel). I always compare this late 18<sup>th</sup> Century 'de-cluttering' with the fashion of home decorating in the last 10-15 years: suddenly all spare furniture and knick-knacks accumulated in the 1980s and 1990s had to be shipped into a self-storage unit and everything had to be cream and white with one fashion-statement expensive glass vase. Had Abel's solo music for viol not survived and ended up in the New York Public Library, we would perhaps also think that his compositional style had very little individuality and just served a market.

Not having seen Sonatas 1 and 2 I would not be able to judge the quality of these, but in this volume there are 2 very playable pieces with 2 movements each. The Second Sonata, Warb B 15b in F Major looks more interesting than the first one (also in F Major) and reminiscent of JC Bach's good solo keyboard music or a good work by Graun. Very enjoyable music indeed, and definitely worth having.

The edition is, as usual, clean, professionally produced and pleasant to play from. The viol part comes in alto and treble clef (both are used in the manuscripts) and I can also imagine these pieces sounding good on a violin. It is great to know that there is more music coming to light that's worth playing. *Susanne Heinrich*