

Preface

Introduction

The viol enjoyed great popularity among members of the Bach family for generations. Accordingly, there are a large number of Bach compositions in which the viol is used as a solo instrument in chamber music and orchestral settings. Eleven sonatas alone for viol and harpsichord or pianoforte have been handed down to us by Johann Sebastian Bach and his sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Christian. Johann Sebastian Bach used the sound of the viol even more frequently in his cantatas, oratorios, and orchestral works. From his time in Mühlhausen to his time in Leipzig, he created works that contain parts for a solo viol or for two solo viols.¹

Bach's personal relationships with gambists

These compositions were certainly influenced to a large extent by the artistic and friendly relationships Bach maintained with outstanding viol players of his generation. We are aware of Johann Sebastian Bach's friendly relationship with Carl Friedrich Abel – which was also a teacher-pupil relationship. This relationship grew out of the friendship that Johann Sebastian Bach had already formed in Cöthen with Christian Ferdinand Abel, Carl Friedrich's father. Although Christian Ferdinand Abel was proficient at playing the viol, his influence on Bach's viol compositions must be assessed rather cautiously, as the frequently cited claim that Christian Ferdinand Abel was a 'viol virtuoso' is completely without historical basis. In 1726, Johann Christian Hertel (1697/99–1754) visited Johann Sebastian Bach in Leipzig. As this important gambist had already stayed at the court of Cöthen in 1718 or 1719 while travelling from Zerbst to Dresden, he most likely got to know Johann Sebastian Bach in Cöthen. So if one really wants to speculate which gambist inspired Bach to compose the three sonatas BWV 1027–1029, then Johann Christian Hertel, a grandson pupil of Marin Marais and Antoine Forqueray and a pupil of the important gambist Ernst Christian Hesse, for whom Handel wrote the virtuoso viol parts in *La Resurrezione* HWV 47 and

Tra le fiamme HWV 170, is a much more likely candidate than Christian Ferdinand Abel, who was merely a 'part-time gambist'. Hertel's influence from the two most important French gambists would also be a plausible explanation for the use of a seven-stringed viol in Bach's sonata in D major, BWV 1028 and in the obbligato gamba part of the recitative *Ja! freilich will in uns das Fleisch und Blut* and the aria *Komm, süßes Kreuz* in the St Matthew Passion BWV 244.2, whereas in the vast majority of obbligato viol parts, Bach does not go below the range of the six-stringed instrument.

Johann Michael Kühnel (? – after 1730), another renowned gambist of the time, is also likely to have met Johann Sebastian Bach: Kühnel first came to the Weimar court in 1717 to serve Ernst August I, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and subsequently entered the service of Field Marshal Flemming in Dresden. Both places offered opportunities for Kühnel and Bach to meet. From around 1735, Heinrich Count of Brühl employed Müller, whom Marburg described as an 'excellent gambist' (possibly identical with J.D. Müller, who worked under Johann Adam Hiller in the Große Concert-Gesellschaft in Leipzig from 1735 to 1738), in his Dresden orchestra. Müller may also have inspired Bach. Unfortunately, we do not have any further names of gambists from Bach's Leipzig circle. However, the *Instruction oder eine anweisung auff der Violadigamba* [Instruction or a Method for the Viola da Gamba] (around 1730)², which was only discovered in the Becker Collection in 2014 and whose Leipzig provenance has been verified by linguistic analysis, proves that there were indeed inquisitive and ambitious gambists at the time of Bach's St Thomas's cantorate (1723–1750).

Without the outstanding gambist Ludwig Christian Hesse (1716–1772), son and pupil of Ernst Christian Hesse, the extensive corpus of Berlin gamba music would not exist. In 1741, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Ludwig Christian Hesse, two musicians who knew no boundaries in either musical or technical terms, met at the Prussian court; accordingly, the result of their collaboration is unparalleled. It is not known whether Johann Sebastian Bach also met Ludwig Christian Hesse during his

¹ Among the string instruments listed in J. S. Bach's estate inventory from the autumn of 1750 is a viola da gamba. The name of its maker is not recorded.

² Edition Güntersberg G240, Heidelberg 2014.