

THE VIOL Summer 2015 No 39

Johann Gottlieb Graun (1702-1771)

Quartet in g minor for two violins, bass viol and bc

Güntersberg G 273

At some stage, we all have to sort out the Grauns. Elder brother Carl Heinrich was predominantly an opera composer, Johann Gottlieb composed eighty concertos, some 175 trio sonatas, as well as concerti grossi and sonatas for single instrument. They both played in Frederick the Great's Hofkapelle and wrote outstanding music for the fine instrumentalists and singers there collected. Among them was Ludwig Christian Hesse, who was, according to Hiller, "incontestably the greatest gambist in Europe", and it is close to certain that he was the intended player in this attractive quartet.

Anyone who has tried Hesse's arrangements of

Parisian opera hits for two bass viols will be familiar with their demands, and the many thirds and sixths initially look quite daunting. But with a few fingerings and some practice this technically demanding part is quite playable. The obbligato viol part also contains passages of the continuo suggesting either that these are cues, or that it can be played without cello continuo. But a string bass makes a substantial contribution to the texture, so my guess is that the viol either stops playing during those passages or plays along in an unobtrusive fashion.

Typically for the Berlin style, we start with the slow movement. This is followed by an allegro *alla breve* and rounded off by a gigue-like *più tosto allegro* with virtuoso riffs for all. This is wonderful, sunlit, airy music not designed to be 'exciting' in the Vivaldian sense, more a conversation in which wise rhetoricians discuss matters of philosophical import with impeccable manners and grammar.

The relatively small number of twelve quartets in Graun's *oeuvre* brings to mind Quantz's observation that 'a quartet is the true touchstone of a genuine contrapuntalist'. If that means that lesser composers found the medium unusually difficult, then Graun has more than risen to the challenge. Let's hope Güntersberg have more of these delightful gems in store for us.

Charles Medlam
