

Introduction

The *Instruction or a Method for the Viola da Gamba* is unique in the history of the viola da gamba. No other German text from the Renaissance or Baroque periods which deals exclusively with this instrument and provides technical instruction on fingering and bowing has survived or is even known by name. However, the *Instruction* will not only interest gamba players: independent from other treatises, its advice on performance practice is a valuable stone in our all too patchy view of the mosaic of German music in the first half of the eighteenth century. More than the incomparably more detailed but chronologically and stylistically inappropriate books of Johann Joachim Quantz, Leopold Mozart and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, this short work is contemporaneous with composers such as Telemann and Bach, and can therefore shed light on the interpretation of their music.

Attribution, dating, provenance

We can trace the *Instruction* from 1844, when Carl Ferdinand Becker (1804–1877), composer, organist at the Nicolai Church in Leipzig, teacher at the Leipzig Conservatorium, musicologist and collector of musical compositions and writings, came into possession of the manuscript.¹ The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature from his extensive collection which includes also the *Instruction* is now held in the music library of the Leipzig City Libraries.

¹ In 1843 he published a catalogue of his collection: Carl Ferdinand Becker, *Alphabetisch und chronologisch geordnetes Verzeichniss einer Sammlung von musikalischen Schriften. Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte der Musik und auf Verlangen einiger Freunde zum Drucke befördert von dem Besitzer der Sammlung Carl Ferdinand Becker, Organisten an der Nicolaikirche und Lehrer an der Musikschule zu Leipzig* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1843), and in 1846 a second edition with addenda: Carl Ferdinand Becker, *Alphabetisch und chronologisch geordnetes Verzeichniss einer Sammlung von musikalischen Schriften. [...] Zweite vermehrte Ausgabe* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1846). The *Instruction* is listed in the addenda, on page 25. The

How Carl Ferdinand Becker obtained this manuscript, and when, where and above all by whom it has been written, is not known. We can thank Becker himself for a single hint, his note “Around 1730” on the title page. Whatever the source of this date, we have no reason to doubt the observation of this expert musicologist. The musical style of the ornamentation and of the admittedly short music examples, the explained tempo markings, the style of the hand and several other elements accord neatly with this date. An overview of the Becker collection helps us to place the manuscript geographically.² Although the large part of the collection – over 1100 printed works – come from many countries, the much smaller section of fewer than 20 manuscripts are almost all connected with Saxon cities – Leipzig, Dresden, Zschopau und Weißenfels – as one might expect from the naturally narrower dispersion of manuscripts. Ultimately we can be sure that the author of the *Instruction* was himself a gambist: some of his technical advice – especially on bow technique – bears witness to personal experience. In the search for the author, let us concentrate therefore on gambists who worked in the political and geographic environs of Leipzig in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Among these, the following may be mentioned:

- Christian Ferdinand Abel (c1683–1737), son of Clamor Heinrich, father of the famous Carl Friedrich, was employed as violinist and gambist in Köthen from about 1715 by Prince Leopold I von Anhalt-Köthen, himself a gamba player.³

note “C. F. Becker, 1844” on the title page of the manuscript indicates its acquisition date.

² Apart from the *Alphabetisch und chronologisch geordnetes Verzeichniss*, cited above, information on the origin of the works in his collection can be found in Carl Ferdinand Becker, *Systematisch chronologische Darstellung der musikalischen Literatur von der frühesten bis auf die neueste Zeit* (Leipzig: Friese, 1836).

³ Walter Knappe and Murray R. Charteris, “Abel”, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., vol 1 (2001) pp. 10–14.

- Michael Kühnel (? –after 1730), gambist and lutenist, was in service in Dresden for some time after 1718, before moving to Hamburg.⁴
- Gottfried Bentley is recorded 1709–1720 among the royal musicians of the Saxon court as lutenist and gambist.⁵
- In the ensemble of the politically influential Count Heinrich von Brühl, a gambist Müller was employed from about 1735. Marpurg called him an “excellent gambist”.⁶
- Ernst Christian Hesse (1676–1762), one of the most significant German gambists of his time, included Dresden in his extended concert tours. The musicians of the Darmstadt court, where he was employed, maintained close contact with Leipzig musicians. Among other connections, Hesse’s second wife, the singer Johanna Elisabeth Döbricht, had lived in Leipzig and had sung in the opera there before moving to Darmstadt.⁷ A handwriting comparison shows, however, that Hesse at least cannot have been the actual scribe of the *Instruction*.⁸
- Johann Christian Hertel (1697 or 1699–1754), a student of Ernst Christian Hesse and himself a celebrated gambist, grew up in Merseburg and studied in Halle in 1716. In 1718 he gained a position in the court orchestra in Eisenach, but frequently came

through Saxon towns on his concert tours.⁹ However, a handwriting comparison once again shows at least that Hertel cannot have been the scribe of the *Instruction*.¹⁰

- Johann Philipp Eisel is not known to us as a gambist, but rather as writer on music, violoncellist and jurist.¹¹ Despite this and the fact that he lived in Erfurt, somewhat further from Leipzig, he should be considered here. Large sections of his treatise *Musicus autodidaktos*, which he published anonymously in 1738, are loosely, often even precisely copied from works of Mattheson, Speer and Walther.¹² Only in the chapter on the viola da gamba he introduces technical advice on the correct position of the thumb and of the whole left hand, which is not sourced from these exemplars; a fact which suggests direct familiarity with the gamba. Furthermore, his defence of the gamba as an instrument for harmonic realisation of a general bass, which is in direct contradiction to Mattheson, shows a personal connection with the instrument. Here it is certainly not without significance that the author of the *Instruction* illustrates his advice on harmony with idiomatic gamba chords, directly encouraging realisation of the bass on the gamba.¹³ The *Instruction* and Eisel’s treatise have in common the anonymity of the author, and the claim of providing all of the necessary basic information for self-education in music: a claim which the *Musicus autodidaktos* makes clear in the title,

⁴ Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon oder musicalische Bibliothec* (Leipzig: Deer, 1732), 348.

⁵ John Walter Hill, “The Life and Works of Francesco Maria Veracini,” Diss. (Harvard University, 1972) 912 and 915; Paola Pozzi, “Il concerto strumentale a Dresda,” *Intorno a Locatelli*, ed. Albert Dunning (Lucca: LIM, 1995) pp. 958.

⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Historisch-kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Schütz, 1754) 259. This Müller named by Marpurg could be the same as the gambist J. D. Müller, who worked under Johann Adam Hiller in the Grosse Concert-Gesellschaft in Leipzig in 1765–68 (Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler* [...], vol. 1 [Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1790–1792] p. 640).

⁷ Elisabeth Noack, *Musikgeschichte Darmstadts vom Mittelalter bis zur Goethezeit* (Mainz: Schott, 1967) pp. 177–179.

⁸ Comparison with letters by Hesse in the Hessische Staatsarchiv Darmstadt, D 4 (Hausarchiv) 358/1.

⁹ Johann Wilhelm Hertel, “Leben Johann Christian Hertels,” Marpurg, *Historisch-kritische Beyträge*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Lange, 1757–58) pp. 46–64.

¹⁰ Autographs of J. C. Hertel are reproduced in Reinhard Diekow, “Studien über das Musikschaffen Johann Christian und Johann Wilhelm Hertels,” Diss. (Rostock University, 1977/80).

¹¹ Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon*, vol. 1, pp. 393–394.

¹² [Johann Philipp Eisel], *Musicus autodidaktos oder der sich selbst informirende Musicus* (Erfurt: Funck, 1738).

¹³ See the final chords of the cadences on pages 17–19.

and the *Instruction* in the final words. On the other hand, the advice on gamba playing in the two treatises, while not contradictory, is certainly not equivalent.

At our current state of knowledge, it cannot be determined which of these musicians could have been the author of the *Instruction*, or whether we must seek elsewhere among the many other German gambists of the time.

The *Instruction* shows clear characteristics of a fair copy; it could even be the work of a professional copyist. Corrections in the text are rare, and the pages are carefully organised thematically. New chapters, which always begin on a new page, are introduced by headings which summarise the content. The infrequent and less tidy additions of a second hand do not alter the general impression; they may have been added later, independently from the first writer. The treatise could therefore have been conceived as a final copy for a print which never appeared. However, given the limited publishing activity in Germany in the first half of the eighteenth century, this is not essential. As the final presentation of a text, a clean manuscript could be a quite acceptable alternative to a print.

Subject Matter

“When a scholar has understood and put into practice these instructions, he needs no further information, and can assist himself.” It is clear from this final sentence that the *Instruction* is to be understood as a complete introduction to music, not just to the art of gamba playing. This begins on p. 6 with such elementary instructions in music theory, metre and notation as are to be found in many treatise of the period. Among the more original contributions in these chapters, the suggestion for “speaking the rests” on p. 23 might be mentioned. The syllables “enes” and “ens” below the quarter- and eighth-note rests on this page may be understood as helpful words to speak for correct measurement of the rests, rather as is done even today in solfège teaching and general music pedagogy.

Other chapters treat the art of ornamentation. Those graces which Quantz would later call “essential ornaments”¹⁴ are described and depicted on pp. 20–22. The author’s specifications on the name, realisation and application of these ornaments are briefly summarised here:

- *Tril* or *Trillo*. SIGN: Tr. REALISATION: the trill always begins from above with an appoggiatura which takes half of the note (p. 20). It should be struck in relation to the length of the note (p. 21, below). APPLICATION: the trill is normally used on notes which proceed stepwise. In passages with leaps, it is replaced by the *Shlag* or the *Shwebung* (p. 22). An exception to this rule is the leading note, which requires a trill even in leaping passages. Several trills should not be used on consecutive notes, but should rather alternate with appoggiaturas, especially on ascending notes. Trills must not be used on unaccented eighth notes (p. 21).
- *Fal*. SIGN: backslash \. MEANING: backfall or descending appoggiatura. REALISATION AND APPLICATION: the *Fal* introduces every trill, taking half of its value. Since several trills should not follow consecutively, it replaces the trill on every second note, especially on descending passages. On descending eighth notes, it is used on the accented note (pp. 20–21).
- *Gegenfal*. SIGN: slash /. MEANING: ascending appoggiatura (p. 22).
- *Gegentril*. SIGN: +. MEANING: trill from the lower note, in other words a mordent. REALISATION: the *Gegentril* begins with the lower note. With this ornament as well, there is a description of how many repetitions should be made (pp. 21–22).
- *Vorshlag*. SIGN: +. MEANING: turn at the end of a trill. It is understandable that the sign for this *Vorshlag* is identical to that of the *Gegentril*, since both touch the lower note (p. 21).

¹⁴ Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin: Voß, 1752) VIII Hauptstück.