

Introduction

In 1787 Carl Friedrich Abel died in London, and many thought it was the end of an era. His obituary in the *Morning Post* said that “his favourite instrument was not in general use, and would probably die with him”¹ and Goethe remembered him as “the last musician who handled the viola da gamba with success and applause.”² The fact that Abel was the last of three generations of gambists only adds to the poignancy of the story. Recent research has shown that the art of playing the gamba never entirely died out, but the instrument never again had a master as universally admired and internationally famous as Abel.

Born in Köthen in 1723, Abel’s first position was in the Dresden orchestra from about 1743, possibly after studying with J. S. Bach in Leipzig. Around 1757-8 Abel set off for London, where he soon became known for his performances on the viol and the harpsichord, his compositions, and his direction and promotion of concerts. His partnership with Johann Christian Bach resulted in a concert series which enriched the musical life of London for many years. In 1782 he embarked on a trip back to Germany, including a performance for the Prussian crown prince Frederick William.

Published in 1771, the “Six Easy Sonattas” were among the last works written for the gamba, and present the gambist with a rare opportunity to experience the classical style. In fact, there is probably no other gamba music which so closely approaches the style of Mozart. This is not surprising, as Abel and his close associate Johann Christian Bach mentored the young Mozart during his visit to London in 1764-5. A symphony of Abel in Mozart’s hand was even erroneously given the number 18 in the Köchel catalogue of Mozart’s works.³

The works are typical early classical sonatas on a rather small scale. They are technically easy, but still present the player with some rewarding technical and musical challenges. The first movements are all in bithematic sonata form, the first subjects being charming melodies in the singing allegro style, enriched by galant triplets, and the second subjects often providing contrast by use of simple passage work. In this way the opening movements provide practice in both legato bowing and string crossing. The “development” section of mainly dominant harmony after the double bar is quite short, preparing the return of one or both of the subjects in the tonic.

The slow movements are mostly adagios, but they are altogether lighter, more charming and less intense than many adagios by Mozart or C. P. E. Bach, and would suffer from being played too slowly. The slow movement of Sonata II, a Siciliano, has a fermata marked in the second-last bar. This is an indication that a short cadenza, not especially virtuosic but in keeping with the relaxed melodic character of the movement, would be appropriate. The adagios of Sonatas III and VI also offer good opportunities for a cadenza, although there is no fermata marked. In each case, it would be played on the third-last note of the movement, over the six-four chord. In the adagio of Sonata I the flourish in the third-last bar might be seen as Abel’s substitute for a cadenza, and in Sonatas IV and V the addition of a cadenza to the slow movement might interrupt the flow. However, such decisions are of course up to the performers, as they were in Abel’s time. Every sonata finishes with an approachable minuet in rounded binary form. In keeping with the sunny nature of the works, all except the last sonata are in major keys.

Appoggiaturas are an important element in most eighteenth-century styles. After the middle of the century there was an increasing tendency to write these small grace notes at their correct value, and this is what Abel has generally done in these works. The normal rule which we find in the writings of C. P. E. Bach, Leopold Mozart and others is that they should be played on the beat, and somewhat stronger than the main note which follows the appoggiatura, to emphasize the dissonance and to enjoy fully its resolution in a consonance. However, there are a few instances where Abel’s intention is unclear:

¹ Cited in Walter Knape, Murray R. Charters/Simon Mcveigh, “Abel,” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 17 March 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*. München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1961.

³ Walter Knape etc, op. cit.

Sonata II:

Allegro, bar 42: the eighth-note appoggiatura should probably be a quarter-note.
Siciliano, bars 1, 9 and 11: the sixteenths should probably be eighths.

Sonata III:

Minuetto, bar 24: this could be played as written and as described above, or alternatively as in bar 2.

Abel's title-page (see below) describes the works quite accurately. They are easily playable on the gamba or the violin: the gambist will only occasionally have to venture above the frets, and play the occasional easy chord or double-stop. The violinist will need to omit only one low f-sharp (Sonata II, Allegro, bar 36) and restructure a couple of chords. The sonatas also make charming exercises for the student of piano or harpsichord.

Our Edition

The Saxon State, National and University Library, Dresden has kindly provided us with a copy of the original print by J. J. Hummel, Amsterdam, which bears the shelfmark **D-Dlb Mus.3122-R-2**. It dates from 1771, and is entitled

Six / Easy Sonattas / for the / harpsichord / or for / a viola da gamba / violin or German
flute / with a / Thorough-Bass Accompaniment / Composed by / C. F. Abel

The original is in score, with an upper voice in treble clef and a figured bass.

Our new edition contains: a score which also contains a realization of the figured bass; a part in treble clef with bass; and a part in alto clef with bass. This allows for the following combinations: harpsichord or piano solo; melody on bass, tenor or treble viol or violin, and bass on harpsichord and/or bass viol or cello. Abel's suggestion of performance on the flute is also possible, but requires some octave transposition or the choice of another key.

Our edition follows the original print closely. Any altered notes have been identified as such. The beaming has been unified in a few places.

We thank Angela Koppenwallner for her realization of the figured bass.

In addition to this new edition, a facsimile edition of all six sonatas based on the same source can be obtained from Edition Güntersberg, under the order number G501.

Michael O'Loughlin
Brisbane, Australia, March 2005