

# THE VIOL No 35, Summer 2014

**Christian Michael Wolff Stettin 1776**

***Sonata in C major for Obligato Harpsichord/Harp and Violetta/Viola da Gamba***

**Güntersberg G241**

Most of Christian Michael Wolff's music perished in a fire at the Marienkirche in Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland) shortly after his death in 1789. Both his father and grandfather had been church organists in Stettin but Christian Michael's duties also involved working at the Schloß, including, one can assume, writing chamber music for his employers. Happily for posterity, a collection of six two-movement sonatas published in Stettin in 1776 has survived. Five of them are for the typical combination of the time of harpsichord obligato and either violin or flute, but sonata IV has the unusual designation of "Violetta o Viola da Gamba" for the solo part, and "Clavicembalo o Harpa" for the "keyboard". Editors Günter and Leonore von Zadow claim that "the (solo) part is easily playable" on viola, tenor viol or bass viol. From the writing and tessitura, it looks very like one of those early classical sonatas for viola, written at a time when composers like WF Bach, Telemann and William Flackton were gradually putting the viola on the map as a solo instrument. All is in the first position with some easy viola chords at the end of both halves of the second movement. It is certainly playable on a bass viol but would require considerable virtuosity from the player, who would also have to modify the chords to fit an instrument tuned in fourths. And this is music which is supposed to sound fluid and easy, composed as it is in a mixture of the *empfindsam* (sensitive) style of the Bach sons and the *galant* Berlin school. This writer has not so far come across solo music being performed on the tenor viol in 1776, but it's possible that the von Zadows have local knowledge of this practice. The designation for viola da gamba is puzzling and can surely not be explained away as simple marketing?

The edition itself is nicely printed in a clear font, but the page turns in the second movement are quite annoying. One has to turn back and forwards twice for two lines, which are orphaned on the last page. Surely it would have been possible to compress such simple music with few performance instructions so that the second half of the movement would fit on two pages? It is telling that old editions are consistently better in this respect.

This is a welcome addition to our music collections, but I suspect that Wolff's sonata will find more favour amongst (unfretted) violists than readers of this magazine. And harpists can add this to their not too extensive repertoire from the classical era.

*Charles Medlam*

**Editor's comment: The criticized page turn is in the playing score for the harpsichord. The viola da gamba part does not have a page turn within movements.**