

Twelve Kassel Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Basso Continuo:
Universitätsbibliothek Kassel: 2° Ms. Mus.
35 attributed to Georg Friedrich Händel

ed. Günter and Leonore von Zadow with continuo realization by Dankwart von Zadow. Edition Güntersberg, Heidelberg, 2015.

Sonatas 1-4 (G269) ISMN 979-0-50174-269-1. €19.50.

Sonatas 5-8 (G270) ISMN 979-0-50174-270-7. €19.50.

Sonatas 9-12 (G271) ISMN 979-0-50174-271-4. €19.50.

Of course, this item immediately caught my attention when Güntersberg announced its release: twelve sonatas by Handel for viola da gamba and bass. Who knew? The cover on this edition, showing the word “zugeschrieben” (German for “attributed to”) in rather small type, calls to mind the definitions encountered in auction catalogues. Shrewd businesspeople, especially those dealing in items whose authenticity is integral to their monetary value, are scrupulous in the description of the items they offer. Reputation and survival are at stake. In stating that an item is “attributed to” rather than “by” a particular creator, an auction house is saying that it is believed by some authority, who is usually cited in the fine print, to be the work of the named maker, though the auction house itself is not necessarily of that opinion. While not technically claiming that a drawing is by Rembrandt, a dealer could still be perfectly happy announcing that someone else thought it the work of a great master. Regardless of any disclaimer to the contrary, the item is now inextricably linked to a famous name.

It is a shame that, in our culture, we are so obsessed with brands and authorship. While a familiar name on an unfamiliar work will initially attract attention, such a label can also prove a distraction, making it difficult to judge the work on its own merits. The sonatas in this collection are pleasant, often energetic, pieces. Will a listener or performer, believing them to be by Handel, hold them in greater esteem? On the other hand, might the celebrated name raise expectations too high for what are after all fairly modest pieces?

The existence of these sonatas has been long known. However, their attribution to any composer, let alone Handel, is new. According to the editors' introduction, provided in German and in an English translation by Howard Weiner, the musicologist Graham Pont came to the conclusion earlier this year that the Kassel manuscript containing these sonatas was probably in the hand of William Babell, Handel's primary copyist between 1711 and 1723. Furthermore, Pont is convinced that these sonatas were written by the young Handel prior to 1711 and subsequently copied by Babell.

In addition to its preservation in the Kassel manuscript, this set of twelve sonatas is found in two further manuscript copies,

one each in the British Library and in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. The London and Berlin manuscripts are nineteenth-century copies while the Kassel one, which is the basis for the current edition, is the only source stemming from the eighteenth century. The manuscript's otherwise blank cover page is inscribed in pencil in an eighteenth-century hand "XII Sonate à Viola da Gamba col Basso." The music is notated on a two-staff system without any figures in the bass. No composer's name appears. Previous recent literature, including Bettina Hoffmann's *Catalogo della musica solistica e cameristica per viola da gamba* (Lucca, 2001) and Fred Flassig's *Die solistische Gambenmusik in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1998), treats these sonatas as anonymous.

This set of sonatas has remained unpublished until now, not so much because of the question of authorship, but rather the more fundamental one of instrumentation. Notwithstanding their description on the cover of the Kassel copy, the sonatas, as written, pose real problems for performance on the bass gamba. The solo part in the manuscript is in French violin clef (*g'* on the bottom line of the staff), and the sonatas have a range of *f'* to *f'''*, which is too high for the bass viol. While a practice existed in England and Northern Germany of notating solo viol music in treble clef, to be performed an octave lower than written, we know of no such octavating practice with regard to French violin clef. However, in addition to its use for treble melody instruments, French violin clef sometimes appeared in the right-hand staff in German keyboard music. Additionally, as the von Zadows discovered, the range of these pieces fits perfectly on the alto recorder in F. Moreover, these sonatas are conveniently devoid of double stops and chords and are in good recorder keys. The editors therefore came to the conclusion that the designation for viola da gamba on the manuscript was erroneous, so they have simultaneously issued a complementary recorder version of these pieces (G266, G267, and G268).

Yet, with the designation for viola da gamba and the fresh attribution of the pieces to Handel, it was understandably tempting for the editors to find a way to make this work. In order to produce a viable version for the gamba, they first took the solo part down an octave and then transposed both parts down a third, except in the case of Sonata X, which they kept in its original key of F major. This transposition down a third means that the bass line is uncharacteristically low for German music of the early eighteenth century. It frequently includes low A, B-flat, and C, so the bass line in the published version cannot be played on a six-string viol without a certain amount of octave displacement.

The resultant set of pieces does not easily fall into any standard category. Although the original title page stated that they were sonatas for the viola da gamba, they had to undergo a two-stage transposition to make them playable; even then, many of the sonatas contain figures that do not lie as comfortably in the hand as one would expect in music that otherwise poses few technical challenges beyond a solid intermediate

player's abilities. Nevertheless, there is always room for more good music for the viol. These sonatas, each in four movements, many of which have dance names, are charming. They are different enough in style from more familiar gamba music to add some variety to our programming. As usual, Güntersberg's production standards are exemplary.

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