

Introduction

As late as 1824 the *F. A. Brockhaus Encyclopedia* remarked after the description of the viola da gamba: “One of the most famous German viola da gambists was Ernst Christian Hesse.”¹⁶ Born on 14 April 1676 in Grossen-Gottern, Thuringia, as a descendent of an old yeoman family, Ernst Christian Hesse had already been dead for over half a century († 16 May 1762 in Darmstadt) when the “sixth original edition” appeared. It may seem astonishing that the names of neither Carl Friedrich Abel nor Ludwig Christian Hesse were mentioned there, yet even more remarkable is the lasting posthumous fame of Ernst Christian Hesse, which was not based on a surviving *oeuvre* for the viola da gamba as in the cases of the viola da gambists Kühnel, Schenck, Marais, and Forqueray. Nearly all of Hesse’s compositions have to be considered lost. Ernst Ludwig Gerber mentioned “vocal pieces that he ... set for the church.”¹⁷ Johann Adam Hiller remarked: “Of his compositions, especially the many sonatas and suites for the viola da gamba, partly alone, partly with an accompanying bass instrument, are extraordinary. They possess not only the whole strength of the instrument, but also, with otherwise very much fire, a particularly pleasant nature and a happy mixture of the French and Italian tastes of that time, whereby, however, the former seems to have the upper hand; this is also not surprising, since Hesse formed himself after his abovementioned French masters.”¹⁸ With this, Hiller refers to his foregoing anecdotal report of Hesse’s education in Paris, which also found almost verbatim dissemination in the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg¹⁹ and Ernst Ludwig Gerber.²⁰

After attending school in Langensalza and Eisenach, Ernst Christian Hesse entered Hessen-Darmstadt service in 1693 as an assessor in the government chancellery in Frankfurt am Main, and went the following year with the royal household to Giessen, where, apart from the office work, he found opportunity to continue his legal studies. The identity of the teacher from whom Hesse received his first viol tuition was already unknown to Hiller. In any case, Landgrave Ernst Ludwig of Hessen-Darmstadt recognized the talent of the twenty-two-year-old viola da gambist and sent him to Paris in 1698 for a generous three-year study visit with Marin Marais and Antoine Forqueray, thus placing him in the hands of the most famous viola da gamba virtuosos known at the time. Only by means of an innocent ruse was Hesse able to enjoy simultaneous instruction from the two rival viola da gamba luminaries: he applied to the first under the name of Monsieur Hesse, to the other as Monsieur Sachs. Both teachers were very happy with their talented pupils, so happy that they organized a competition between their pupils at which the whole swindle came to light and the actual adversaries made their peace with one another. Remarkable is Hiller’s summary: “In this concert, Hesse paid special tribute to his honest masters, to each in his own manner.”²¹ Marpurg’s characteristics of the different manners of playing the instrument, which Marais and Forqueray “achieved on the same [instrument] with the greatest perfection,” is revealing: Marais’s strength lie “especially in the consideration of the pleasing and flattering,” Forqueray’s, on the other hand, “in the consideration of the difficulties and the quick and lively playing.” And Hesse did not want to “limit himself to the manner of the one or the other.”²² Accordingly, the whole gusto of French viola da gamba playing was united in Ernst Christian Hesse, and it would have been wonderful had he passed on this knowledge to a large horde of pupils. But it seems that Ernst Christian Hesse neither felt an inclination to teach, nor did he have very much time. According to legend, he taught only Johann Christian Hertel and his own son, Ludwig Christian Hesse. Instead, he toured the then known musi-

¹⁶ *Allgemeine deutsche Real-Encyclopädie für die gebildeten Stände (Conversations-Lexicon)*, 4 vols., sixth original edition (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1824).

¹⁷ Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1790), col. 631.

¹⁸ Johann Adam Hiller, *Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter Musikgelehrten und Tonkünstler neuerer Zeit* 1 (Leipzig, 1784), p. 170.

¹⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Legende einiger Musikheiligen* (Köln [recte Breslau], 1786), p. 49–52.

²⁰ Gerber, *Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon*, cols. 630–31.

²¹ Hiller, *Lebensbeschreibungen*, p. 167.

²² Marpurg, *Legende*, p. 49.

cal world: in November 1705 he left for Holland and England. On the way there, he met Johann Mattheson in Hamburg and became friends with George Frideric Handel. Hesse is possibly the missing link between the transcription of two Corelli violin sonatas for viola da gamba (nos. 6 and 11 from op. 5), which the London publisher Richard Meares Jr. published in 1712 in the appendix of the third edition of Christopher Simpson's *Division Viol*, and the French concordances of the complete op. 5.²³ It is known that Forqueray performed Italian violin sonatas on the viola da gamba. Corelli's op. 5 appeared in 1700, that is to say, during Hesse's study visit in Paris, and these transcriptions after Forqueray's model could have been brought to London, where Corelli's works were popular, by Hesse. In 1707 Hesse traveled to Italy, probably to round off his compositional studies with Antonio Vivaldi in Mantua. He gave concerts in Venice, Naples, and Rome, among other places. On 8 April 1708, in Rome, he most likely played the demanding solo part for viola da gamba at the premiere of Handel's oratorio *La Resurrezione* (HWV 47) under Corelli's direction. On the journey back to Darmstadt, he performed in Vienna, together with Pantaleon Hebenstreit, before Emperor Joseph I. "Honor and applause accompanied him everywhere on these journeys, owing to his musical merits."²⁴ In September 1719 both Hesse and his third wife,²⁵ the highly regarded singer Johanna Elisabeth, née Döbricht, as well as Handel sojourned in Dresden on the occasion of the festivities in honor of the marriage of Friedrich August, the son of the Saxon elector, to Maria Josepha, the daughter of the Habsburg emperor. Graham Pont has put forth the hypothesis that Hesse and Handel performed Handel's *Concerto [in C Major] à Cembalo Solo con Viola da Gamba*²⁶ together on this occasion.

The present works by Hesse presumably fall short of the brilliance and the difficulty of his lost viola da gamba works. The fact that they, together with an incompletely preserved trio, represent Ernst Christian Hesse's only compositional legacy, makes them appear valuable.²⁷ They give evidence of a musician about whom Hiller opined: "He was indisputably the greatest viola da gambist that one had until his time. Whoever has heard his abovementioned third son [Ludwig Christian Hesse] will be able to get an idea of the neatness, the fire, and the bravura in the performance of the father, since he himself was his son's teacher."²⁸

Thomas Fritsch
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²³ F-Pn: Vm⁷ 6308.

²⁴ Hiller, *Lebensbeschreibungen*, p. 167.

²⁵ Both historical as well as modern reference works have perpetrated a fallacy that is already found in Hiller. Johanna Elisabeth, née Döbricht, was actually Hesse's third wife (♠ 1713, 1692–1774). He was previously married to Katharina Magdalena, née Merck (♠ Darmstadt 18 February 1696, 1680–1698) and subsequently to her sister Anna Katharina, née Merck (♠ Darmstadt 4 December 1703, † 1713). (See also Hessische Biografie, Hessisches Landesamt für geschichtliche Landeskunde, as of 12 March 2013).

²⁶ Georg Friedrich Händel, *Concerto à Cembalo Solo con Viola di Gambe o Braccio*, ed. G. v. Zadow, Güntersberg G189 (Heidelberg, 2010).

²⁷ The attributions to Ernst Christian Hesse of the opera *La fedeltà coronata* and the divertimento *Apollo in tempe* (both Ms. in D-DS) have proven to be false.

²⁸ Hiller, *Lebensbeschreibungen*, p. 170.