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# A German Baroque Viol Tutor

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Anonymous, *Instruction oder eine anweisung auff der Violadigamba (Instruction or a method for the Viola da Gamba)*, facsimile ed. Bettina Hoffmann (Edition Güntersberg G240, Heidelberg, 2014), xii + 56 pages.  
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This anonymous manuscript, *Instruction oder eine anweisung auff der Violadigamba*—the only German language tutor devoted entirely to the viol to have survived from either the Renaissance or Baroque—has been in the Stadtbibliothek in Leipzig since 1856. It was just one item in an enormous collection of music prints and manuscripts presented to the library by the composer, musician and musicologist Carl Ferdinand Becker (1804-1877). Its provenance is obscure: Becker did not divulge the circumstances of his acquisition of it in 1844, nor did he explain his reasons for dating it ‘around 1730’. This new edition presents the manuscript in facsimile, along with a transcription and an English translation, prefaced by a short introduction in German and English, and seems to mark its first appearance in the modern literature. It is not clear whether it was ‘hitherto unknown’ or known only to a small circle—no previous articles or reports are cited, nor is anybody credited as ‘discoverer’.

By anyone’s standards, then, this is an important publication, particularly for anyone with an interest in the viol outside France at the beginning of its twilight years. I suspect that most, like me, will want to offer a vote of grateful thanks to Bettina Hoffmann for undertaking the arduous task of transcribing and interpreting the text. As is usual for the time, the German text (the vast majority) was written in *Kurrentschrift*, only Latin or Italian terms appear in familiar Latin characters. The character forms of *Kurrentschrift* are related to those of Gothic or Fraktur typefaces; when it went out of use in the twentieth century it vanished remarkably quickly out of popular memory, and today most German speakers are unable to read it fluently, if at all.

The work of the editor did not end with the transcription. The final paragraph of the German introduction begins thus (my translation, this passage is not present in the English): ‘The translation into English is based on my exegetical version of the original text, whose meaning is not always immediately apparent: the translation may also serve to assist understanding for German readers.’ Thus one stage of the interpretative process does not appear in the edition, and readers conversant with only English or German will have quite different reading experiences from each other, and from readers comfortable in both. However, editorial comments both in the transcription and the translation are clearly identified, and I have found nothing in Michael O’Loughlin’s translation which is obviously inconsistent with the original. Praise is also due for the translation, the advantages of engaging a native speaker who knows the subject are manifest!

The main body of the edition presents the 27 pages of the manuscript, one page per opening, with the (raw) transcription and translation facing black and white halftone facsimile images. According to the stated dimensions these images are slightly enlarged, and the quality is good—perhaps not good enough for detailed study, as may be judged by the noticeably better quality of the two selected pages reproduced in colour on the front and back covers (these are however reduced in size). There may in fact soon be another option: on the homepage of the University of Leipzig there is an announcement of a project to digitise the entire Becker collection.<sup>1</sup> This is scheduled for 2010-2013, although I was not able to locate images of the *Instruction*.

The Introduction summarizes what little is known for certain about the manuscript, outlines its content, and highlights a few items worthy of special consideration, without drawing any firm conclusions. One section is a little more speculative, a shortlist of seven possible authors, six of whom were viol players, drawn up on the basis of C.F. Becker's suggested date, and the fact that most of the other manuscripts in his collection are connected in some way to cities in Saxony. The suggestion that the neatly organised, largely error-free presentation might be the work of a professional copyist is thoroughly plausible—I wonder whether the occasional supplementary annotations in a different and decidedly scruffier hand were added by a pupil?

What of the content of the manuscript? On the final page the author signs off with: 'When a scholar has understood and put into practice these instructions, he needs no further information, and can assist himself.' This seems a grandiose claim for such a modest document. Of its 26 pages of text and music examples, only about one third deal with purely viol-related matters. The remainder cover basic musical concepts, note names and values, tempo markings, ornaments etc., which are framed so as to relate to the bass viol, e.g. the use of bass and alto clefs for the music examples (the manuscript does not deal with any size other than the six-stringed bass). Viol basics such as posture and bow hold are not covered, neither are there any pieces to play, so this is not a tutor in the sense of Walsh and Hare's 'The Compleat Violist' (London, c. 1700), let alone Simpson's 'The Division-Violist' (London, 1659, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1667, reprinted 1713) or Rousseau's 'Traité de la viole' (Paris, 1687).

Much of the content is uncontroversial, but the page of bowing examples stands out as a possible challenge to modern practice. As Bettina Hoffmann points out, the examples draw heavily on Georg Muffat's bowing instructions (*Florilegium secundum*, Passau, 1698), not only in the symbols used, but also in the sense of relating forward and back bows very closely to strong and weak beats in the bar. This leads to a significant number of consecutive forward bows, even on pairs of quavers (interestingly retaking on a forward bow is also frequently indicated in the Kassel tablatures, D-Kl MS. 4<sup>o</sup> Mus. 108.2-7). There are also a few light touches—basic note values and names are presented simultaneously in a scale which begins with a semibreve on *D*, rising through a bar each of successively shorter note values before cascading downwards from *g'* to *G* in semiquavers and making the final descent to *D* via dotted note

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<sup>1</sup> <[www.ub.uni-leipzig.de/forschungsbibliothek/projekte/projekte-chronologisch/musikbibliothek-von-carl-ferdinand-becker/](http://www.ub.uni-leipzig.de/forschungsbibliothek/projekte/projekte-chronologisch/musikbibliothek-von-carl-ferdinand-becker/)> accessed 06.12.14

patterns in ever increasing note values. Later in the guide to notation symbols there are hints on recognizing where a copyist has crossed out a mistake.

Two features of the manuscript not singled out in the Introduction seem to me worthy of comment, as they throw possibly useful light on the author's understanding of tonality.

The presentation of note names appears to be anomalous. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the modern German system of naming inflected notes was not yet fully established—sharpened notes had *-is* added to the note name (e.g. *fis* = F sharp), but the corresponding addition of *-es* to flattened notes had not yet been introduced, which meant that a notated G flat was usually also called *fis*, and not *ges*, as nowadays. Johann Jacob Prinner, in his *Musikalische Schüssl* of 1677, does this, but also explains that flattened notes could be differentiated by adding *mol* to the letter name (i.e. *g mol* = G flat). By the time of Quantz's *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen*, published in 1752, the modern naming conventions were almost fully in place (his thorough account tells us that all that was missing was a generally agreed name for the double flat). The author of the *Instruction*, however, confusingly designates E sharp and A sharp as *es* and *as*, instead of the expected *eis* and *aïs*, thus using the terms which were very soon to mean E flat and A flat.

Related to this oddity is the presentation of tonality, which takes the form of a series of music examples, the same two cadential flourishes and a bass formula, transposed for each key. The flourishes are fully written out in sixteen keys, minor and major (*mol* and *dubr*) on each of the eight notes which in German have a simple letter name: A, B (B flat), C, D, E, F, G, and H (B natural). The remaining eight keys, major and minor on C sharp, D sharp, F sharp and G sharp are simply listed as 'very rarely used'. This means that the list of common keys excludes E flat major whilst including F minor, E major, B major and B flat minor.

Without a more closely defined context the significance of the manuscript is difficult to assess. Until we know more about the circumstances of its genesis and the status of its author it is only possible to speculate on how much weight can be attached to its content. Much could change, if Becker were shown to have been wrong about the date, or the manuscript were found to originate elsewhere. But such speculation oversteps the bounds of a review: the main purpose of this facsimile edition is to make this fascinating source widely accessible for discussion, and to get the ball rolling with a few pointers and suggestions, all of which it achieves admirably.

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Note: some of C.F. Becker's works, including the catalogue of his collection mentioned in the editor's Introduction are available online in the digital library of the *Münchener Digitalisierungs Zentrum*:

[http://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=autoren\\_index&ab=Becker%2C+Carl+Ferdinand&l=de](http://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=autoren_index&ab=Becker%2C+Carl+Ferdinand&l=de)