

## Introduction

Born in Cöthen in 1723, Carl Friedrich Abel's first position was in the Dresden orchestra from about 1743, possibly after studying with J. S. Bach in Leipzig. In the winter of 1758–59 Abel set off for London, 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 commenced in 1763, and two years later they started the Bach-Abel concert series, which enriched the musical life of London until 1782. During Mozart's visit to London in 1764–5, he was mentored by the two more senior German composers. In 1782 Abel embarked on a trip back to Germany, including a richly rewarded performance for the Prussian crown prince Frederick William. Abel spent the last two years of his life back in London, still active as a musician and a member of fashionable society. In 1787 he died in London, and many thought it was the end of an era. His obituary in the *Morning Post* said that "his favourite instrument [the viola da gamba] was not in general use, and would probably die with him" and over 20 years later Goethe remembered him as "the last musician who handled the viola da gamba with success and applause."<sup>1</sup>

Peter Holman has identified two contrasting styles in Abel's composition for his own instrument, the viola da gamba. One was for public consumption or for use by his students, and the other, far more passionate and technically difficult, was for his own performance.<sup>2</sup> The same might be said of his compositions for violin, even though he was not known as a performer on that instrument. Whereas other works, such as the six sonatas published by Hummel in Amsterdam, are quite complex and demand a high level of technique, this sonata does not require virtuosic skill. That said, in an era when sonatas were sometimes marketed equally at flute and violin players, Abel has clearly differentiated it from his many compositions for the flute. The texture is idiomatic for the violin, without being virtuosic. We often find a deliberate intention to ex-

loit and enjoy the different tone colours of the upper and lower strings, for example when Abel repeats a motive at the octave at bar 6 in the *Vivace*. Only the first three positions are required, most of the work can be played in first position, and there are no double stops.

Abel's contemporary, the famous music historian and commentator Charles Burney, remarked that Abel's "invention was not unbounded, and his exquisite taste and deep science prevented the admission of whatever was not highly polished."<sup>3</sup> This work shows the composer's excellence in crafting satisfying musical creations. Each movement is in an early variant of what was to become Classical sonata form. On a relatively small scale, the basic elements of sonata form are all present: a first theme in the tonic key, a modulation to the dominant, a second subject and cadence in the dominant, a development section which diverges into a few more distant keys, and a recapitulation with both subjects in the tonic key. In the faster movements the double bar signifies the end of the exposition, whereas in the *Adagio* this occurs unmarked at the end of bar 6.

This sonata is cast in the slow-fast-fast (SFF) three-movement form which was often used by composers such as Somis and Tartini in the first half of the century, but which was gradually supplanted by the fast-slow-fast form after about 1760. However, too little is known about the dating of Abel's compositions to conclude from this that it is an early work: he seems to have used both forms at will. In the SFF form the three movements are always in the same key, whereas in the later form the central movement is usually in a contrasting key.

Another characteristic of the SFF form is that a fermata which signifies that a cadenza is required is often found at the final cadence, almost always in the opening slow movement rather than in the final fast movement as in the Classical concerto. This sonata is quite unusual in that the copyist has provided a quite elegant sample cadenza, with an arch shape and an implied *accelerando* towards the end.

<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Tübingen 1812), vol. 2, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Holman, *Life After Death: the Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Burney, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London 1776–1789), vol. 4, p. 680.

As required in the sonata genre, each movement has its own character. However, in this sonata we find an unusual degree of thematic unity between the movements. In the *Allegro* and the *Vivace*, the opening themes both start with an ascending G major triad, and in the *Adagio* the first three notes also ascend to a D, but stepwise. Now these motives are common enough to be unremarkable, though the way Abel inverts the theme and uses different ornaments at the double bar in the *Vivace* is a nice touch. However, the unity of the second themes (bars 5 and 15 in the *Adagio*, 10 and 36 in the *Allegro*, 14 and 51 in the *Vivace*) is extraordinary. Each of them consists of a scale rising over a sixth, but decorated in engagingly different ways. Abel seems quite often to use related themes to unify his sonatas.

*Vivace* is a frequent tempo marking for sonata final movements by Abel and many of his contemporaries. In Abel's case these are almost always based on the minuet, though it is unusual for this to be marked explicitly, as it is here. Such movements normally begin with one or two four-bar phrases, then expand on and diverge from the repeated four-bar phrases which are characteristic of this dance, so as to create a more substantial sonata movement. We might speculate that Abel added the marking *Tempo di Minuetto* as a reminder, since in this case the first phrase happens to be three and not four bars, and the unequal phrase lengths commence right at the beginning of the movement. The concurrence of these two terms, *Vivace* and *Tempo di Minuetto* is fortuitous, reminding us that *Vivace* is today probably the most misunderstood eighteenth-century tempo marking. Whereas the famous Maelzel metronome, and the understanding of modern musicians, place *Vivace* as a tempo considerably faster than *Allegro* and only one step below *Presto* in speed, in the eighteenth century this was not the case. Those treatises which give a hierarchy of tempo markings invariably place *Vivace* as slower than *Allegro*, making it clear that *Vivace* can comfortably be applied to the minuet, a moderately fast and cheerful dance.<sup>4</sup>

As always with manuscript sources, there are frequent discrepancies in articulation, which we do not attempt to "correct." For example, in the *Adagio* the first two notes of the main theme are slurred when they appear at the recapitulation at the end of bar 12,

but not in the two previous occurrences of the theme. This is more likely to be an oversight by the copyist than a deliberate choice; performers can easily add slurs, or not, as they choose. Similarly in that movement, the fact that each triplet has its own slur, but two of them are uniquely slurred together in bar 4, is unlikely to carry any particular significance.

It is worth considering in some detail another area where freedom of interpretation, guided but not strictly ruled by what we know of performance practice at the time, is relevant. C.P.E Bach wrote that appoggiaturas, irrespective of their notated length, are played on the beat and take half or two thirds of the value of the following note, but also that there was an increasing tendency to notate them at the correct length. These observations can be applied throughout this work. Possibly as a guide to students and amateurs who may not have been familiar with the conventions, Abel or his copyist has generally added an appoggiatura to trilled notes. However even where it is not marked, convention would require one; on the other hand, a trill may or may not be added to other notes which have an appoggiatura. At the second subject of the *Vivace* at bar 14, the copyist has probably deliberately marked the appoggiaturas as semiquavers, to suggest to the performer that these should be played short, a solution which seems more elegant at this point than the long appoggiaturas described above. Another type of grace note in frequent use was the *coulé*, a charming ornament borrowed from the French style. This is used over falling thirds such as in bar 22 of the *Vivace* and elsewhere, and is played short, before the beat and unaccented.

Michael O'Loghlin  
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## Our Edition

The present edition is based on a manuscript in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in München with siglum and shelf number **D-MBs Mus. ms. 6850**. The manuscript contains the sonata twice. A title page does not exist.

The first copy has on the first of four pages at the upper right *di Abel* and underneath the title *Suonata*

<sup>4</sup> See e. g.: Anonymer Autor der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts, *Instruction oder eine anweisung auff der Violadigamba*, ed. Bettina Hoffman (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2014), G240, p. 25. Order: ...

Andante, Un poco Vivace, Vivace, Allegro Assaÿ, Allegro, Un poco Presto, Presto ...