

Carl Friedrich Abel, Three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Basso in C minor, G minor, A minor

ed. Sonia Wronkowska. Edition Güntersberg: Maltzan Sammlung, vol. 2 (G302). ISMN 979-0-50174-302-5, 2016. Score and parts, €19.80.

It is a widely accepted narrative that the viola da gamba rose during the Renaissance, declined after the death of Purcell, and then languished in obscurity, only to be gloriously rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it turns out not to be as clear-cut as we've been led to believe, which will hardly shock the esteemed readers of the *VdGSA News*. We are all aware of the work of Carl Friedrich Abel, but allow me to indulge in a quick moment of history. Our beloved instrument was incredibly popular throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but had begun to be considered old-fashioned, dare I say *unfashionable*, by the mid-eighteenth century. The usual story is of Abel as the last great virtuoso of a dying instrument, respected for his skills as performer and composer; after his death the instrument rides off into the sunset for a century of well-earned rest. While not incorrect, this is also not the whole story. Peter Holman has elucidated this topic at length, notably in his engaging *Life After Death*. Historically informed performance has been drifting ever later, exploring music of the Classical and Romantic eras. The viola da gamba has mostly been left out of that particular discussion, due to the assumption that it had been shelved by Abel's death in 1787. But Abel died just four years before Mozart did, and this neglect of the early Classical viol has been to our detriment.

We know Abel to have been a prolific performer and composer, but until recently we have had comparatively little of his music available to us. The discovery and subsequent publication of two significant treasure-troves from libraries in Europe have given us much more to work with. The volume reviewed here represents a tiny sampling from one of these collections and of the labor that has gone into bringing this rediscovered music to the public.

Count Joachim Carl Maltzan was a Prussian diplomat who had connections to London and Berlin and the lively musical scenes in both cities. He was also an enthusiastic amateur viol player. His time in London coincided with the Bach-Abel concerts, and it is speculated that he could have been one of Abel's noble pupils. Whatever the relationship, the end result is that the count acquired manuscripts of music by Johann Christian Bach, Andreas Lidl, and Abel, some in autograph, that eventually made their way, along with the rest of the Maltzan palace library, to the University Library in Poznań, Poland. This rich vein was discovered by Sonia Wronkowska and mined initially as the subject of her 2016 master's thesis. The volume discussed here presents three of the twenty-seven sonatas and duets by Abel that were found

in the Maltzan collection. It is the second volume in a set of ten containing the complete body of newly uncovered music, edited by Wronkowska in an edition released by Güntersberg in 2016.

The volume contains an excellent preface on the historical background of these pieces and a concise, thorough explanation of the editorial policies. The historical information will be of real interest to many of our readers. Additions are clearly indicated throughout, for instance, in the form of dotted rather than solid slurs. Use of accidentals has been standardized to reflect modern conventions.

This edition consists of a score and separate parts. The solo part is provided in two versions, one in the original clefs with treble to be read down an octave, and bass; the other version adheres to the modern system of alto and bass clefs. The score does not contain figures, so you might want to give it to your keyboardist a bit in advance. As with all of Edition Güntersberg's publications, the music on the page is clear, beautifully formatted, and a pleasure to read. Measure numbers are provided in all parts, some fingerings are provided in the solo part, and page turns have been arranged to occur only between movements or sections.

Many of the sonatas by Abel that have been available to us are simple ones, readily accessible to students. The three pieces found here pose sufficient technical challenge to interest the more advanced player without featuring the overly complicated chordal writing sometimes found in Abel's unaccompanied music. The technical difficulties include a solo part that pushes the upper limits of the comfortable range. All three sonatas spend a fair amount of time off the frets, even now and again venturing beyond the invisible barrier of our high D. The challenges are interspersed with moments of repose, and the advanced player should find them achievable with some work. A few of the string crossing passages that leap across several strings are not for the faint of heart, but Abel's aims are musically satisfying enough to make the effort worthwhile. Except for a few juicy chords, the continuo part is straightforward enough, posing no significant obstacle to players accustomed to realizing harmonies in the absence of figures.

All three sonatas are in a three-movement form, with a longer and more elaborate first movement, an adagio middle, and a faster third. The last movements vary in form, with only one being the otherwise ubiquitous *tempo di minuetto* found in sonatas of this time. The three sonatas present similar challenges in terms of range and double stopping. The first, in the not-particularly-hospitable key of C minor, is surprisingly playable save for a few moments. Personally, I think the A-minor sonata has the most to offer musically in this set, along with some of the most hair-raising technical challenges. This sonata's strikingly chromatic adagio is particularly attractive.

These pieces should be an excellent addition to the repertoire of the experienced player. They offer engaging technical challenges while being musically satisfying. I would highly recommend them and that you consider some of the other volumes, which vary in their difficulty, in this set of newly published early Classical repertoire. Should you have the opportunity to read any of these sonatas with the accompaniment of a fortepiano instead of a harpsichord, jump at the chance! Any keyboard will bring them to life, but the sound-color combination of fortepiano and viol really take these *galant* pieces to the next level.

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