

Introduction

The arrival of the viola da gamba virtuoso Carl Friedrich Abel in England in late 1758 or early 1759 marked the beginning of his international fame. London, the richest city in the world, offered a liberal intellectual outlook, a thriving publishing industry for music as well as books; a lively audience, many private and public concerts, and a court, soon to be graced by George III and his German music-loving queen, Charlotte. Abel, like Johann Christian Bach a few years later, took full advantage of these new opportunities. In the succeeding decades he published eighteen sets of symphonies, concertos, chamber music and sonatas in London, many of which were republished abroad, establishing his name across Europe north of the Alps.

Abel soon found his feet in London, acquiring, on 15 April 1760, a Royal Privilege to print music with some copyright protection. In that year he published his first music in England, the *Six Sonatas for the Harpsichord with Accompaniments for a Violin or German Flute*, Op. 2, advertised in the *Public Advertiser* on 30 July¹. The sonatas were published first by the author alone and sold from his lodgings at “the Dove and Acorn” in Greek St, Soho². A copy of the first issue belonging to the ninth Earl of Exeter³ contains a printed list of subscribers, published now for the first time since the eighteenth century (see facsimile). The number of names suggests an initial print-run of about 140 or more copies⁴.

While it is unlikely that Abel knew all the subscribers personally, he was probably acquainted with many, several playing significant roles in his career. The subscribers encompass the elite of Britain’s musical life, including the composers Charles Avison in Newcastle upon Tyne, Charles Burney (both of whom took six copies each); John Burton, the writer of keyboard music; Philip Hayes, John Garth in Durham, Thomas Linley the elder in Bath, William Jackson of Exeter, James Nares of York, Stephen Paxton the composer and cellist; Felice Giardini, the influential violinist and composer in

London and teacher of the violinist Noferi, also a subscriber and later a frequent performer in the Bach-Abel concerts; and Charles Weideman, a court flautist. Philip Eiffert, the oboist, was a close member of Bach and Abel’s circle and a performer in their concerts. “Signor Galini”, was the dancing-master and impresario. J.C. Bach, Abel and Gallini were the first proprietors of the Hanover Square Rooms in 1775. Frederick Nicolai, the violinist, was later a colleague with Bach and Abel in the Queen’s Chamber Band. The presence of the painter Thomas Gainsborough among Abel’s subscribers reveals for the first time that their friendship began very early. Gainsborough, then resident in Bath, was an enthusiastic performer of the gamba and one of Abel’s most ardent fans. He sketched and painted him several times from the 1760s onwards, including the impressive full-length portrait with gamba and snoozing Pomeranian dog, now at The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, California.

Several other residents of Bath⁵, Bristol and Exeter are among the subscribers, underlining the strong, but little-known connections Abel had already forged in the West of England. Abel’s early concert performances in Salisbury and Bath in 1759 and 1760 are not mentioned by his earliest biographers. On 4 February 1760, Abel held a Benefit Concert at Wiltshire’s Rooms, Bath. It was probably here that Abel first encountered Gainsborough. Abel’s rapturous performance on the gamba was enthusiastically reported in a letter from William Hoare to James Harris (another subscriber).⁶ The diarist and music lover Harris, organised the Salisbury Festival, at which Abel played in 1759 and was to return on many occasions.

Other notable names include the Earl and Countess of Pembroke of Wilton House, near Salisbury. Lady Pembroke owned two important collections of autographs of Abel’s gamba music, the first at the British Library⁷, the second on deposit at the Bach-

¹ The Symphonies Op.1 were probably published first in Amsterdam as the title-page refers to the composer as “Musicien de la Chambre de Sa Majesté Royale de Pologne”. A London edition by John Johnson was published before 1762.

² RISM A/I A 105.

³ In the library of Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire. BH 206.

⁴ 132 copies for subscribers are listed here. Doubtless the composer would also require additional copies for himself.

⁵ For example, Miss Allen, was a relative of Ralph Allen who built Prior Park, the magnificent Palladian mansion outside Bath, and was one of the founding fathers of 18th-century Bath.

⁶ Donald Burrows and Rosemary Harris, *Music and Theatre in Handel’s World, the Family Papers of James Harris 1732–1780*, Oxford, 2002, p.345.

⁷ GB-Lbl Add MS.31,697. Modern editions: C. F. Abel, *Sonata Viola da Gamba Solo Senza Basso* (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2008),

Archiv, Leipzig⁸. Their presence in the subscribers' list indicates that their acquaintance with Abel also dates from early on. William Young, later knighted, was a friend of both Abel and J. C. Bach, governor of Dominica in the West Indies and cellist. Both Abel and Bach later dedicated works to him. Most important of all is the Duke of York, the newly ennobled brother of George III, grandson of George II. By the middle of 1760, Abel had already established firm and important court connections.

This edition of the Sonatas Op.2 to judge by the relatively large number of surviving copies and re-printings, was evidently very popular. The later issues in the 1760s are still described as "Printed for the Author", but the music-seller is now Robert Bremner, who was probably the actual printer of the first edition.⁹ Bremner advertised some of his other publications on the title-page, the list enlarged when reissued. The last London edition leaves Bremner as sole publisher and is no longer described as "printed for the author"¹⁰. The title-page is completely re-engraved, with Bremner taking full responsibility for the printing and distribution. Abel remained with Bremner for his entire career in London. In an age of publishing piracy and lawsuits by composers against rogue music printers, the appearance of Abel's music under the imprint of Bremner guaranteed its authenticity.¹¹

Abel had strong connections with Paris and was a frequent visitor. An edition of his Op.2 sonatas published there, probably in the mid-1760s, uses the original, heavy London plates, which must have been shipped to Paris for the purpose. Only the title-page is re-engraved, without mention of publisher or dedicatee. The edition is described as available "Aux Adresses Ordinaires de la Musique".¹² J.C. Bach acted similarly with his Accompanied Sonatas Op.2 (1764), after he, like Abel, had secured the "Privilège du Roy" to publish music in France¹³. Both Abel and Bach's Sonatas Op.2 advertise the French privilege on their title-pages and may have been published around the same time.

An edition published by the Leipzig publisher, Breitkopf, in 1762 has no direct connection with the London and Paris editions.¹⁴ It is scored only for keyboard and violin/flute and the cello is not mentioned on the title-page. In common with other Breitkopf publications, this edition was type-set rather than engraved. Whether its publication was authorised by the composer or not, it shows the high regard Abel was held in his homeland and in Leipzig, where he had spent a good part of his early career before moving to Dresden in 1745.

The dedicatee of the London editions is The Earl of Buckinghamshire, also a subscriber. John Hobart (1723–1793), the second earl, was an English politician and by 1760 was a courtier: having been a Lord of the Bedchamber to George II, he was retained in this position by George III. No serious author would dedicate a work to anyone without permission. The dedicatee may even have contributed to the expense of publication. With such good royal connections, Abel could anticipate a permanent royal appointment, which was secured two or three years later.

The genre of the Accompanied Sonata, a two or three movement composition for keyboard, with extra instruments which support but do not take precedence over the harpsichord or piano, was very popular in London publications in the second half of the eighteenth century. These pieces were primarily teaching material for the keyboard, with easy violin parts for amateur music-making. J. C. Bach's Sonatas Op.2 (1764) exemplify this style: there is nothing in the accompanying parts to startle a listener or trouble a performer, and the violin seldom takes the lead in establishing any memorable musical idea. Abel's Sonatas Op.2 come from an earlier tradition. The violin, while mostly secondary, is never indispensable. It often resembles a voice in a baroque trio sonata, with the other parts supplied by the two hands of the keyboard (with supporting cello). In many later accompanied sonatas, the violin could be

G142; C. F. Abel, *Sonata Viola da Gamba Solo & Basso* (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2010), G188); C. F. Abel *Pembroke-Sammlung* (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2018), G343–G346.

⁸ D-LEb Kulukundis I.A139. Modern editions: C. F. Abel. *Zweite Pembroke-Sammlung – Vier Duette für Viola da Gamba und Violoncello* (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2014), G250; C. F. Abel: *Zweite Pembroke-Sammlung – Zehn Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Basso* (Heidelberg: Güntersberg, 2014), G253–G254.

⁹ RISM A/I A 106 (this number covers at least two issues).

¹⁰ RISM A/I A 107.

¹¹ A point noted by C. F. Cramer, *Magazin der Musik*, I (Hamburg, 1783), p.353.

¹² RISM A/I A 108.

¹³ S.W. Roe, *The Keyboard Music of J. C. Bach* (New York, 1989), Thematic Catalogue 9/1d; this edition appeared a few months after the London publication, being advertised in *Annonces Affiches* on 4 June 1764. The engraving style of the title resembles the Paris edition of Abel's Op.2.

¹⁴ RISM A/I A 140.

omitted with little loss to the texture or musical argument. But with Abel's Op.2 this is definitely not the case.

The first edition of the sonatas is published in score for violin/flute and keyboard. No cello part survives for the first issue, but separate parts exist for both accompanying instruments in later printings. The cello generally follows the bass line of the keyboard as far as possible, as in a basso continuo, but it could easily be dispensed with. Occasionally figuring is introduced into the keyboard part, a relic of an older style. The title-page gives the option of a "German flute", a transverse flute rather than a recorder, instead of the violin. The music is not especially idiomatic for the flute, even though Abel provides an alternative part when the music drops below the normal compass of the instrument. The lower tessitura and the long sustained inverted pedals are easier to achieve on the violin. The presence of the flute on the title-page is more sales-ploy than practicality, as is also the case with Christian Bach's Sonatas Op.2.

By 1760, the piano had yet to establish itself in London, and the music of Abel's Op. 2 is more suited to the harpsichord. Dynamic markings, when present are terraced and there are none of the orchestral effects found in Johann Christian Bach's sonatas, with implied crescendos, which call for the dynamic versatility of the piano. What is noteworthy is the variety, difficulty and idiomatic writing for the keyboard; the frequent use of octave writing in the left-hand and the varied figuration often in accompanying the violin. Abel boldly uses quite thick textures in the lower registers of the bass clef, not unlike Handel. In terms of virtuosity and complexity, these accompanied sonatas surpass any works for the same instruments by J. C. Bach published in the 1760s and have obvious connections with the keyboard styles of earlier masters such as Handel and J. S. Bach.

No special pleading is required for these attractive and inventive sonatas, all but the last being in two movements. Certain sections owe something to Abel's German predecessors: the "Allegro assai" of the second sonata, with its Handelian drive and the C minor slow movement of the sixth sonata, whose plaintive melody over a gentle bass recalls J. S. or C. P. E. Bach. These are original, imaginative and inventive works, personal in utterance. They were composed before Abel had much contact with the middle-class, knowledgeable audience of London, which helped transform his later musical style. There are none of the crowd-pleasing touches of later works, where popular folk-like themes are introduced. Melodies are often intricate and have irregular phrase lengths, which with their fiddly rhythms and complex keyboard-writing, must have been a challenge both to the performer and the engraver. Harmonies are richer and more telling than in most other contemporary accompanied sonatas: some of the textures, with their interior suspensions and sequences are often pleasing and startling. Abel is not averse to bringing a musical phrase to a sudden halt, *à la* Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. The harmonic range has its basis in the baroque, with faster harmonic rhythms but is overlaid with a classical sensitivity. Opening movements tend to be on the slower side: only the first movement of the fifth sonata is marked "Vivace". The second movements and the single third movement are dances, the most extraordinary being the finale of the fifth, marked "Scherzo, Presto", one of the earliest uses of the word "Scherzo" in an instrumental work. Perhaps Abel recalled J. S. Bach's Third Partita for keyboard in A minor, whose sixth movement is also marked "Scherzo". All in all, these sonatas are an impressive introduction to Abel's musical career in London.

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