



Anfang von Sonate I in KHM 25b
Beginning of Sonata I in KHM 25b

Introduction

In 1787 Carl Friedrich Abel died in London, and many thought it was the end of an era. His obituary in the *Morning Post* said that “his favourite instrument was not in general use, and would probably die with him”¹ and Goethe remembered him as “the last musician who handled the viola da gamba with success and applause.”² The fact that Abel was the last of three generations of gambists only adds to the poignancy of the story. Recent research has shown that the art of playing the gamba never entirely died out, but the instrument never again had a master as universally admired and internationally famous as Abel.

Born in Cöthen in 1723, Abel’s first position was in the Dresden orchestra from about 1743, possibly after studying with J. S. Bach in Leipzig. Around 1758 Abel set off for London, where he where he soon became known for his performances on the viol and the harpsichord, his compositions, and his direction and promotion of concerts. His partnership with Johann Christian Bach resulted in a concert series which enriched the musical life of London for many years. In 1782 he embarked on a trip back to Germany, including a period at the court of the Prussian crown prince, Frederick William. The prince’s enthusiasm for both the gamba and the cello is well documented, and he rewarded Abel richly for his playing, and perhaps also for these sonatas, which were almost certainly written in Berlin at this time.

The two sonatas are rather different from Abel’s other chamber works, and show that he was able to absorb and creatively reproduce some elements of the specific Berlin style. One of these is the sequence of movements, slow – fast – fast, which is neither a mistake nor an oddity when seen in the context of Berlin School sonatas. This sequence was inherited from composers such as Somis and Tartini, and was often favoured by the Berlin composers of this period over the more modern fast – slow – fast sonata type. Another Berlin characteristic is the expressive use of chromaticism, which is more pronounced than is usual in Abel’s music. This is found more in the first two movements of each sonata, whereas in the finales Abel reverts to a more typical uncomplicated jollity. Throughout the works he shows his mastery of charming melody, leavened by occasional comfortable passagework and chords. Although the designation “basso” would allow for the use of a chordal continuo instrument, Abel’s bass lines are strong and purposefully melodic, and the continuo instrument is not required. Since the bass part has a couple of notes below C, the seven-string viol may have been what Abel had in mind for it; however, a cello or a six-string viol would also be excellent choices.

The single grace notes, or appoggiaturas, are an important element in most eighteenth-century styles. The normal rule which we find in the writings of C. P. E. Bach, Leopold Mozart and others is that they should be

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¹ Cited in Walter Knappe, Murray R. Charters/Simon McVeigh, “Abel,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy, <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*. München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1961.

