

## Music reviews

**Händel (attrib.) *Twelve Kassel Sonatas for viola da gamba and basso continuo*, edited by Günter and Leonore von Zadow  
Edition Güntersberg G269/270/271 (three volumes at €19.50)**

To quote from the rubric at the Güntersberg website, where readers curious for more detail are encouraged to explore: “These twelve sonatas are from an anonymous manuscript in the Kassel University Library. The title of the manuscript describes them as viola da gamba sonatas. However, they lie much too high for bass viol, so that specialists have long wondered how they could be played. In our edition, we now offer a solution: the viol part has been taken down an octave, and the two parts then transposed a third lower. As a result, viola da gamba players can now play these fine sonatas for the first time.”

The good news is, the publication is to all the high standards we expect from Edition Güntersberg. Carefully edited, page-planned and typeset, printed on good quality paper and attractively bound, with an informative introduction and statement of editorial policy, and generously packaged to include a score with keyboard realization of the (originally unfigured) BC line, then two separate playing copies which include melody and bass. No grumbles at all!

The less good news is, that although we should all welcome plausible additions to our repertoire, these *particular* sonatas seem, for this player at least, just plain uninspiring. The writing presents no great technical challenges to a viol player able to approach a ‘generic’ baroque sonata; nothing virtuosic, nor anything that feels particularly idiomatic for the instrument. So if you are looking for some not-too-hard baroque sonatas to learn, and don’t mind that it won’t be ‘great’ music, go ahead and add these volumes to your library. They are not bad pieces; they are tuneful and varied in character, but please don’t expect them to be as good as the Handel you know and love... which brings us on to the question of the attribution.

Handel’s name does not appear on the manuscript, but Handel scholar Graham Pont has concluded from the handwriting that it was copied by William Babell, Handel’s principal copyist in the years 1711-23, and has offered the attribution to Handel on the grounds of stylistic consistency. Now, I am no Handel scholar, and here feel just a little perplexed! I was unaware of Babell’s role as Handel’s principal copyist, but I *was* aware of him as a composer of some stature, whose style quite closely resembles Handel – according to Mattheson he was *taught* by Handel. Is it completely inconceivable that these twelve sonatas, written in Babell’s hand, were actually written *by* Babell? Subjective judgement here: to me, they just don’t *feel like* Handel tunes. The lines do not ‘flower’; where in Handel the second part of the sentence does something quite different from the first, but nevertheless feels that it has grown out of it... here, all too often, the first bar

is simply repeated a step higher to provide the second bar. This music *may* be by a young Handel, as supposed here. If so, I think I might stick to music by the mature Handel from now on!

The solo part in the manuscript (notated in French violin clef) does indeed clearly lie too high for bass viol. The editors’ thinking is that the mention of the viola da gamba on the title page is erroneous, and, having observed that the sonatas (one single note excepted) fit the treble recorder beautifully, have prepared an edition for recorder of all twelve sonatas, in their catalogue as G266/267/268. The present publication proceeds on the supposition that the Kassel manuscript may represent a transcription for recorder of a (lost) set of sonatas for viol, and have therefore offered a *re-transcription*, by means of transposing a minor tenth down. For unexplained reasons, the tenth sonata is transposed by an octave only, leaving it in F major. I found it lay ‘under the fingers’ much more comfortably when given the same transposition as the other eleven sonatas and played in D.

Having questioned the editors’ supposition that these sonatas are by Handel, I may as well question their assumption that the title page is erroneous in referring to the viola da gamba. I am entirely prepared to be shot down in flames by superior scholars here – it may well be that no other repertoire for the pardessus has ever been identified as for the viola da gamba, but my observation is that these twelve sonatas, in their original keys, are *much more enjoyable* to play on a pardessus, on which instrument the occasional awkward moments of the bass viol version magically become less awkward! (Pardessus players should invest in the recorder edition rather than this one.)

*Piers Snell*