

Music reviews

Demachy (Le Sieur de Machy – fl.1655 - 1700)

Pièces de Violle

Ed. Franziska Finckh

Guntersberg G400

Demachy's eight solo suites for the seven-string bass viol, published in Paris in 1685, are an invitation into the world of French elegance. The suites are a collection of dance movements, each with its own character, key, and particular ornamentation.

The Guntersberg edition includes Demachy's *Avertissement*, or instruction manual, in which he makes clear how a viol should be played, and he bemoans the bad habits that some, even professional, players have allowed to creep into their playing. According to Demachy, if the rules are followed properly there should be no difficulty in mastering the instrument. It is interesting to note that Demachy's Suites were published a year before Marais published his *Pièces de Violle*, and he is keen to exert his influence in a climate of competing technical approaches to the playing of the instrument by St Colombe and his pupil Rousseau. He discusses at some length the importance of the harmonic nature of the Gamba in combination with the melodic line.

He also discusses the use of tablature as opposed to music notation – tablature being the preferred way to learn chordal passages, but nevertheless, a player may choose the method that suits him best.

Some fingerings are included, but many need to be worked out in order to keep the melodic line smooth in relation to the chords beneath.

Demachy takes the use of ornaments to its limits. And in turn the player is taken to his/her limits too! These pieces require detailed attention to the intricacy of every phrase and its embellishments. At all costs, anything vulgar must be avoided. The ornaments should never obtrude, but their presence is what brings grace and sophistication into the music. Guntersberg includes a useful page showing the signs for and interpretation of Demachy's ornaments.

The first D minor Prelude is the most complex of all the movements, with big chords, distinct phrases, and driving passages. This could be a piece in its own right, but is balanced out through the suite with a filigree Allemande, a fast-moving Courante with big interval jumps, a somewhat pensive Sarabande, a linear, flowing Gigue, a stately Gavotte, and a mournful, less ornamented Menuet.

Other Preludes consist of modulating, running quaver passages, some of which go in stepwise motion, and some with jumping intervals. The moods vary in the movements, partly influenced by the major or minor nature of the key. The second suite (D major) is light and cheerful, with a more introspective Sarabande, and likewise the fourth suite (G major) and the eighth (A major).

In some of the stepwise quaver movements there is the opportunity for playing *'inégal'*, introducing a

different rhythmic nuance to a phrase (Sarabande in Suite 1, Courante in Suite 5).

In some phrases it feels as if Demachy is seeing how long he can ornament a note without changing it (Courante in Suite 7). The challenge for the player is to imbue what could be seen as simple melodic phrases with meaning and interest through the use of the ornaments, and with the addition of the chords.

He also uses unexpected, slurred groupings of quavers, and stresses the importance of the *'double unisons'* and *'tenues'* to shape the sounds. His use of intervals of 7th and 9th are part the *'signature'* of his writing, as are some of his patterns of modulation.

It is interesting to consider Demachy's Suites in the context of the repertoire of the French composers of the time, and to observe how these innovative musicians negotiate the elusive balance of musical elements and their notation in different ways.

With a comprehensive introduction, and wire-bound pages, Guntersberg has produced an excellent publication. If, as Demachy suggests, you follow the rules, you will be able to play these suites with finesse, demonstrating how the gamba is the perfect instrument for playing harmonically as well as melodically. Nimble wits and nimble fingers will enable tasteful ornamentation and expression. The poised player can take time to dance, pause and breathe with these pieces. What might have started as a *'simple cloth'* could be embellished with the finest lace, or be transformed into rich brocade.

Helén Cais