

The Viol No 44

Autumn 2016

Juan Bautista Pla / Anon

Two sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Basso, edited by Thomas Fritsch and Günter von Zadow Edition Güntersberg G289 (€19.80)

Juan Bautista Pla (c.1720-1773) was a Spanish oboist, bassoonist and psalterist (if that's the word) doing the rounds of Europe in the eighteenth century. As a performer, he was in the first rank, a protégé of Domenico Scarlatti, a 'regular' at the Paris *Concert Spirituel* in the 1750s, and warmly received in London in 1753. As a composer, without wishing to be unkind... maybe not so much?

These two sonatas are both identified in the source as transcribed from flute sonatas; the first exists in another source as an oboe sonata. The editors go only so far as to say that it is 'quite possible' that the anonymous sonata offered here is also by Pla, on the grounds that it is copied in the same hand, and included in the same *Ledenburg-Sammlung*, (the library of predominantly viol repertoire collected by the von Grothaus family, and the same collection we have to thank for preserving the only surviving copy of the newly rediscovered Telemann Fantasias). For this pair of ears, the two sonatas do not feel as

though they are the work of a single composer, but this is of academic importance; let us just consider, are they rewarding to play?

Alas, my feeling is that once this copy finds its way onto my music shelves, it might not come out very often. These sonatas are competently written, tuneful enough, with occasional details that catch the imagination, but in the end they do rather come across as 'generic' three-movement woodwind sonatas of the mid-eighteenth century, and while they present no insoluble technical problems, there is no particular feeling of them *belonging* to the viol, and I found them more awkward to play than their musical rewards really merit. The Pla sonata (in Bb) is the more awkward of the two, asking us, for example, to play passages of semiquavers slurred in fours, with a trill at the front of each beat, necessitating a change of position for each group. I know there is nothing impossible about this, but I can't help feeling that viol players do have better things to do with their time!

Your mileage may vary, of course; if the *empfindsam* world of the late-baroque, early-classical sonata is a world you love, this may well appeal, so by all means go out of your way far enough to download and trial the two sample pages so helpfully offered on the Güntersberg website. (More publishers to follow this example, please!)

As usual from this source, music is competently engraved, thoughtfully laid-out, printed on good materials, etc. The first sonata has a figured bass (the figures having been imported from the oboe sonata source) while the second sonata does not – Güntersberg as usual provide a well-crafted keyboard realisation for both sonatas, (including some octave-shifting to avoid crossing parts). We also have a reference score with just solo and bass, and separate bass and solo parts. No grumbles at all, and a sensible editorial introduction in German and English is included.

I did wonder about some editorial details from time to time. The original composer or copyist seems to have been (not unusually) a bit haphazard with slurs; editorial slurs are all very well when the first instance of material has slurs which are not repeated later, but what do we do when it is the other way round? Or when semiquavers slurred in pairs appear 'recapitulated' slurred in fours? And how parallel is a parallel passage? I am afraid I found the editorial slurs sometimes raised more questions than they answered. Referring to just one sample page which the reader may consult for him/herself, why a slur in bar 15 and not in 17, in 21 and not 23, in 32 and 36 but not in 34? And I did wonder why the trill originally appearing over the third semiquaver in bar 24 has been moved *forward* to the first semiquaver rather than onto the crotchet to match bar 22? Details like the tie which connects the second crotchet in 14 to the *appoggiatura* in 15, are just plain puzzling!

Piers Snell

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