

Preface

The German composer Johann Michael Nicolai lived from 1629 to 1685. We know little about his musical training in Thüringen. He played several instruments and was a member of the court band in the service of the Count of Sachsen-Lauenburg. From 1655 until his death he was an instrumentalist at the court of Stuttgart and instructed the choir boys. In addition to sacred music he also composed numerous instrumental works and is known to viol players today mainly for his three sonorous sonatas for three bass viols and continuo¹.

The hitherto unpublished pieces for two bass viols and continuo presented in this edition are found on pages 2-11 of the manuscript **GB-DRc D.10** in the Durham Cathedral Library. The title reads “Sonata â 2 Viol de Gamb: et Basso Continuo. Autor Sing:” Although this indicates one sonata, the last three of the eight pieces are in a completely different key than the first five. For this reason we have separated them into “Sonata in A minor” and “Suite in D minor”.

These same eight movements are also found in parts (with the omission of the first viol part) in the manuscript **GB-Lbm Add.Ms 31430**. At the beginning of this manuscript, which also includes other pieces, there are the words “by Mr Jenkins”. While the two manuscripts are in most respects very similar, there are some differences. For one thing, the order of the sections is different in the four-part Allemand. For another, while in D.10 all 8 movements appear consecutively, in 31430 only the movements of the same key signature are grouped together, with other pieces placed between them.

There are several indications that the pieces in question were actually composed by Nicolai. For one thing the compositional technique, the order of the movements, and the musical content are very similar to the above-mentioned sonatas for three viols. For another thing, they appear in close proximity to exactly those sonatas which are undoubtedly by Nicolai in both manuscripts. It seems unlikely to us that Jenkins is the composer, even though this opinion dominates amongst the musicologists^{2 3}.

We suggest that the pieces be played by two viols and a keyboard instrument, preferably an organ. Because the bass line of the continuo often runs parallel to that of the second viol part it is not necessary to double this line with a third viol. However, should no keyboard instrument be available, the sonatas can also be played by three bass viols.

Our edition reproduces manuscript D.10 as exactly as possible. When uncertain of the composer’s intentions we referred to manuscript 31430, making any necessary corrections without making a note of them. All other corrections are elucidated in the critical commentary. Although in both original manuscripts the viol parts are set in alto, tenor, and bass clefs, we have chosen to use bass and octavated treble clef in the score and bass and alto clef in the parts.

We wish to thank Andrew Ashbee, Bettina Hoffmann, and Brigitt Stehrenberger for their help with the research that went into determining the authorship of the pieces. Further thanks go to Gunther Morche for the realization of the figured bass and Lynn Dickinson for the translation of the preface.

Heidelberg, January 2004
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¹ E.g. Johann Michael Nicolai, Sonata in C major for 3 bass viols and basso continuo, Edition Günterberg 2003, order number G041

² Brian Crosby, A Catalogue of the Durham Cathedral Music Manuscripts, Oxford 1986, page 182

³ Bettina Hoffmann, Catalogo della musica solistica e cameristica per viola da gamba, Lucca 2001, page 107