

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)

12 Fantasias for Solo Viola da Gamba

Edition Güntersberg, G281 (2016), Ledenburg Sammlung, with Facsimile

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If you are a viol player you will already be in the picture about this exciting discovery, as this year (2016) you would have found it difficult not noticing the many platforms on which these pieces were exposed after lying in a dusty library for over 280 years, unnoticed: the Güntersberg edition (subject of this review), the CD by Thomas Fritsch plus its reviews, and a performance of all 12 Fantasias at the International Festival for Viols at the RCM in November. The fact that there seems to be only one surviving copy of these pieces, lovingly preserved in a private collection until 2000, shows perhaps that Telemann might not have sold as many copies as he would have hoped. But, publishing 12 Fantasias for solo Viola da Gamba in 1735 is indeed an unusual move for a business man as shrewd and opportunistic as Telemann.

For the benefit of those who have missed the finer details of why this collection of pieces was hidden for so long, I shall recap some of the information (partly taken from the preface to the Güntersberg edition), and give some context of what position the viol found itself in Germany as regards popularity in 1735:

Telemann published the 12 Fantasias for solo Violin (TWV 40:14-25) and those for solo Viola da Gamba (TWV 40:26-37) in the same year (1735), as single fortnightly sheets with one Fantasia per page, which were available either individually as they were published, or, later, in a collection. A similar method had been employed when Telemann published the *Getreue Musikmeister* in bits a few years earlier, with single sheets made available to subscribers at regular intervals, except that with this much bigger and more flexible collection, as a subscriber you might find yourself with a sheet with half a song and one movement for keyboard one time, and then two movements of a flexible duet for all sorts of instruments the next time. It is interesting that, after that sizeable venture, Telemann saw the need to narrow down the market somewhat so that subscribers or other interested customers only receive music for their own instrument. This must have required a very different marketing strategy which perhaps didn't work so well for the viol.

The better known collection of Fantasias is of course for flute (TWV 40:2-13) a couple of years earlier, and the evident success of these pieces may have sparked off the idea to repeat a similar venture for the violin and the viol. The viol fantasias were long thought lost, but recently it was discovered that one copy of

the ‘Fantasies pour la Basse de Violle, faites et dédiées à Mr. Pierre Chaunell, par Telemann’, originally acquired by the poetess Eleonore von Münster (née von Grothaus, 1734-1794) at Ledenburg Palace, near Hanover, migrated to the Lower Saxony State Archive, Osnabrück (Dep 115b, Akz. 2000/002 Nr. 528) in 2000. The timing of the migration of the Ledenburg library into an accessible archive meant that the viol fantasias missed inclusion in two important catalogues for solo viol music, both of which the result of doctoral research: Fred Flassig ‘Die solistische Gambenmusik in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert’ (Cuvillier Verlag, Göttingen 1996), and Bettina Hoffmann ‘Catalogo della musica solistica e cameristica per viola da gamba’ (Antiqua, 2001). Unlike the other Telemann Fantasia collections, this one has a dedicatee in the Hamburg banker and business man Pierre Chaunel (1703-1789). He is known to have purchased several of Telemann’s works, and was subscriber to the *Musique the table* in 1733, and later acquired an advance subscription to the *Nonveaux Quatuors en Six Suites* (1738). Chaunel was born in Altona (now part of Hamburg) in 1703, as the son of Huguenot immigrants from Montpellier. He was an important part of Hamburg business circles – of which many were French - and considered Hamburg’s richest business man towards the end of his life¹. However, it is not known whether he played the viola da gamba. The title page of the viol fantasias underlines Telemann’s good connections with Altona and gives us an important clue as to his links with French music lovers in Germany. Telemann described himself as ‘a great lover of French music’ in a letter to Mattheson in 1717². However, it was not until 1737, two years after publishing these viol pieces, that Telemann took an extended trip to Paris. His two sets of Paris Quartets (1730 and 1738) are of course further proof that Telemann was a great fan of French music, the style of which he incorporated so well into some of his works, albeit making it very much his own.

Apart from Telemann using the viol in the Paris Quartets, two accompanied Sonatas, the big solo Sonata in D, and several Trio Sonatas, what was written for it around 1735? This is seven years after Bach uses the viol in the Matthew Passion, but possibly around the time Bach wrote his accompanied sonatas for Viola da Gamba and harpsichord. Ernst Christian Hesse (1676-1762) and his son Ludwig Christian Hesse (1716-1772) would have been around: Ernst Christian – the one who had lessons with Marais and Forqueray – in Darmstadt, and Ludwig Christian

1 Percy Ernst Schramm, Art. His, Pierre, in: Neue Deutsche Biographie 9 (1972), p.248. [Online version URL: <http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd138716277.html>]

2 Georg Philipp Telemann. Briefwechsel, Sämtliche erreichbare Briefe von und an Telemann, eds. Hans Große und Hans Rudolf Jung (Leipzig, 1972), p.251f: Georg Philipp Telemann to Johann Mattheson, letter dated November 18, 1717. ‘[.dass er] ein grosser Liebhaber der Frantzösischen Music sey’

initially also in Darmstadt, but from 1741 in Berlin. Johann Daniel Hardt (1696-1763) was also a prominent viol player, though quite some distance away from Hamburg, at the Württembergische Hof. Johann Gottlieb Graun (1703-1771) was already in Berlin and writing for the viol, however, only accompanied sonatas and concertos, as far as we know. In France, Marais had published his fifth book 10 years earlier, but we know that his works were very popular for a long time, evident in a reworking of many of the bass viol pieces for *pardessus de viole* by Vielleneuve as late as 1759. Forqueray had not published his *Pièces de Viole* (1747) yet, but if the theory by Dr Lucy Robinson is correct that they were actually written by Forqueray senior, they may have been created a bit earlier. Rameau was in full swing in 1735, concentrating mainly on writing operas, and not yet having published the *Pièces de clavecin* (1741) with a viol part written so badly within the texture, that it certainly helped the instrument into its grave in France. François Couperin had published his *Pièces de viole* in 1728 and Charles Dollé was working on his fiendishly difficult *Pièces de viole*, published in 1737. Young Carl Friedrich Abel was only 12 in 1735 and was possibly already singing in the Thomasschule in Leipzig, while his father, Christian Ferdinand maintained Bach's former position as *Premier Musicus* in Köthen.

As regards solo viol music without continuo, Telemann's pieces fill a sizeable chronological gap between what was written before (Sainte-Colombe, Demachy, DuBuisson, Schenck) and after (Abel). Despite the presence of many gamba players (mentioned above - many of which also played the violin and often had a job as *Kapellmeister*) in good and prominent positions dotted around courts in Germany, the viol had already moved into the background. Mattheson was writing his *Capellmeister* at that time (published in 1739), and in one of his publications³ he mentions that the viol is often used to play a bass line in the orchestra, playing chords following the figures, but that 'he has not heard it done well'. Alongside Abel's success in London, there were some isolated attempts to revitalise the popularity of the viol in the second half of the 18th century, with accompanied sonatas by Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach (1714-1788), several works by Christoph Schaffrath (1709-1763) and Johann Gottlieb Graun, and much later some viol players would have found employment opportunities if they could get their head around learning to play the Baryton and join Prince Esterházy's court in Hungary. During that time Carl Ludwig Junker (1748-1797) makes some poignant remarks (1777) about the decline of the viol: 'It is true that we have invented new instruments, we have improved some of the old ones and we have extended their limits by using them randomly. But why do we neglect, for example, the lute, the viola da gamba and the viola d'amore – instruments that are so close to the heart? Our taste truly deserves little praise. True, those instruments are difficult to learn;

3 Exact reference needed. Free CD for someone who finds it!

but seeing difficulty as the reason for the dereliction would mean accepting that our abilities have shrunk; I feel the reason perhaps lies in education. They are not really instruments to play along with. A self-determined youth has no interest to learn how to forget the daily grind in quiet twilight over the whispering lute, but seeks pride and applause in the world. And perhaps the last of those who inherited knowledge of these instruments and who should be our teachers have passed away.⁴⁹ In the year Junker wrote this, Abel was an old man in London (died age 64 in 1787), Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach had written his sonatas for viol quite some time earlier, both Hesses, Schaffrath, JG Graun and Hardt had died, Andreas Lidl (or Lidel) was about to move from Esterháza to London, via a brief stay in Germany, and Josef Fiala, a Bohemian musician who also wrote for the viol, had only just gained a position at the court in Munich.

So, if we think of the viol having its golden time as a solo instrument on the continent between 1670 and 1720s, and the later revival by some excellent composers and enthusiasts was a fairly isolated and ineffective attempt to show that the instrument could hold its ground against other still-developing (and therefore increasingly louder) instruments, the 1730s were an odd time to invest in writing 12 fantasias for the viol. Perhaps Telemann thought he could tap into the market of French people in Germany who were homesick for their old country, and/or older viol players who had not moved with the times (hence writing solo music for those who are no longer compatible with other, more modern chamber musicians).

However, following the huge excitement one feels when such a volume of music is discovered at a time when we thought we had already found all music that is worth finding for the viol, I have to be perfectly honest (and going against the grain) and say that these are not Telemann's finest pieces. If one had to describe them in a few words, one would sum them up as 'great first movements, lovely slow movements which are too short, and naff fast (last) movements'. In contrast, the flute fantasias are largely really wonderful, providing an extension to Bach's flute

4 Carl Ludwig Junker, *Tonkunst*, (Bern, 1777), Vorbericht b3-b4. 'Wahr ist's, wir haben neue Instrumente erfunden, wir haben die Alten zum Theil verbessert, wir haben ihre Gränzen durch willkührlichen Gebrauch erweitert. Aber warum vernachlässigen wir, z.B. die Laute, Viola da Gamba, und die Viola der Liebe? – Instrumente die so eigentlich fürs Herz sind? Wahrhaftig wenig Ehre, für unsern Geschmack. Schwehr zu erlernen sind diese Instrumente, das ist richtig; aber den Grund der Vernachlässigung in der Schwehrheit zu suchen, hieße, Abnahme unserer Fähigkeiten annehmen; ich finde den Grund vielleicht in der Erziehung. Es sind so keine, recht eigentliche Instrumente zum mitspielen. Der sich nicht selbst bestimmende Jüngling lernt – um bey der Welt sich künftig Ehre, und Beyfall zu erwerben, - aber nicht, um in stiller Dämmerung, künftig, über seiner flüsternden Laute zum Beyspiel, des Tags Mühe zu vergessen. Und vielleicht sind die letzten, auf die, die Kenntniß dieser Instrumente kam, und die unsre Lehrer seyn sollten, - weggestorben.'

partita in a minor, and showing the instrument in its best light, mysterious, sometimes a bit haunting, but also gutsy, fun-loving, rustic, and playing with the different styles, French, Italian, Polish etc really effectively. Those show the flute from its best side, they are idiomatic and one cannot but walk away thinking how impressed one is with the *traverso* and its versatility. The violin and viol fantasias however, make the impression of a rush-job, something that needs to be quickly put on paper, Telemann's heart is not really in it, and the focus is on quantity rather than quality. There are some great pieces in there, but they could have been written for any instrument. I have to disagree with Thomas Fritzsich who writes in the preface to this edition: 'Telemann demonstrates astonishing knowledge of the playing techniques of the gamba and of composing in an idiom suited to the instrument.' Telemann displayed much greater knowledge of the viol in his great solo sonata from the *Getreue Musikmeister* (1728), and I think Mattheson is someone I would agree with more here, when he rather diplomatically wrote 'these pieces can hardly be called anything but good ideas'⁵. There are certainly countless of wonderful ideas here, in 12 different keys, and not all with just three movements. We find many different styles, just like in the other Fantasia sets, but it is so surprising that Telemann did not tap more into the French style, something the viol is so good at: his dedicatee was French and he himself had an interest in French music, and certainly was capable of writing in that style. The nearest solo viol music Telemann would have had as a possible model were Schenck's (much earlier) solo sonatas which explore the German version of the French style very effectively. And we have the French craze with the Hesse family, and the exchange of music between Paris and Berlin (although this may have not happened until the 1740s). Telemann's first two viol fantasias show a much thinner texture than all the others later in the collection, and perhaps he did get some feedback in the first month from a professional viol player. One definitely misses some accompaniment in those first two pieces, and also later, especially in the snappy short last movements, and often during melodic passages, sequences and scales, all similar to a viol part in a Telemann trio sonata, one feels a little empty without a bass, either provided by another instrument or by the viol itself. Occasionally, Telemann uses the viol effectively, writing in a *brisé* style or using an arpeggiated texture. It takes him four Fantasias to discover the full extent of the viol being a 6-string and not a 4-string instrument, but it has to be emphasised that the slow movements are idiomatic and effective and work really well on the viol. If one compares the snappy last movements with Schenck's last movements (mostly *Gigas*) in his solo viol pieces, one cannot help but feeling as if Telemann had simply copied the successful principle of the 'alla Polacca'-type last movements of the flute fantasias and came up with a few bars that put a smile back on your face after a slow

5 Mattheson, *Capellmeister*, S.88 '[..dass man diese Fantasien] schwerlich mit einem anderen allgemeinen Nahmen, als guter Einfälle belegen kann'

movement, and something that just fills the remaining space on that page, without much regard of there being 6 strings and huge potential of resonance. I would have rather had fewer fantasias, but longer slow movements and more substantial and more idiomatic last fun-movements, think of Telemann's last movement to Lessons 15&16 from the *Getreue Musikmeister*, or Abel's rustic A Major Allegro – pieces that work really well for the viol, create a great sound, are fun to play and tell us more about what the instrument is capable of. But that would have taken more than a single page. There are only very isolated moments where I thought when playing through the volume that a) I would pick one whole fantasia to play in a concert and b) it tells the audience (or the player) something about the instrument, what it can do, what it is good at, how it can sound best. The violin Fantasias also contain a few last movements which you finish playing, thinking 'what was the point of that?', but I am sad to say that the viol fantasia collection contains more of those.

However (and this is a big but!), this is a really important collection, and every viol player should have this on the shelf, even if it's only because there is a lot in there that would improve everybody's technique. I just wish Telemann had not felt so pressured by his business venture to cram it all on one page, and publish 12 fantasias in a very short amount of time. With more time and thought we would have had some really brilliant Telemann, with some substantial beautiful slow movements (rather than coming to the end of it thinking 'aw, that was too short!'), and generally more thought about what the viol can do. Fritzsche also writes in the preface that 'by 1735, full-bodied gamba chords that set disturbing limits on the course of the melody and all too often hinder *galant* elements had long been marks of an antiquated style which was felt to be unnatural and which dashed the expectations attached to the currently predominant style of writing fantasias: "§. 93. For this style is the freest and most independent of all imaginable variants, since once comes across this idea and that, with everything bound neither to words nor to melody, only to harmony [...] bringing forth all kinds of unusual passages, hidden ornaments, ingenious turns and trimmings [...] now rapid, now hesitating; now monophonic, now polyphonic [...] not without intent seeking favour, rushing in and evoking wonder."⁶ I fear I have to disagree again, because what Mattheson seems to be saying here is that there should be a lot of variation and surprise in Fantasias. Chords (or double/triple stops) surely would be a great way of adding more interest, and more variety, and comparing the violin fantasias

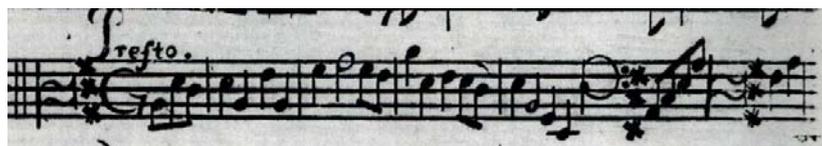
6 Mattheson, *Capellmeister*, S.88 '§. 93. Denn dieser Styl ist die allerfreieste und ungebundenste Setz- Sing- und Spiel-Art, die man nur erdencken kann, da man bald auf diese bald auf jene Einfälle geräth, da man sich weder an Worte noch Melodie, obwol an Harmonie bindet, [...] da allerhand sonst ungewöhnliche Gänge, versteckte Zierrathen, sinnreiche Drehungen und Verbrämungen hervorgebracht warden, [...] bald hurtig bald zögernd; bald ein- bald vierstimmig; [...] doch nicht ohne Absicht zu gefallen, zu übereilen und in Verwunderung zu setzen.'

with the viol ones, I can almost see more double stops and chords written for the 4-string instrument, perhaps because it was more familiar to Telemann, or because he knew he would be selling more copies. I agree that chords can sometimes be in the way, but if composed with some consideration and played well it can actually help the flow and the performance of the whole piece, and if the fashion of the time dictates a gradual move away from the predictable one could draw much joy and effect from the huge range of possibilities an instrument with six strings offers.

There are two little-known German composers I have not mentioned here yet, mainly because they would have unlikely featured prominently in the viol world of 18th-century Germany, and therefore would have had next to no influence on Telemann's works. But although they are very minor composers who could never reach the quality and polished compositional style of a Telemann, their music has something that is of interest: Johann Friedrich Ruhe (1699-1776) wrote four accompanied Sonatas for viola da gamba around 1740, and Johann Gottfried Mente (1698 – ca.1760) published a 'Suite in a minor for Viola da Gamba and BC, 1759'. Ruhe's pieces are fairly standard and pleasant baroque pieces, but some of his livelier movements could be mistaken for Telemann's lower quality ones. Except that Ruhe adds a bass part which means that the lack of quality is not so exposed.



Ruhe, 2nd movement of Sonata 2 (Facsimile by Walball Verlag, EW259)



Telemann, 3rd movement of Fantasia 2

Mente's suite, at first glance, is only unusual in the date of its publication, but inside we find an accompanied sonata in four movements (Lamento, Scherzando, Menuet, Polonoise) which is in style not dissimilar to Graun or late Telemann, but with one very interesting difference: The first movement is a really good attempt to be as French and rhapsodic as possible. There are chords, long flourishes, and surprising moments, and one would almost not miss the bassline because the viol part is so full by itself. Obviously, this may seem a bad comparison for those who

take the labelling of 'Suite', 'Sonata' and 'Fantasia' very seriously, and in addition, nobody has heard of Ruhe or Mente, perhaps for good reason. But my point is that Mente managed to write a first movement that is exciting, fits the instrument well and sounds full and French and is satisfying to play. Why did Telemann not make more of what the viol does best?

There is no doubt that if the title page was missing from these Telemann pieces, we would still know that it is Telemann, as they show his very own and inimitable style, but yet, if we were less sure that they were composed by a great man such as him, the excitement would be not as great about this discovery, and they might shrink into the dimmer areas of our music shelf, just like Ruhe or Mente.

We viol players want so much to be part of the mainstream recognised classical music world, although we at the same despise its regularity and predictability. But every viol player who has been asked countless times to provide a solo viol piece (perhaps even with accompaniment) as part of the second half of a chamber music concert, knows what I am talking about: you find yourself the odd one out, the one with the piece by a composer that nobody has heard of before, the one that sounds and looks different, the one that has to tune all the time. Perhaps this is nowadays a very old-fashioned view, and we like to think that the world is now clued up about the viol, and that audiences don't look at it a second time, or at least not as much as they used to. But if we think about what we have in our baroque repertoire that a standard concert-goer would recognise, find attractive, buy a ticket for and like, or someone who buys a glossy classical music magazine, or perhaps even a CD, or if the recording company says 'great, you can play, so let's have some solo music that sells', we very quickly run out of options. The world would recognise Bach of course, and what he wrote for the viol is mostly quite difficult, and perhaps not as idiomatic as it could have been. CPE Bach may be a recognisable, if not household, name amongst bog standard audiences who are used to piano trios and string quartets. But his viol pieces are also unidiomatic for the viol and for the most part totally impossible to play. Handel – there is that sonata that is so bad that for a very long time we couldn't believe that it was by him. And he forgot to write a lovely and indispensable viol part in the Messiah, something that would have kept players and the instrument in the limelight and business. Partly we want to 'educate' our audiences that there are other, lesser known, composers, who deserve their undivided attention. But it is a battle that can only be partially won in small niche-market festivals that have now largely disappeared for funding reasons. So, good middle ground would be to have a collection of attractive Telemann pieces that excite the standard listener, since Telemann has risen in the estimation of audiences in the last few decades. We want to have a worthwhile addition to the very slim solo-music section of our shelves, and we want to believe that this Fantasia collection is something that shows the world how great the viol is. Unfortunately, these pieces are not going to play that

role. But they are largely very playable and entertaining, although it is difficult to see what purpose they can fulfil other than providing some very worthwhile amusement on a Sunday afternoon within your own four walls (which is nothing to be sniffed at).

Looking at a comprehensive shelf of solo (also accompanied) viol music we keep finding ourselves repeatedly drawn to music written by viol players. Perhaps part of the reason for the viol's decline was not just fashion and lack of 'street cred' (like Junker seems to imply), but its complicated nature and lack of resilience when a composer comes along in a hurry who writes for it without fully understanding how it works best.

I should add that the edition is, as usual with Güntersberg, impeccable, clean and user-friendly and contains the bonus of having the Facsimile. There is a comprehensive preface by three people (Carsten Lange, Thomas Fritsch and Günter von Zadow) which makes very interesting reading. I am really glad that Güntersberg are doing such a great job of concentrating on viol music and making it widely available to all.