Introduction

Born in Cöthen in 1723, Carl Friedrich Abel's first position was in the Dresden orchestra from about 1743, possibly after studying with J.S. Bach in Leipzig. Probably in 1755, Abel embarked on a long and poorly documented journey, although we do know that he visited the Goethe household in Frankfurt. He arrived in London some time before 5 April 1759, the date of his first concert there. London was a major music centre; and a most unusual one, in that almost all of its entrepreneurs, composers, and most famous performers were Germans or Italians. Abel was celebrated not only for his compositions, but also for his performances on the viola da gamba. After over 20 years as one of London's leading musicians, Abel set off for Germany via Paris in May 1782. In Potsdam or Berlin he was well rewarded for his performances for the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm. From January 1785 he was again active in London.

Abel's contemporary, the famous music historian and commentator Charles Burney, remarked that Abel's "invention was not unbounded, and his exquisite taste and deep science prevented the admission of whatever was not highly polished." However, there was another side to Abel: eyewitness accounts record that when improvising or performing his own music in intimate private settings, his style could be intensely emotional.[1] He was even compared to Laurence Sterne, the most influential exponent of the sensitive style in literature. We find this dichotomy reflected in these trios. In Trios 1–5, the first movements show Abel's unfailing gift for charming melody, supported by elements of counterpoint and relatively uncontroversial but always effective harmony. The central slow movements tend to be very expressive, showing aspects of *Empfindsamkeit,* the sensitive style often associated with the works of Abel's older contemporary, C.P.E. Bach. These include complex, subtly syncopated rhythmic patterns, chromatic lines and dissonance. Each trio finishes on a lighter note with a minuet, Abel's favourite form for the finale in chamber music.

The Trio no. 6 is different and interesting in several ways. Like the others it has three movements, but they are arranged in the order slow–fast–(moderately) fast. This format, in which the three movements are always in the same key, was pioneered by such composers as Tartini and Somis, and was used elsewhere by Abel as well as C.P.E. Bach and others. Later in the century it was supplanted by the fast–slow–fast format. The sonata form of the first movement is less clearly delineated than in the previous first and second movements. There is no recapitulation of the first subject, and the second subject commences in the unusual key of B flat minor (E flat minor in the recapitulation) instead of the expected major. The fugal second movement is another surprise from Abel.

The trio was arguably the most important *Hausmusik* form in the figured-bass era, being supplanted by the string quartet towards the end of the century. Eighteenth-century German theorists were quite specific about how the trio should be composed: a counterpoint of two melodious voices of equal importance over a bass line which can be serious and interesting, without competing with the upper voices. Imitative entries are necessary in this traditional Corellian form, but in op. 3 Abel rarely uses them. He does at times provide interesting countermelodies for the second player, and enough of the main subject material to keep them interested, but the two voices are not equal: we have here a hybrid between the traditional trio and the solo sonata.

The first sonata commences with a movement labelled Vivace, and it is worth addressing a common misconception about this tempo. Whereas the famous Maelzel metronome, and the understanding of modern musicians, place Vivace as a tempo faster than Allegro and only one step below Presto in speed, in the eighteenth century this was not the case. Those treatises which give a hierarchy of tempo markings invariably place Vivace as slower than Allegro. This clearly applies here, where the subtle and flexible rhythmic shapes of the theme would not be effective if played at a very fast tempo.

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[1] Peter Holman, *Life after Death, The Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010). p. 179–182.