

# Introduction

## Abel's Biography and Legacy

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. 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. Abel soon became known for his performances on the viola da gamba 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 there, 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"<sup>1</sup> and over 20 years later Goethe remembered him as "the last musician who handled the viola da gamba with success and applause."<sup>2</sup> 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>

Abel's formative years 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. Abel's colleague J. C. 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 Johann Adolph Hasse, who had studied and worked successfully in Italy, and brought the Italian style back to Dresden.

Perhaps no eighteenth-century composer is now in as much need of a reassessment as Abel. The forthcoming catalogue of his works<sup>4</sup> will contain about 400 entries, of which only 233 are listed in the 1971 catalogue by Walter Knappe.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the works for viola da gamba, the newly discovered works mainly have been found in various German collections, and are thought in general to date from Abel's early years in Germany, before he left for London. Abel was prolific in the three most significant instrumental forms, symphony, concerto and sonata, and also wrote many short single-movement pieces. The concerto is the least represented instrumental form, with 29 works, not all of which have survived. There are eleven surviving flute concertos, making it his most favoured concerto solo instrument; his other concertos are for keyboard, violin, cello, horn, viola da gamba, and oboe.

## Abel's Concerto Form

In 1711 Vivaldi published his famous collection of concertos, *L'estro armónico*, op. 3. These revolutionary works became the model for successive generations, especially German composers, and their influence can be traced through to Mozart's mature concertos. It is easy to see how Abel, immersed in the Italianate style of the Dresden court orchestra, became an early adopter of the new form. The Germans were generally less flexible in their interpretation of the genre than Vivaldi himself. They adhered strictly to the now familiar three-movement form, in which two outer fast movements in the tonic key flank a central slow movement in a related

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Walter Knappe, Murray R. Charters and Simon McVeigh, "Abel, Carl [Karl] Friedrich", *Grove Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy [http://www.grovemusic.com].

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*. (München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Burney, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London 1776–1789). Qtd in Knappe, Charters and McVeigh.

<sup>4</sup> Günter von Zadow, *Catalogue of Works of Carl Friedrich Abel (AbelWV)*, forthcoming, planned for 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Knappe, *Bibliographisch-thematisches Verzeichnis der Kompositionen von Karl Friedrich Abel (1723–1787)* (Cuxhaven, 1971).

key. Each movement is built on the ritornello principle: the movement commences and ends with a ritornello comprising a strong statement of one, or usually more, themes by the full orchestra, contrasting with the intervening solo sections or episodes, in which the soloist is accompanied much more lightly. The most generally popular variant has four ritornellos and three solos, but in the outer Allegro movements, Abel often employs the five-ritornello, four-solo form. An important structural characteristic of the form as employed by Abel and most of his contemporaries is that the ritornellos are harmonically stable, while the episodes provide the necessary modulations away from, and then back to the tonic. Solos will be interrupted by orchestral interjections of brief motives from the ritornello.

It is worth emphasising that Abel and his compatriots used the ritornello form for all three concerto movements. These movements are not in sonata form, but irrespective of the number of sections, they can be notionally mapped against the three large parts of that form. The first part, or exposition, comprises the first ritornello and the first solo, which modulates to the dominant or the relative major. The central part would become the development in sonata form, but here there is no working over or developing of the themes presented in the exposition. Instead, new and contrasting ideas are introduced. As in a development section, it is here that the harmony reaches its greatest distance from the tonic; but in Abel's concertos that is not very far, usually the minor third or sixth degree in a major-key movement. The recapitulation usually occurs at the second-last ritornello in both four-ritornello and five-ritornello forms; after this, the harmony remains bound to the tonic.

Theorists of the later part of the eighteenth century give two distinct and potentially conflicting purposes which the concerto serves: to show the virtuosity of the soloist, and to depict a dialogue between two different characters. Heinrich Christoph Koch's rhetorical ideal describes Abel's concertos well. He makes a rather beautiful and very appropriate analogy with the ancient Greek tragedy,

"... where the actor expressed his feelings not to the audience but to the chorus, which however became involved in the action down to the last detail, and at the same time had the right to take part in the expression of feelings."<sup>6</sup>

## Cadenzas

In all three movements of this concerto, at the end of the final solo section, there is a fermata marked over a six-four chord. As always, this signals the need for an improvised or prepared cadenza at this point. As with many aspects of eighteenth-century music, our most informative source of information on the cadenza is provided by Quantz.<sup>7</sup> It is worth remembering that despite its title, Quantz's book is a treatise for the amateur not just on flute playing but also on all aspects of performing, understanding and appreciating music. The chapter on cadenzas gives advice for both singers and instrumentalists. After stating twice that cadenzas have developed through free inspiration and without rules, Quantz proceeds to give a quite alarming number of rules for constructing them. The most famous of these is that singers and wind players must complete their cadenza in one breath, whereas cadenzas for stringed instruments can be as long as the player wishes, although here also, short and sweet is better than long and annoying. Quantz also says that cadenzas are appropriate only in slow movements or serious fast movements; he gives a list of unsuitable fast movement time signatures, which includes every one except C and 4/4. This means in effect that cadenzas belong only in first and second movements, not in bright finales. In most cases this would exclude the last movement, but here Abel has chosen to include one. Quantz also advises that the cadenza should flow from the main *affect* of the movement, and include some of the pleasing melodic ideas of the movement.

## This concerto

Abel wrote seven keyboard concertos, but this is the only one which specifies as solo instrument the harpsichord: to quote the Italian title page, 'Concerto a Cembalo obbligato.' The other six were published in 1774 in London, Paris and Amsterdam as Opus 11, and carry the title 'Six Concerts pour le Clavecin ou Piano Forte . . .' The fact that the newer instrument, the pianoforte, is not mentioned on the manuscript source of this concerto, together with its presence in a German collection, suggest that it is an earlier work than the Opus 11 concertos, almost certainly from Abel's first German period.

<sup>6</sup> Koch, Heinrich Christoph, *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*, 3 vols (Leipzig: Böhme, 1782–93, facs. rep. Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), p. 332.

<sup>7</sup> Quantz, Johann Joachim, *On Playing the Flute*, trans. Edward R. Reilly, 2nd ed (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), Chapter 15.

The **first movement** has five ritornellos and four solos. The structure of the opening ritornello matches Abel's other early concertos, in that there is no identifiable first and second subject, but a succession of contrasting ideas or themes: in this case, four, plus a transition beginning at bar 28. In the solos Abel makes only single references to three of these. In general, the solos are composed more of scales and various forms of broken or unbroken arpeggios, which fit well under the hand and do not rely on sustained melodic lines for their effect.

The long introductory ritornello in the **second movement** consists of a chain of short, rhythmically complex motives which coalesce into a long, subtle and highly ornamented melodic line, played by the first violins. Unlike the first movement, here Abel maintains the same poignant character throughout the solo sections, by referring to some of the ritornello motives within the context of a free, improvisatory fantasia. Here Abel avoids idiomatic harpsichord textures, preferring instead long cantabile lines played entirely by the right hand. Any lack of sustaining power is averted by a profusion of ornaments: trills, coulés in the French style, and free flourishes in the Italian style. The third ritornello at bar 54 is a rare but not unique exception to the general rule stated above under 'Abel's Concerto Form,' in that it modulates from E minor back to G major for the tonic recapitulation at the third solo.

Abel tends to use two broad types of concerto **finale**: moderately fast, often in the style of a minuet, or very fast and brilliant, as in this work. The first and longest ritornello theme, played by both violin sections in unison, is suitable for this purpose and is used by Abel to commence the first and fourth solos at bar 44 and bar 170. The second solo at bar 109 commences with an inversion of the brief canonic theme from bar 22. Apart from these brief references, there is in this movement, as is generally the case with Abel, more interest in idiomatic flourishes and new melodic ideas than thematic development in the solo sections. This reaches its height in the sparkling fourth solo, which culminates in a cadenza which could well continue in a similar virtuosic style.

As always with Abel and his German contemporaries, appoggiaturas are ubiquitous and essential to the style. It is worthwhile to consider the quite clear

and relevant instructions on appoggiaturas from Quantz and C.P.E. Bach: they are played on the beat, taking time from the following note; if the note is dotted, the appoggiatura takes two-thirds of its value.<sup>8</sup> Both authors mention the special case where a note with an appoggiatura is followed by a rest. Here, the appoggiatura takes the value of the main note, and the main note is moved into the rest, thereby abolishing it. This type of appoggiatura is found in all three movements of this concerto. This last rule seems difficult to accept for many musicians, and as always, its observance or not is up to the performers. Quantz also mentions the "continuous appoggiaturas" which are found between falling thirds, such as in bars 18, 45 and 47 in the second movement. These, writes Quantz, come originally from the French taste (*tierce coulée*), and are therefore to be played short, lightly, and before the beat. Irrespective of context or type, all appoggiaturas are slurred to the following note.

### Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the name Mozart has appeared in this introduction. During his time in London, 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. Both composers have a charming facility to introduce new and unexpected themes into their development and solo 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.

Michael O'Loughlin  
Brisbane, February 2022

<sup>8</sup> Quantz, Chapter 8. Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. William J. Mitchell, (London: Cassell, 1949), Chapter 2, Part 2.

## Our Edition

The source of this concerto is in the Pretlack Collection, which is now kept in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv. The RISM siglum and shelf mark are **D-B N.Mus. BP 7**. The source, written by two different unknown copyists, consists of five separate parts on a total of 26 pages. The title reads *Concerto | a Cembalo obligato | 2 Violini, | Viola e | Violoncello | Del Sig. Abel*. There is no other source of this concerto, which is published here for the first time. In Walter Knappe's catalogue of works<sup>5</sup> it is not included. In the planned new catalogue of works<sup>4</sup> it is listed under AbelWV F7.

The Pretlack Collection has been described in detail by Joachim Jaenecke in 1973.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of watermarks, Jaenecke concludes that this concerto was completed in Darmstadt in the years 1746–1759; it is therefore likely to date from Abel's pre-England period.<sup>10</sup>

The source has an unusually large number of errors, but these can easily be corrected by looking at parallel parts and harmonic correlations. Our edition follows the source as closely as possible. In the orchestral parts, we have also standardised and completed the articulation in order to facilitate rehearsal work.

The harpsichord part contains the (unfigured) bass line in the tutti passages. We have provided these passages with a realisation, which is shown in smaller notes. We have also added some smaller printed notes in the solo passages to make the chords more complete. These additional notes are included in the full score and in the separate harpsichord part. Our edition, however, includes a second harpsichord part without any additions.

All major amendments are listed in the Critical Report. In order not to overload it, we have silently corrected rhythmic errors and other obvious typographical errors. Similarly, appoggiaturas in parallel parts were adapted in terms of note value and existence, and inaccurately placed dynamic signs were moved to the appropriate place, without documenting this in detail. All other amendments are marked as usual: slurs and ties are dotted, additions are in square brackets. If we suggest accidentals that differ from the source, they are in brackets. Warning accidentals are not marked.

I would like to thank Dankwart von Zadow for his continuo realisation, Michael O'Loghlin for his introduction and Thomas Fritsch for his proofreading and suggestions for this edition.

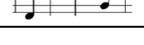
Günter von Zadow  
Heidelberg, February 2022

## Kritischer Bericht *Critical Report*

Wir vermerken die Schreibweise des Originals, wenn diese von unserer Edition abweicht. T1 = Takt 1, N1 = Note 1, Cemb-r = Cembalo rechte Hand

*We indicate the original reading, if it differs from our edition. T1 = bar 1, N1 = note 1, Cemb-r = harpsichord right hand*

Moderato T1	Taktbezeichnung <i>time signature</i> V1  B ohne <i>without</i>
Moderato T3 V1 N8–11	

Moderato T35 Cemb-r N9–10	
Moderato T36 V1 N1–4	
Moderato T36 Cemb-r N5–8	
Moderato T47 Cemb-r N1–3	
Moderato T61 V2 N4–5	
Moderato T74 B+Cemb-l	
Moderato T85 B	

<sup>9</sup> Joachim Jaenecke, *Die Musikbibliothek des Ludwig Freiherrn von Pretlack (1716–1781)* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Jaenecke, p. 60 and 90.