

Introduction

Johann Christian Bach: Quartets for Abel, *the celebrated viol-di-gamba player*

“There [in Paris] I also already made the acquaintance of the two very famous musicians Bach and Abel, who had come from London to visit Baron de Bach.¹ I had the pleasure of sitting next to them at the dinner table and could already infer from their conversation as well as from the pleasant style of their music that one paid little attention in England to pranks and hocus-pocus in music, and that a master could only make himself popular by means of pure harmony, cantabile melodies, and sensitive expression, both in composition as well as in performance.”²

This first encounter of the flutist Jean Gaspard Weiss (1739–1815) in August 1767 with Johann Christian Bach and Carl Friedrich Abel, who at this point in time had become the two most influential musicians in London’s concert life, had far-reaching consequences. In the years up to 1774, Weiss was a part of a network of artists and aristocratic art lovers in London. “I soon became a member of a very pleasant and, for an artist, instructive society. It was made up mostly of the most famous artists in London, as, for example, MM Bach, Abel, Sachini, Fischer, Cramer, Crostdill, etc. as musicians, and MM Dance, Cipriani, Bartholozzi, West, etc. in the graphic arts etc. this company usually met once every week for a midday meal in the house of M Abel, who, in addition to his great merits as a musician, was just as talented in entertaining his guests. The pleasant conversation in this company, both at the dinner table as well as during the breaks in between, was so highly regarded that several aficionados from the highest ranks of society always wanted to join us.”³ It is to the artistic, social, and private interrelationships within this circle of people that we owe an abundance of art works, whose reception still leads to surprising discoveries even in the twenty-first century.

Since 1764, Johann Christian Bach and Carl Friedrich Abel proudly called themselves *Chamber Musician[s] to the Queen*. Queen Charlotte, born as Sophie Charlotte von Mecklenburg-Strelitz, was appreciative of art and an excellent keyboard player; in London’s St. James’s Palace, she surrounded herself with outstanding musicians from her German homeland, who having fled in large numbers from the turmoil of the Seven Years’ War, deluged London like a flood and lastingly transformed the

city’s musical life. The ensemble that made music in the palace was called *The Queen’s Band*, with *The Queen’s Chamber Band* as its elite formation. Twice a week this chamber music ensemble played for the queen; among its members over the years were Bach (keyboard) and Abel (viola da gamba, occasionally harpsichord), Wilhelm Cramer (violin), and Johann Christian Fischer (oboe), the latter two being replaced in 1775 by Frederick Nicolai (violin) and Redmond Simpson (oboe); moreover the clavierist Johann Samuel Schröter, the flutist Charles Papendiek, and the violoncellist John Crostdill. Queen Charlotte herself participated in the music-making as clavierist and singer.

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, who visited London in 1785, confirmed in retrospect in the *Musikalischer Almanach* that Abel was responsible “for playing the viola part on the gamba, at times also to accompany the harpsichord” in these concerts.⁴ Already three years previously, he had written about Abel: “He was a gambist and, in the queen’s regular small chamber music concerts, also played the bass, but more commonly the alto [i.e., viola] on the gamba.”⁵ This was confirmed by Ernst Ludwig Gerber: “His task in the queen’s concerts was usually to play the viola [parts] on his gamba, and every now and then, when Bach was absent, to accompany on the harpsichord.”⁶

“To play the viola or the ‘alto’ on the gamba” describes Abel’s participation in the quartet formation in which he performed the alto or tenor part of the quartet setting on the gamba. (This was abetted by the notation in alto clef, which was familiar to violinists and gambists alike.) The other players could be violinists, flutists, oboists, violoncellists, and harpsichordists. Abel’s Quartet in G Major for flute, violin, viola da gamba, and violoncello WKO 227 / A6:1 owes its creation to this practice,⁷ and Johann Christian Bach’s Quartet in B-flat Major, Warb B 60, is preserved in a Brussels manuscript as *Divertissement pour hautbois, violon, viola da gamba et basse*. There are reports of two otherwise unspecified quartets by Bach that were performed in October 1770 under the auspices of the Salisbury Festival. Biweekly private quartet sessions with Fischer, Cramer, Abel, and

¹ Charles Ernest Baron de Bagge (1722–1791), amateur violinist and patron of music in Paris.

² Jean Gaspard Weiss [Weiß], *Autobiographie*, ed. by Tobias Bonz and Eliane Michelon (Beeskow, 2012), p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴ *Musikalischer Almanach*, ed. J.F. Reichardt, part IV (Berlin, 1796).

⁵ Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Berichtigungen und Zusätze zum Gerschen Lexicon der Tonkünstler* (Berlin, 1793).

⁶ Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Neues Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon*, part 1, col. 5 (Leipzig, 1812).

⁷ Carl Friedrich Abel, *Quartet in G Major*, ed. by G. v. Zadow (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2011), G199.

Bach in Bach's residence in Richmond are also documented in notes by Charlotte Papendiek (Assistant Keeper of the Wardrobe and Reader to Her Majesty).

The credible reports and the knowledge of the close relationship between Bach and Abel convinced me already years ago that Bach must have composed quartets especially for his friend Abel, “*the celebrated viol-da-gamba player*,”⁸ who was effectively able to display his extraordinary capabilities. In 2012 the prominent Greek-American collector Dr. Elias N. Kulukundis purchased in an antiquarian music shop in Stuttgart a set of partbooks of English provenance, containing five of the six quartets of Bach's op. 8. In the context of the above-mentioned reports, the title *Quartetto / a / Oboè / Violino / Viola da Gamba / e / Basso. Del Sig^r: G[iovanni] C[ristiano] Bach* preceding each quartet in the basso partbook makes it clear that these are five of the quartets explicitly composed for Abel. The fabulous find is however marked with a blemish: of all things, Abel's partbook with the gamba part is lacking!

For the reconstruction of the gamba part, the recovery of the dynamics and articulation markings, and for the preparation of a conjectural original version of the E-flat Major Quartet (Warb B 53), which is not included in the partbooks, Bach's practice of recycling once again proved to be a stroke of luck, since the five quartets in the Kulukundis Collection (Warb B 51, 52, 54–56) represent early versions of the quartets op. 8 for flute/violin/oboe, violin, viola, and basso/violoncello. A comparison with their first editions by Stechwey (1772) and Welcker (1772), and consultation of further editions issued by Hummel, Sieber, and Götz, brought to light countless switched-around parts and transpositions with respect to the conjectural original version, changes in the dynamics and articulations, and, above all, several deletions of Abel's gamba solos, the execution of which Bach did not want to assign to the viola players assuming Abel's place. The reconstruction of Abel's lost gamba part with a compass of D to e² was a difficult, yet logically consistent endeavour. We owe the confirmation that the reconstructed part corresponded to the lost original part to the carelessness of two engravers, who inadvertently forgot to alter several bass-clef notes that are unplayable on the viola. “A man's errors are what make him amiable” (Goethe).

There can be no doubt that the instrumentation of the third quartet part with viola da gamba corresponds to Bach's original intention, and its level of difficulty once again shows Abel's abilities. On the one hand, the prints that appeared starting in 1772 in London, Amsterdam,

and Paris – and in which the gamba part had been transcribed for a viola and that additionally included alternative instrumentation suggestions for the first part – took into account the fact that the number of available gambists in the 1770s had already decreased considerably. On the other hand, the flexible scoring of the first part certainly enhanced the marketability, so that the Quartets op. 8 soon enjoyed great popularity in England and on the European continent.

The individual quartets are bound together (by twine in a parchment cover) in the partbooks of the Kulukundis Collection; this is shown by the five individual title pages of the basso part. It can no longer be determined whether a copy of the E-flat Major Quartet (Warb B 53) was lost before binding or never existed. The quartets, each written on two facing pages in landscape format in the hand of a professional (London?) copyist, probably stem from the early 1770s and display the owners' marks of William Clarke from Yaxley, Huntingdonshire (today Cambridgeshire) and Henry Smyth from Charlton in the neighbouring county of Northamptonshire. The order of the quartets deviates from that of all the printed editions; we have retained this order in our edition and added the Quartet in E-flat Major /Warb B 53) as number six. The English provenance of the manuscript, which could represent a copy of an already existing (now lost) manuscript source, is also evidenced by an English-language inscription in the violin part concerning the subsequent notation of forgotten measures.

The bass part of the manuscript is not figured; this speaks in favor of a performance on violoncello without the participation of a keyboard instrument. Of the prints listed in the description of the sources, the editions by Stechwey, Hummel, and Götz are figured, but that by Sieber is not. This offers a true representation of the changing performance situations that ensued through the participation of Bach or Schröter on the keyboard instrument, and Crosdill on the violoncello, and points to the different scoring possibilities for the basso part: with violoncello, with harpsichord or pianoforte, and also with string and keyboard instruments together.

The viola da gamba – of all the instruments authorized for the quartets, that with the largest compass – performs different functions within the quartet texture: it is a middle part; it is occasionally employed as a “Bassetchen” [literally: small bass instrument];⁹ and in a few cases, it replaces the basso part.¹⁰

Bach's Quartets op. 8 are – alongside the previously known five Sonatas for harpsichord or pianoforte and viola da gamba obbligato (Warb B 2b, 3b, 4b, 6b, 15b)¹¹ –

⁸ Charlotte L. H. Papendiek, *Court and Private Life in the Time of Queen Charlotte: being the Journals of Mrs Papendiek*, vol. 1, ed. by Vernon Delves Broughton (London, 1887).

⁹ Quartet no. II (D Major), Rondeaux, m. 17ff. and m. 106ff.

¹⁰ Quartet no. IV (B-flat Major), Andante, mm. 10–11 and mm. 77–78, Minuetto, mm. 80–81; Quartet no. V (F Major), Minuetto con variazioni, m. 21ff.

¹¹ Johann Christian Bach, *Four Sonatas for Harpsichord / Piano-forte and Viola da Gamba*, ed. by T. Fritsch and G. v. Zadow (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2012), G226 and G227. Johann Christian Bach, *Sonata a Piano forte e Viola da Gamba obbligato*, ed. by S. Wronkowska (Heidelberg, Güntersberg, 2016), G309.

a further indication of his continuing interest in the viola da gamba. However, to a greater extent than the sonatas, the Quartets op. 8 illustrate Carl Friedrich Abel's supreme mastery of the instrument, which put Bach in a position to form his wealth of musical ideas into works

that are unrivalled in terms of instrumentation and richness of ideas.

Thomas Fritzsch
Freyburg (Unstrut), May 2017

Our Edition

Our edition of the six Quartets op. 8 by Johann Christian Bach is based on the following sources:

Q1

D-LEb¹ **Kulukundis II.5 Warb 51(8)**. Manuscript of five quartets (in C, D, G, B-flat, and F) with the individual parts *Oboe, Violino, Basso*. Title page of each quartet in the Basso part reads: *Quartetto a Oboe [or Oboè] Violino Viola da Gamba Basso. Del Sigr: G. C. Bach*. The viola da gamba part is lacking. The copyist is not known.

Q1 is our principal source for the edition as a whole.

Q2

Print, **The Hague**, gravé pour le Compte d'Antoine Stechwey, *Six Quatuor à Deux Violons, ou une Flutte, un Violon, Taille, et Basse. par Jean Chretien Bach. Oeuvre IX [recte XIII], 1772, RISM B 309, GB-Lbl, etc.*

Q2 is our principal source for the third part, for the Quartet in E-flat Major, and for the figuring in the bass.

Q3

Print, **Amsterdam**, J. J. Hummel, No. 216, *Six Quatuor à Une Flute, Violon, Alto et Basse. Composées par Jean Chretien Bach... Oeuvre Huitième*, RISM B 310, I-MOe, etc.

Q4

Print, **Paris**, Sieber, *Six Quartetto Concertante A deux Violons, Ou un Hautbois, un Violon, Alto, & Basse. Composés par J C Bach. Oeuvre 8, 1772, RISM B 311, F-Pn, etc.*

Q5

Print, **Mannheim**, M. Götz, No. 7, *III Quartettos pour une flute, violon, taille et basse. Composée Par Jean Chretien Bach... œuvre Huitième* (D, G, B-flat), RISM B 312, CH-E, etc.

Q6

Print, **London**, Welcker, *Six Quartettos for a German Flute, Violin, Tenor and Violoncello. Composed by John Christian Bach... Opera VIII, 1772, RISM B 308, F-Pn, etc.*

The Kulukundis manuscript (Q1), which was unknown until now, is our principal source. It is unusual in that the third part is assigned to viola da gamba. Unfortunately, precisely this part has not come down to us. However, it was possible to reconstruct it from the viola parts of the contemporary prints Q2–Q6. The primary source Q1 also determined the order of quartets I–VI and the movement headings.

For the reconstruction of the gamba part, we compared all the prints of op. 8, Q2–Q6.² It turned out that there are basically two versions, represented on the one hand by the largely concordant group Q2–Q5, and, on the other hand, by the London print Q6. The differences point to a reworking (switched-around parts, octave transpositions, variant treatment of the two upper voices). These differences are greatest in the Quartets no. III (G Major) and no. 5 (F Major). Quartets no. IV (B-flat Major) and no. VI (E-flat Major) are almost identical in both versions.

A comparison of the Kulukundis manuscript (Q1) with these two versions shows a very close concordance with the Q2–Q5 group.³ For the reconstruction of the gamba part, we selected print Q2 as the primary source, because it seemed to us to be the most reliable of this group.

Our reconstruction of the gamba part follows the viola part as closely as possible. However, we have transposed several short passages down an octave for the gamba. The justification for this is that in two of the printed sources we found a number of places that are too low for viola and notated in bass clef: Quartet no. I (C Major), Minuetto, mm. 15–16 (Q6) and mm. 65–66 (Q4 and Q6); Quartet no. IV (B-flat Major), Minuetto, mm. 80–81 (Q4). We assume that the model for these two prints was a version for gamba, and that the engravers forgot to transpose these passages. The passages transposed down an octave in our score are indicated by [va ...]. In addition to the gamba part, our set of parts also includes a viola part without these octave transpositions.⁴

For the Quartet in E-flat Major, which is completely lacking in Q1, we have likewise employed Q2 as the

¹ Bach Archive, Leipzig.

² In addition to these prints, there are several manuscript sources of op. 8.

³ There is indeed a deviation in the Allegretto of Quartet no. III (G Major): the movement is twenty-two measures longer in Q1 than

in Q2–Q5. However, it was possible to restore the missing passages in the third part on the basis of the violin part of the same movement.

⁴ In the Allegretto of Quartet no. III (G Major), the indicated passages are not octave transpositions, but rather passages that stem from different sources (Viola da Gamba from Q2, Viola from Q6).

principal source. The quartet has been assigned the number VI in our edition.

The scoring differs in the above-mentioned sources. For the uppermost part, oboe or flute is almost always given top priority, only then followed by violin. The second voice, on the other hand, is clearly intended for violin, owing to its nature and compass. In the prints, the third part is always assigned to viola; only in Q1 is *viola da gamba* indicated. The bass part is usually labelled *Basso*, and in one case *Violoncello* (Q6). In our edition, we have taken into account all these scoring possibilities. The bass is figured in Q2, Q3, and Q5. We have adopted the figuring from Q2 in order to enable performance with a keyboard instrument.

Articulations and dynamics are extraordinarily important for this music, but none of our sources contain complete and consistent markings. This is the case for the parts within any one source and also in comparison among all the sources.⁵ However, if one considers all the sources together, the result is a coherent and complete whole that we reproduce in our edition. The third part is a reconstruction (with the exception of Quartet no. VI in E-flat Major), so that adjustments had to be made (the addition of missing measures, articulations, and dynamics). Moreover, we have corrected obvious errors in the

musical text of Q1 and Q2. Q1 displays a number of eighth-note grace notes notated with a stroke through the hook. Contrary to today's meaning (short *appoggiatura* before the main note), sixteenth-note *appoggiaturas* are intended. Because of the large number of alterations and additions that this would require with respect to the principal sources Q1 and Q2, we have dispensed with corresponding markings – contrary to our usual practice – in order not to overload our edition, which is indeed intended to serve practical music-making.

The first recording of the Quartets Op. 8 by Go Arai, Daniel Deuter, Thomas Fritzsich, and Inka Döring, which is based on this edition, was issued in 2017 by Coviello Classics (COV 91712).

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Günter von Zadow
Heidelberg, May 2017
Translation: Howard Weiner



Kulukundis-Manuskript, Q1: Beginn der Oboen-Stimme des Quartetts Nr. III (G-Dur).

Diese und die folgenden drei Abbildungen illustrieren beispielhaft die Rekonstruktion der Viola da Gamba-Stimme. Die Taktzahlen am linken Rand sind hinzugefügt und stimmen mit unserer Edition überein. Ein Vergleich mit dem Druck Q2 zeigt, dass dort die Takte 29 bis 39 fehlen. Die Viola da Gamba-Stimme in diesen Takten wurde aus der Violino-Stimme in den elf Folgetakten ergänzt, da es sich im Wesentlichen um dieselbe Passage mit vertauschten Stimmen handelt.

Kulukundis manuscript, Q1: beginning of the oboe part of the Quartet no. III (G major).

This and the three following images illustrate the reconstruction of the viola da gamba part as an example. The bar numbers at the left margin have been added and are the same as in our edition. A comparison with print Q2 shows, that the bars 29–39 are missing in the print. The viola da gamba part for these bars was added according to the violino part in the eleven following bars, because these two passages are essentially equal with interchanged parts.

⁵ Our sources contain only individual parts, not scores.