

## Music reviews

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### Carl Friedrich Abel

*Concerto Violo de Gambo*, A major A9:1A  
Edition Güntersberg G328  
*Sonata C-Dur für Viola da Gamba und obligates  
Tasteninstrument* A4:1  
Edition Güntersberg G330  
Reconstructed Wolfgang Kostujak  
Ed. Thomas Fritzsich and Günter von Zadow

### Johann Christian Bach

*Sechs Quartette Op. 8*, Warb B 51-56  
Edition Güntersberg G312  
Reconstructed and ed. Thomas Fritzsich and  
Günter von Zadow

The friendship between the Bach and Abel families began in 1717 when JS Bach arrived in Cöthen, where Christian Ferdinand Abel was a violinist and viol player; in 1720 JS Bach became godfather to C F Abel's eldest daughter. Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-87) was Christian Ferdinand's son; Burney tells us that he studied with JS Bach. During the 1740s Abel was connected with the Bach family in both Leipzig and Dresden but the devastating Seven Years' War forced him to leave Dresden and he arrived in London during the 1758/9 concert season. Fresh from Italy, Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782) came to London in 1762. During 1763 the pair began to share lodgings and by 1764 they had become chamber musicians to Queen Charlotte; they collaborated on their first concert on 29 February 1764. Between January 1765 and May 1781 they ran their famous Bach/Abel series, the first regular subscription concerts in London, which consisted of 10 to 15 concerts annually. The flautist JC Weiss describes how they created an 'instructive society... made mostly of the most famous artists in London... this company usually met once a week for a midday meal in the house of Mr. Abel, who, in addition to his great merits as a musician, was just as talented in entertaining his guests'.<sup>1</sup>

Reconstruction unites the three works reviewed here. We know that Abel performed his own concertos and that when his effects were sold on 12 December 1787 they included some of his 'concertos for the viola de gambo'. But all that seems to remain to us today is the recently discovered *Concerto de Gambo*, one of four concertos in the Schloss Ledenburg collection. I say 'seems' because, unlike the other three concertos, this work does not bear the composer's name. I agree with Fritzsich that stylistic comparison with works of Abel points a finger in his direction, and this hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that there are many works by Abel in the collection, along with the English use of the word 'Gambo'. Only the solo viol part survives and thus the orchestral parts – violins 1 and 2, viola and the basso continuo part – have been reconstructed. Characteristically the solo viol part includes the orchestral bass for the tutti sections, so that gives Kostujak a good clue as to the nature of the bass part. A curiosity is his figuring of the bass to the solo sections (which is entirely his

own reconstruction) but why not also in the tutti? The solo viol part lies low and is not technically demanding – very different to Abel's highly virtuosic viol obbligato to 'Frena le bella lagrime' in the pasticcio, *Sifari*. Thus I feel some of the tutti orchestral texture in the solo sections, such as bars 60 to 62, will cause balance problems – maybe minims and semibreves would have put the viol better in the spotlight or even a scoring throughout for two violins and continuo would have given the viol the benefit of greater transparency. At times the viola is used along with the continuo to accompany the soloist, which I find a bit fussy and atypical. But Kostujak is scrupulous in informing the players what is original and what is his reconstruction.

Similarly for the C major sonata with obbligato keyboard only the solo viol part marked *F. Abel per il Viol di Gambo* remains and unusually it is written in the alto, not treble, and bass clefs. It is housed in the Senate House Library of the University of London. However the repeated semiquavers on one note in bars 16 to 18 of the solo part in the binary first movement and the parallel section in the second half beg for the treble line of an obbligato keyboard part to accompany. In contrast the over 40 other viol sonatas surviving by Abel all use a continuo accompaniment. Kostujak's realisation is sound if harmonically cautious, which makes the work a little bland. Like the concerto above, the viol part lies predominantly in first position. A piece that is neither demanding for viol or keyboard player for an evening's chamber music.

Johann Christian Bach's six quartets for oboe/flute/violin, violin, viola da gamba/viola and bass op. 8 are of great interest as early examples of the string quartet. Reichard recalled how Abel 'was a gambist, who in the Queen's regular small chamber group concerts, also played the bass, but more commonly the viola part on the gamba'.<sup>2</sup> Fischer (oboe), Cranmer (violin) and Crosdill (cello) played with them. There are reports of the same group of players, minus Crosdill, playing in Salisbury in October 1770 just around the time of the appearance of Bach's op. 8. Five printings from The Hague (1772), Amsterdam, Paris (1772), Mannheim and London (1772) have been available with the viol/viola part labelled 'Taille', 'Alto' or 'Tenor'. But it wasn't until Dr Elias Kulukundis bought a set of English part books containing five of the six quartets in Stuttgart with the cello basso part marked *Quartetto a Oboè, Violino, Viola da Gamba, e Basso. Del Signor G. C. Bach* that absolute proof was given that Abel had indeed played the part above the bass on the gamba. The only problem was that the part-book for the viol was missing, so the viol part has been reconstructed using the six early versions. ►

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<sup>1</sup> *Autobiographie*, ed. Bonz and Michelon (Beeskow, 2012) 57.

<sup>2</sup> EL Gerber, *Neues Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon*, part 1, col 5, Leipzig, 1812.

Bach writes in the *gallant* two-movement form, contrasting time signatures and tempi. The first movement is commonly the more substantial, followed in five of the quartets by a *Minuetto* or *Rondeaux*. The three upper parts — played in Queen Charlotte's small chamber group by oboe, violin and viol — share the discourse evenly. The bass part which appears to have been played on either the keyboard or cello — or both together — frequently has a supportive role of repeated crotchets or quavers. In his op. 20 quartets (1772), Haydn famously liberated his cello parts from the bass line; thanks to Abel, in JC Bach's quartets it is the viola/gamba part which plays an unusually prominent role. Indeed, the gamba/viola part is quite challenging on the viol, and is of similar difficulty to playing Rameau's *Pieces de Clavecin en Concerts*, but it lies well and is grateful to play. It falls more readily on the viola as players can reach e'' in first position. Modern viola players should be grateful.

*Lucy Robinson*