

Introduction

Three illustrious German musical dynasties reached their zenith in the eighteenth century: they bear the names Abel, Bach and Benda. There were many interactions and collaborations between various musicians in these families, but none was more significant than the team which comprised Carl Friedrich Abel and Johann Christian Bach. From 1764 to 1781, the two Saxon musicians promoted and directed the Bach–Abel concerts in London, forming a pioneering partnership in the history of the public concert, still a young institution. Its early development coincided with the “new simplicity” or galant revolution: counterpoint became less significant, melody became simpler, and symmetry gained significance at all levels, from motives and phrases to entire movements. Unlike today, the public wanted new music; but like today, they wanted to be able to understand and respond to it without too much effort. The new style was driven by Italian opera and symphony composers. Bach would have learned it during his seven years working in northern Italy. Abel never went to Italy, but his first position was as a member of the Dresden court orchestra, which was directed by the Italianate composer Johann Adolph Hasse.

Probably in 1755, Abel embarked on a long and poorly documented journey, although we do know that he visited the Goethe household in Frankfurt. He arrived in London some time before 5 April 1759, the date of his first concert there. London was a major music centre; and a most unusual one, in that almost all of its entrepreneurs, composers, and most famous performers were Germans or Italians. Abel was celebrated not only for his compositions, but also for his performances on the viola da gamba. After over 20 years as one of London’s leading musicians, Abel set off for Germany via Paris in May 1782. In Potsdam or Berlin he was well rewarded for his performances for the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm. From January 1785 he was again active in London.

Peter Holman has found many eyewitness accounts which support his contention that when performing his own music, Abel had two styles: a public face, and an intensely emotional style for intimate private performances.¹ He was even compared

to Laurence Sterne, the most influential exponent of the sensitive style in literature. We find this dichotomy reflected in his compositions. Many of his solos for viola da gamba, including almost certainly many which he improvised but never wrote down, show elements of the sensitive style (*empfindsamer Stil*) characteristic of North German composers such as C. P. E. Bach. Symphonies and overtures formed the backbone of Abel’s (and indeed all) public concerts. These needed to be robust works to open the concert; they almost always commenced with a strong loud chord to gain the attention of the public, and included contrasting moods between movements and within each movement, especially the first one. However, they are not entirely free of elements of *Empfindsamkeit*, as we will see below.

Except for the six Prussian Symphonies presented here, all of Abel’s 46 symphonies were printed in London and elsewhere. Although we do not have detailed programmes, we can assume that they were performed at the Bach-Abel concerts, and probably in many other centres. This set may have been performed before Abel left for Germany, during his time in Germany, or at the Grand Professional Concerts which Abel led from 1785 after his return from Germany. They are presumably his last symphonies, and publication may have been delayed and ultimately prevented by Abel’s advancing age and poor financial circumstances. In the case of the five pure symphonies, extra parts in the hand of the Berlin copyist Johann Nicolaus Schober have been added to the original English set of single parts. In the case of No. 4, the *Sinfonia Concertante*, all of the parts are by Schober. Apparently Schober was given the job of making the parts ready for a performance by an orchestra of perhaps 17 players in Potsdam or Berlin: he added the word “Contra” to the original English basso part for the contrabass player(s), wrote out a duplicate basso part for the cellist(s), as added other parts as necessary. These included duplicate parts for the violins and also some wind parts. The presence of parts which are not duplicates of the English set shows that he must have had a score or some other parts to work from, now lost. As far as can be judged from scans of the

¹ Peter Holman, *Life After Death: The Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge 2010), p. 179–182.

parts and with the exception of the *Sinfonia Concertante*, there is no evidence of performance anywhere; but this is quite normal in eighteenth-century manuscript parts. It seems musicians then did not need the copious pencil annotations, bar numbers and bowing marks we now find necessary.

The Five True Symphonies, nos. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6

Every one of Abel's symphonies is set in three movements. In the early eighteenth century, the symphony originated as the curtain-raiser, or *sinfonia*, to the Italian opera; in fact, almost all of Abel's symphonies were also marketed as overtures. Contrasting with the French overture, these *sinfonias* were always in three movements in a fast – slow – fast format; whereby the finale could be either faster or more moderate in tempo than the first movement. Emancipating the symphony from its operatic origins, Joseph Haydn introduced what was to become the stable classical four-movement symphonic form as early as 1762, and Mozart followed suit in 1771; but Abel never adopted the newer form.

In his introduction to his edition of Abel's six symphonies op. 1, which were performed in London as early as 1760, soon after Abel's arrival, Zimmerman speaks frequently of the appearance of both Baroque and Classical characteristics in these works. It would of course be absurd to imply that Abel felt tension between the two styles, since neither term was known as a period descriptor at the time. However one cannot escape the feeling that Zimmerman is reflecting a common view: that works such as these suffer from the supposed immaturity of the sonata form at the time.

Although virtually all eighteen movements bespeak a familiarity with the principles of sonata-allegro, at least in its incipient stage, none is progressive, and most are definitely old-fashioned, that is to say, "Baroque" in formulation. . . . Developmental passages, where they exist, . . . tend to be brief, tentative, and somewhat stereotyped in harmonic plan.²

These and Abel's subsequent symphonies were celebrated as just what the public wanted, and their style was clearly thought to be fresh and new. Throughout his career, Abel used sonata form

(again, a term which was not known at the time), in his opening symphonic movements; but he did move with the times and adapt it to some extent. Its strength lay in the fact that it provided a satisfying framework combining symmetry and asymmetry, continuity and contrast, within which a composer could be infinitely flexible. Abel seems to have become more flexible and less predictable: for instance, Zimmerman comments that "Almost all of Abel's symphonic movements fall into three parts that are more or less equal in length."³ In these last symphonies, tripartite forms remain frequent, but the sections can be very divergent in length. In the opening movements, the exposition is normally the longest, but Symphony no. 2 has a very long and interesting development section. This commences with a new theme which is then varied, and includes inversions and various developments of the main and subsidiary subjects. A pretty touch in the exposition of this movement is the introduction of the first subject as a bass to the second. Abel does this again in the development section of the first movement of the Symphony no. 5. Such hints at contrapuntal technique, including brief imitations, are frequently to be found in these works. Abel was quite capable of writing a fugue, and he did so in one of his solos for viola da gamba, but a fully developed fugue would not be expected in this modern *galant* style.

The central slow movements are some of Abel's finest creations, showing us a glimpse of the passionate private composer. These movements show many characteristics of *Empfindsamkeit* as we know it from such Berlin School composers as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach's older half-brother. The *Andante* of the first symphony is a good example. It is written for strings only, freed from the harmonically inhibiting influence of the natural horns. The melody is expressive throughout, and remains almost entirely with the first violins. The first dissonance is found in bar 2, where the G sharp is approached by a diminished third, and further expressive dissonances are found on strong beats throughout. The tension is relieved by the typically *galant* triplets at bar 31; but the re-transition commences immediately afterwards with a series of poignant falling sixths over a dominant pedal, followed by a sudden shock: a diminished

² Franklin B. Zimmerman, Introduction to *Carl Friedrich Abel: Six Symphonies, Opus 1*. The Symphony, series E, vol. II, ed. Barry S. Brook and Barbara B. Heyman, (New York & London 1983) p. xvii.

³ Zimmerman, Introduction to *Carl Friedrich Abel: Six Symphonies, Opus 1*. p. xvii.

seventh chord in *forte*. This is followed by a rhetorical pause whose emotional *affect* is quite unlike the rests which are found after dominant chords in the outer *Allegro* movements: here, the listener has no idea what will follow. As it happens, Abel finds his way into A flat major via a dominant, before proceeding to the recapitulation.

The second symphony has a songlike central *Andantino* in which the oboe and horn soloists are accompanied by the strings. If it were in an opera, it would be more a conversation than a typical duet, because the two soloists play together only for a few bars. Each has its own theme, but each adopts the other's material as the movement progresses. The set of parts begins to tell a story about a performance of this movement, but we do not know how it ends. Uniquely in this set of symphonies, the oboe parts are in Abel's own hand. Even more interesting are the horn parts, of which there are three, all in E flat and all in the hand of the London copyist. The first horn plays only the outer movements. It remains in the upper middle register with very little variety, providing only strength and harmonic support. The second horn plays a similar role in the outer movements, the range being similarly restricted but a little lower. Both the first and second horn parts are labelled *Andantino tacet*: do not play the *Andantino*. However, there is another second horn part which contains only the *Andantino*, with the outer movements marked *tacet*. Unlike the other horn parts, this part requires a skilled soloist. Its top note is the same as the first horn's, a written g'', sounding b flat', not particularly high by Classical horn standards. However it contains scale runs in the middle register as well as quite fast low arpeggios, both of which required a virtuoso technique on the natural horn. It is also distinguished from the orchestral horn parts by its beautiful melodic lines. It seems likely that this part was intended for a different player, a soloist of high calibre. In the *Andante* of the sixth symphony, the oboes and horns are silent, but the two flutes are given a partially independent part, adding sweetness to the strings. This is the only one of Abel's symphonies to use flutes.

The finales are either in rondo or sonata rondo form – the latter term meaning a rondo with some modulation and development, as found in sonata form. In his symphonies and sonatas generally, Abel seems to have two basic styles or moods for finales: the very swift, light movement, usually in 2/4 or 3/8 time, and the *Tempo di Menuetto*. In this

set, the only *Tempo di Menuetto* is found in the sixth symphony. The second symphony finale also has a dance-like character: it is reminiscent of the gavotte, though not marked as such. The Symphony no. 1 finale is tightly controlled thematically: in the outer sections in C major, all themes derive from one basic idea, which then contrasts with the central section in C minor. The Symphony no. 3 finale has a typical hunting theme in 6/8 time, reminiscent of the Mozart horn concerto finales. However, Abel has resisted the urge to give the full hunting theme to the horns; instead they get a only a small motive from the traditional call of a pair of hunting horns, for example at the end of the first repeated section.

Symphony no. 4: Sinfonia Concertante for oboe, violin, cello and orchestra

In this work, the compositional technique is different from the pure symphonies. Each movement is based on the concerto format which was universal in the eighteenth century: an alternation of *ritornello* (tutti) and solo sections. The origin of the *ritornello*, a section played by the full ensemble to separate solo sections, is entirely Italian; it was used in vocal music through the seventeenth century, and brought into instrumental music (the concerto) by Vivaldi and younger contemporaries such as Tartini. The *ritornello* form was taken up almost unchanged by German composers, and finally integrated into sonata form by Mozart.

Despite its name, this work has much more of the concerto than the symphony. The main symphonic characteristic is found in the long opening *ritornelli* in the outer movements. After that, the three soloists are allowed to dominate, the successive *ritornelli* becoming progressively shorter. These outer movements each have four *ritornelli* and three solos in between them. The normal procedure in this form is that the *ritornelli* are harmonically stable, while the solo sections modulate to a new key. This is the case here, except that in each of the outer movements, the third *ritornello* modulates from B minor back to the home key of D major, at which point the third solo announces the recapitulation in the home key. In the central slow movement, the pre-eminence of the soloists is even more pronounced: the three *ritornelli* are pared down to the bare minimum. This movement has a charming group cadenza for the three soloists, which in the original set of parts was written out in full for each player: surely an invitation to play it freely rather than in strict time.

In this work, the emphasis is typically Abellian: singing melody rather than virtuosity. In the eighteenth century a soloist could hardly make a reputation with technique alone; the ability to move an audience, preferably to tears, was expected. This work requires enough technical skill to play some moderately fast scales, arpeggios and passage work, but is easier than many contemporary concertos for oboe, violin or cello. The texture of the solo sections is based on a happy balance of solos and duets with the occasional trio section, lightly accompanied. Each of the solo instruments is also represented in the orchestra, and when the player has no solo, much of the orchestral part is included in the solo parts – or in the case of the cello part, all of it. The soloists can of course choose how much or how little they play.

The first recorded performance of this work was on 16 February 1785, at the Hanover Square Grand Professional Concert in London. The soloists were Johann Christian Fischer (oboe) Wilhelm Cramer (violin) and James Cervetto (cello). Performance marks on the Schober copies suggest that it may also have been performed in Potsdam or Berlin, possibly by Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, a keen and competent amateur cellist, with his musicians.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the name Mozart has appeared a few times in this introduction. It is well known, but worth repeating here, that Bach and Abel mentored the young Mozart on his visit to London in 1764/5. Mozart copied Abel's Symphony in E flat, op. 7 no. 6, which was long thought to be Mozart's own work. Abel's style shows surprising similarities to Mozart's: above all, the apparently endless resource of charming melodies. With their skilful use of passing dissonances, many of Abel's melodies are quite similar to Mozart's. As an innovator, neither composer ranks with the older C. P. E. Bach or the younger Beethoven, and Abel even less so than Mozart. Abel's use of the wind instruments is cautious, with the exception of a few special solo sections; quite like the early Mozart,

but nothing like the glorious *Harmoniemusik* passages in Mozart's late symphonies and piano concertos. Both composers have a charming facility to introduce new and unexpected themes into their development sections. In the area of harmony, Abel is again the more cautious composer, rarely venturing outside the circle of closely related keys. This is not meant to suggest that Abel is merely a pale imitation of Mozart. Like any significant composer, he has some aspects in common with his contemporaries, and some which are uniquely his own; and all of them are well worth finding and enjoying.

With thanks to Robert Johnson for his advice on eighteenth-century horn technique.

Michael O'Loghlin
Brisbane, January 2021

Our Edition

We assume that all of Abel's handwritten works, which are now in the Berlin *Königliche Hausbibliothek*⁴, arrived there on the occasion of Abel's visit to the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm in 1782. The chart on page XIII provides an overview of these manuscripts. Abel had prepared his visit well. Two years earlier, in 1780, his six quartets op. 15 had been published in London with a dedication to the Crown Prince.⁵ And Abel evidently brought his Cello Concerto in C major (WKO 60) for the cello-playing Crown Prince. The only surviving source of this is the performance material in Berlin today, which includes cadenzas in Abel's hand. After Abel's death, an auction of his estate took place in London, offering under "Manuscript Music" "The last concerto which Mr. Abel composed, designed for the present King of Prussia".⁶ This London manuscript has not survived.

In addition to the Violoncello Concerto, Abel apparently also brought the scores of ten new symphonies with him to Berlin, including the Sinfonia Concertante in D major with the solo instruments oboe, violin and violoncello. In any case, the performance material for these is now exclusively in the *Königliche Hausbibliothek*. The title pages of these

⁴ The *Königliche Hausbibliothek* is today part of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv.

⁵ Six | QUATUORS | pour | Deux Violons, Alto, et Violoncello, | obligés | Dediés avec le plus profond Respect | à | Son Altesse Royale, Monseigneur | LE PRINCE DE PRUSSE | & . & . & . | Composés par | CHARLES FRÉDÉRIC ABEL | Musicien de la Chambre de Sa

Majesté | LE REINE DE LA GRANDE BRETAGNE. | LONDON | Printed for the Author and Sold at his House, N.º 6 Duke Street, Portland Place. Announced in the Public Advertiser on 04.01.1781.

⁶ Stephen Roe, „The Sale Catalogue of Carl Friedrich Abel (1787)“, *Music and the Book Trade from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (New Castle, Delaware and London 2008), pp. 105–144.

symphonies were created by the Berlin copyist Johann Nicolaus Schober⁷ and numbered 1 to 10. Four of these symphonies were published in London at about the same time as part of Abel's Six Symphonies op. 17. The remaining six, however, remained unpublished. They are called "Prussian Symphonies" because they are related to the Prussian Court and have only survived in the *Königliche Hausbibliothek*. Fittingly, also offered at the aforementioned auction was "Symphonies by Abel, his last work, unpublished".⁶ These London manuscripts are lost as well.

The sources of the Prussian Symphonies consist of individual parts, mostly for two violins, viola, basso, two oboes and two horns, whereby there is another copy for each of the violins and the basso (duplicates). Most of the parts were prepared – as the paper used suggests – by London scribes whose names are not known. Two oboe parts on London paper were written by Abel himself. The duplicates and some other parts were written by the Berlin copyist Schober mentioned above. In the following, we thus distinguish between parts from London and from Berlin.

Our edition follows the sources as closely as possible. We have given priority to the notation of the London parts over the Berlin parts. The few errors that we have corrected and some other alterations are listed in the Critical Report on page XIV. We have only added articulation where there are parallel passages or other compelling reasons such as manners of bowing. If individual articulations that seem sensible to us can only be found in the duplicates, we have adopted them tacitly. This also applies to the length of the appoggiaturas.

All our additions are marked: Slurs and ties are dashed, other additions are in square brackets. If we suggest signs that differ from the source, these are also in brackets. Warning accidentals are set tacitly.

The **Prussian Symphony No. 1 in C major**, WKO 37⁸, has the shelfmark KHM 8⁹. The title in Schober's handwriting reads: *Sinfonia in C*. | *Violino 1^{mo}* | *Violino 2^{do}* | *Viola* | & | *Basso*. | *Oboè 1^{mo}* | *Oboè 2^{do}* | *Corno 1^{mo}* | *Corno 2^{do}* | [Incipit *Allegro assai*] | *di Abel*. At the top left of the title page is the serial number 4. There are 11 parts in all:

Main sources London (V1, V2, Va, B, Ob1, Ob2, Co1, Co2)
 Duplicates Berlin (V1, V2, B)

The **Prussian Symphony No. 2 in B flat major**, WKO 38, has the shelfmark KHM 9. The title in Schober's handwriting reads: *Sinfonia in B*. | *Violino 1^{mo}* | *Violino 2^{do}* | *Viola* & | *Basso*. | *Oboè 1^{mo}* | *Oboè 2^{do}* | *Corno 2^{do}* | *Obligato* | *Corno 1^{mo}* | *Corno 2^{do}* | [Incipit *Maestoso*] | *di Abel*. At the top left of the title page is the serial number 5. There are 12 parts in all:

Main sources London (V1, V2, Va, B, Co1)
 Autograph (Ob1, Ob2)
 Berlin (Co2, Co2 Obl.)
 Duplicates Berlin (V1, V2, B)

The **Prussian Symphony No. 3 in E flat major**, WKO 39, has the shelfmark KHM 10. The title in Schober's handwriting reads: *Sinfonia in Eb*. | *Violino 1^{mo}* | *Violino 2^{do}* | *Viola* | & | *Basso*. | *Oboè 1^{mo}* | *Oboè 2^{do}* | *Corno 1^{mo}* | *Corno 2^{do}* | [Incipit *Allegro*] | *di Abel*. At the top left of the title page is the serial number 6. There are 11 parts in all:

Main sources London (V1, V2, Va, B, Ob1, Ob2, Co1, Co2)
 Duplicates Berlin (V1, V2, B)

I thank Michael O'Loghlin for the introduction and Thomas Fritzsich for his proofreading and his suggestions.

Günter von Zadow
 Heidelberg, February 2021

Order Numbers

G369	Sinfonie Nr. 1–3	full score
G370	Sinfonie Nr. 4–6	full score
G371	Sinfonie Nr. 1	parts
G372	Sinfonie Nr. 2	parts
G373	Sinfonie Nr. 3	parts
G374	Sinfonie Nr. 4	orchestral parts
G375	Sinfonie Nr. 5	parts
G376	Sinfonie Nr. 6	parts
G377	Sinfonie Nr. 4	piano reduction and solo parts

⁷ Bernd Koska, „Die Berliner Notenkopisten Johann Gottfried Siebe und Johann Nicolaus Schober und ihre Bach-Abschriften“, *Bach Jahrbuch* 2017, S. 149–184.

⁸ Walter Knappe, *Bibliographisch-thematisches Verzeichnis der Kompositionen von Karl Friedrich Abel* (Cuxhaven 1971).

⁹ RISM: D-B KHM 8.