

THE VIOL Autumn 2012

**Johann Christian Bach *Vier Sonaten für Cembalo/Pianoforte und Viola da Gamba* Sonaten I und II  
edited by Thomas Fritsch and Günter von Zadow. Edition Güntersberg G226**

These sonatas for keyboard and viola da gamba by Johann Christian Bach (1735-82), thought to have been written between 1765 and 1772, are some of the earliest examples of keyboard sonatas with instrumental 'accompaniment' that became popular towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Here the viol's rôle is very different to that in the two sonatas with obbligato keyboard by Johann Christian's older brother, Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714-88), where it has an integral and virtuosic voice in the musical argument on a par with the keyboard. Whilst J. C. Bach hands the viol the occasional thematic phrase, he primarily uses it to enrich the keyboard texture by giving it pedal points, arpeggiated accompaniment figures and discanting in 6ths and 3rds with the keyboard's melody. The virtuosic writing is exclusively in the keyboard part, which could indeed stand on its own (incorporating the few melodic features entrusted to the viol). Any idea that these works were written specifically for Bach's colleague Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-87) seems unlikely to me; the viol part is of a standard more appropriate to the wave of 'sensitive' writers, artists and aristocrats who took up the viol inspired by Abel's beguiling performances.

Although the manuscript sources for these two sonatas both specify 'cembalo' uniquely, when they appeared in print as numbers 1 and 3 of Bach's op. 10 (London 1773) they are 'FOR THE HARPSICHORD OR PIANO FORTE'. And Bach's keyboard writing itself strongly suggests the 'magnificent and new affect' of the forte piano: it is impossible to balance the treble on the harpsichord when Bach has written thick chords in the LH or a busy alberti bass. At this moment the 'London' Bach brought the fortepiano hugely into vogue and Johannes Zumpe (1726-90) ingeniously started making small square pianos for a third of the price of a harpsichord. The music of these sonatas is charming. I particularly enjoyed Bach's unattributed borrowing of the opening of his father's Bb Praeludium in the first Partita of the *Clavir Übung* op. 1 reworked as a gigue (which means that the dotted quaver semiquaver figures should be played in triplet rhythm). This is a very welcome addition to the viol's repertoire, ably edited with a well-researched introduction. *Lucy Robinson*