

SAINTE - COLOMBE SOLOS

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Sainte-Colombe Pour la Basse... The pieces for Viola da Gamba solo from the MS M.3 of the Manuscript of the Bibliothèque municipale de Tournus Edited by Günter and Leonore von Zadow. Edition Güntersberg, Heidelberg 2013. xviii + 136pp, €42.50

Sainte-Colombe is a fascinating figure, mysterious because as a person he left so few traces, yet there survives a small but significant body of music, technically fascinating and compelling listening. A modern edition of his *Concerts à deux violes esgales* has been available for many years, and there are many marvellous recordings of these pieces. This new edition of his pieces for solo viol is of particular interest and importance, more so now that the facsimile published in 1998 by Minkoff is no longer available. It is in Güntersberg's standard format, clear type face, no mid-movement page turns, in short, entirely practical, sitting on the music stand comfortably, with the pages sitting flat despite its bulk (136 pages).

The relatively brief introduction includes sufficient information for everyday users of the book, and refers to the more extensive introduction of the Minkoff facsimile. The main notational problem, the so-called 'notes perdues' is elegantly solved in the same way as the Hooreman edition of the *Concerts*. The few facsimiles of the MS demonstrate the differences between the original notation and the edition, which attempts to mimic the original as closely as possible. Other changes include replacing unfamiliar clefs, for example the French violin clef, by those familiar to viol players.

The individual movements are arranged, as in the original, according to key, not grouped into suites. There are 97 in D minor, 12 in D major, 13 in G major, 5 in G minor, 16 in C major. Their titles are mostly dance movements: *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Gigue*, *Gavotte*, *Menuet*, *Ballet*, *Sarabande*, something called a 'Pianelle' – for which I can find no explanation – some character pieces called *Petite Pièce*, and a total of 29 *Préludes*, almost all in D minor. A performer would select pieces from a wide range of options to form a suite.

All but the G minor pieces are written for the 7-string bass. Sainte-Colombe is credited with inventing the technique of winding the bass strings with silver, thus making an hitherto too-short string length capable of playing a strong low AA. Naturally the music exploits the enjoyment of this register, newly available to the virtuoso bass viol.

None of the available sources are in Sainte-Colombe's hand. The Tournus collection seems to have been written by the same person who transcribed the *Concerts*, an elegant and accurate professional hand, easy to play from. I hope that the facsimile will become available again.

For those not familiar with this composer, unthinkable after the success of the film all those years ago, his music is almost as mysterious as he is. So little is known about him beyond a few small details and a couple of anecdotes. He was a famous player in his day, teacher of Marin Marais and Jean Rousseau. Marais published a beautiful *Tombeau* for him in book two of *Pièces de violes*. Many of the *Concerts* are familiar through recordings, and they are treasures of the repertoire, beloved by players and listeners alike. They are very idiosyncratic, seemingly breaking the rules of composition, yet wonderfully effective in their capacity to excite and move the listener. The melodies take irregular turns, his harmonic directions intuitive and unexpected. The so-called *notes perdues* are unmeasured runs, which usually need to be played as fast as one can, making the bar in which they occur seem unbalanced. The harmonies are fully adequate in themselves, though there have been attempts to 'complete' them.

These characteristics are also present in the music for the solo viol, and it rewards those who take time to understand it. I started with the comparatively measured dance movements, and graduated incrementally to the preludes, which are full of unmeasured episodes, notated both as *notes perdues* and as semiquavers in long runs played with a single bow, making a single bar visually very long. The dance movements' comparative regularity helps the player come to terms with their individuality. The music is constantly surprising, and, particularly in the preludes, needs long acquaintance to make sense of it.

However for the determined pilgrim there are considerable pleasures. *Gigue* 133, in G minor, is fingered and bowed with some arresting and characteristic effects. The final piece, a *Sarabande en passacaille*, in C major, reveals the composer as a truly forceful player, relishing the low-string chords. Also in C major, an extraordinary *Allemande*, no 145. It seems more like a prelude or overture, with the first section in duple time leading to a tripla in the style of a *gigue*, with a droll, whimsical melody, unexpectedly dropping octaves and with sudden, assertive chords. It is full of humour, utterly belying the unsmiling and severe puritan depicted in the film.

It is an important resource, an essential part of the library of anyone interested in the development of the techniques of the viol. His contribution is as significant as that of his contemporary Christopher Simpson, but quite different with the ornaments and anticipated notes, unusual chords dictating hand positions, slurred bowings, unique to this very special player and transformer of the character of the music of our wonderful instrument. As his pupil Rousseau said, had Adam, in paradise, wished to make an instrument he would undoubtedly have made a viol: 'on peut juger que si ADAM avoit voulu faire un Instrument, il auroit fait une Violle...'