

Introduction

Carl Friedrich Abel was born at Cöthen on 22 December 1723, the son and grandson of viola da gamba players; his father, Christian Ferdinand, was probably the person for whom J.S. Bach wrote viola da gamba parts in the sixth Brandenburg concerto and the Cöthen revision of the cantata ‘Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut’, BWV199.¹ Carl Friedrich studied in Leipzig, presumably with Bach (the viola da gamba sonatas BWV1027-9 may have been written for him), and in 1745 he received a post as *Violgambist* at the Dresden court. Charles Burney wrote (presumably using information received from the composer himself) that he remained at Dresden until 1758, when he was forced to leave ‘finding that the oeconomy to which that court was reduced by the horrors of war rendered his subsistence scanty and precarious’;² Dresden was occupied by Prussia in 1756 at the start of the Seven Year’s War and was subsequently devastated several times. However, Abel disappears from the court records in 1755 and Ernst Ludwig Gerber wrote that he left after a disagreement with the court *Kapellmeister*, Johann Adolph Hasse.³ It is not known what he did or where he went between then and the winter of 1758-9, when he arrived in London.

Abel settled in England (where he was known as Charles Frederick) and remained there until his death in 1787, with the exception of several years spent in Germany in the early 1780s. He quickly became one of London’s most prominent musicians. He began promoting concerts for the society hostess Theresa Cornelys as early as 1761, and went into partnership with John Christian Bach at the beginning of the 1765 season; the Bach-Abel concerts quickly caught the attention of polite society and placed them at the head of the German faction of their profession. The Bach-Abel concerts came to end with Bach’s death in January 1782, and Abel seems to have made his subsequent trip to Germany to escape his creditors: Bach reportedly died £4000 in debt and William Jackson wrote in 1802 that the concerts ‘ought to have been a lucrative Undertaking, but it was not so’.⁴ After his return from Germany in the winter of 1784-5 Abel became an elder statesman in London’s concert life, acting as a director and composer for the Professional Concert at the Hanover Square Rooms but also as principal composer for Salomon’s rival series at the Pantheon. He made his last appearance a month before his death.

Abel was unusual that his main instrument was the viola da gamba, though he also played the violoncello in orchestras and seems to have directed concerts from the harpsichord; most professional gamba players in the eighteenth century were violoncellists first and foremost. Playing the gamba enabled Abel to carve out a distinctive niche in London’s highly competitive concert scene, avoiding competition from younger and more fashionable players – a perennial problem for virtuosos on more popular instruments. Newspaper advertisements reveal that his normal practice was to contribute to public concerts one or two gamba pieces entitled ‘solos’, though he also played concertos on occasion. In private concerts, particularly those given by the chamber group employed in Queen Charlotte’s household, he often seems to have played the viola parts of quartets and quintets. In this context ‘solo’ seems to have meant a multi-movement sonata for a melody instrument and the bass, normally being provided by a violoncello. Abel’s unaccompanied gamba pieces, more virtuosic, complicated and *recherché* than his sonatas with bass, seem to have been composed to entertain his friends in private.

Abel must have composed dozens if not hundreds of sonatas for his own use in public concerts, but most of those that survive come from manuscripts that once belonged to Elizabeth Herbert, Count-

¹ For Abel’s biography, see W. Knappe, *Karl Friedrich Abel: Leben und Werke eines frühklassischen Komponisten* (Bremen, 1973); P. Holman, “‘A Solo on the Viola da Gamba’: Carl Friedrich Abel as a Performer”, *Ad Parnassum*, 2/4 (2004), 45-71; idem, *Life after Death: the Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge, 2010), ch. 5.

² C. Burney, *A General History of Music* (London, 1776-89), ed. F. Mercer (London, 1935), ii. 1018.

³ E. L. Gerber, *Neues historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1812-1814; repr. Graz, 1969), i. cols. 4-8, at 4.

⁴ A. Asfour and P. Williamson, ‘William Jackson of Exeter: New Documents’, *Gainsborough’s House Review* (1996-7), 39-152, at 66.

ess of Pembroke (1737-1831), his probable pupil.⁵ Add. MS 31697 is a scrapbook containing seven separate items rather a single manuscript, of which the first five are autographs and the last two non-autograph collections each containing fifteen simple sonatas with bass in what appears to be a graded sequence, presumably intended for the countess's instruction.⁶ The G major sonata edited here, WKO 152 in Knape's catalogue,⁷ comes from the first item, ff. 3-6v, copied by the composer onto what was probably originally two folded oblong quarto sheets. Its last page, f. 6v, is blank, and on it there is a solo gamba arrangement of the aria 'In diesen heil'gen Hallen' from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* copied by an unknown hand around 1800.⁸ Below it the compiler of the manuscript, probably the artist and amateur gamba player Thomas Cheeseman (1760-?1842), pasted a minuet by Abel for unaccompanied gamba, also in the composer's autograph.⁹

Cheeseman described Add. MS 31697 on f. 2 as 'formerly the Music Book of the Countess of Pembroke', though there is no direct evidence that Abel composed this sonata for her. It is significantly more difficult than any of the sonatas in the non-autograph sequences in Add. MS 31697, with passage-work in the first movement running up to *d'''* several times (Abel wrote his gamba music in the treble clef, expecting it to be played an octave lower), an elaborately decorated Adagio, and a concluding 2/4 Allegro in *moto perpetuo* style, doubtless intended to be played very fast as a display piece. As such it is the only sonata in the manuscript that looks as if it was composed by Abel for his own use in public concerts, and the only one that can compare with his two 'Prussian' gamba sonatas WKO 149 and 150, surviving in Berlin manuscripts.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the solo part includes a few autograph fingerings (there are also many non-autograph fingerings, some in pencil and red crayon), suggesting that Abel copied the manuscript for teaching purposes. As already mentioned, Abel probably played sonatas with violoncello accompaniment. By the 1770s it was becoming customary to omit the harpsichord in works of this sort – those by Andreas Lidl are labelled 'Viola da Gamba e Violoncello' – though publications still provided figured basses. Thus Abel's *Six Easy Sonatas for the Harpsichord or for a Viola da Gamba, Violin or German Flute* (?London, 1772) has a figured bass while only one of Abel's sonatas surviving in manuscript has figures, evidently added later.¹¹

Colchester, October 2010
Peter Holman



Autograph: Beginn des zweiten Satzes *Beginning of the second movement*

⁵ For the Countess of Pembroke, see Holman, *Life after Death*, esp. 243-7.

⁶ For the manuscript, see Holman, *Life after Death*, esp. 209-16.

⁷ W. Knape, *Bibliographisch-thematisches Verzeichnis der Kompositionen von Karl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787)* (Cuxhaven, 1971).

⁸ Modern edition: C. F. Abel, *Sonata Viola da Gamba Solo Senza Basso and other pieces for solo bass viol from the Pembroke collection WKO 153-155*, ed. G. and L. von Zadow (Heidelberg 2008).

⁹ For Cheeseman, see Holman, *Life after Death*, esp. 287-90.

¹⁰ Modern edition: C. F. Abel, *Zwei Berliner Sonaten für Viola da Gamba und Bass*, ed. G. and L. von Zadow, intro. M. O'Loughlin (Heidelberg, 2006).

¹¹ Facsimile: C. F. Abel, *Six Easy Sonatas*, intro. M. O'Loughlin (Heidelberg, 2005); modern edition: C. F. Abel, *Six Easy Sonatas*, 2 vols., ed. M. O'Loughlin (Heidelberg, 2005).