



VIOLA

Bach and the Viola da Gamba Sonatas

by J. David Arnott

I would like to dedicate this column to advocacy for music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), in particular, to his *Three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba*. Violists are all too used to playing music written for other instruments (the Bach *Six Cello Suites* and *Six Violin Sonatas* and *Partitas*, the Brahms *Sonatas*...), so these sonatas would fall under that category. They were likely written while Bach was living in Köthen (1770-1723 though no dated autograph exists) and at about the same time as the solo works for violin and cello, the orchestral suites, as well as the Brandenburg Concertos (it is also the time when he acquired his second wife). It was a prolific time for him compositionally, a happy time for him with regards to employment, and also a time when he was not required to write music on a weekly basis for church consumption.

A quick perusal of the Wikipedia article on viols shows that the viola da gamba came about during the 1400s in Spain and can be traced back to the medieval period—to the Arabic rebab and the European vielle. They had 6 strings as well as frets and were tuned much like that of a modern day guitar. They came in a variety of sizes and were played in consorts (sets of instruments covering a wide range). They were played with a bow and an underhanded bow (though not necessarily in an underhanded way or by underhanded players). Bach owned at least one viol at the time of his death and likely played himself. If you are interested, there is even a motion picture about a prominent 17th century gambist, Marin Marais, as he recounts his attempt to study with Monsieur Sainte Colombe (*Tous les matins du monde*, 1991, starring Gerard Depardieu).

At the time of the writing of these compositions, interest in viola da gamba playing

was certainly waning, and even more so if one believes that they were possibly written around 1740 during the Leipzig period (1723 to his death in 1750).

Of the three sonatas, the first in G Major (BWV 1027) is the most accessible to younger or less-experienced violists. Its form is that of a four-movement sonata da chiesa (slow-fast-slow-fast) just like the Telemann *Concerto*. The keyboard part (ideally played on harpsichord) was written specifically for the keyboard, which is in contrast to the orchestral reductions found with the Telemann or Handel concerti. The keyboard part is independent in nature, an equal partner to the viola, with the right hand providing an additional melodic part and the left hand providing continuo. In fact, the *G Major Sonata* also appears as a sonata for two flutes and continuo (BWV 1039) with the second flute taking the whole of the right hand of the harpsichord. It offers the viola player an opportunity to add appropriate ornamentation or not, and also to play with a continuo (cello or bass) or not. I prefer to play this piece with harpsichord when possible and a cellist covering and mostly doubling the left hand of the harpsichord part.

The second sonata, in D Major (BWV 1028) is also in the sonata da chiesa style. I find it to be a bit more difficult to master than the *G Major Sonata*. There is a reminiscence of *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3* in the fast movements, and the second slow movement is exquisite and reminiscent of *Erbarne Dich* from the *St. Matthew Passion* (which might have been even better with a viola solo rather than a violin solo—but that's just viola prejudice).

The third sonata, in G Minor (BWV 1029), is perhaps my favorite and is written

in the Italian Concerto three-movement style. It is definitely concerto-like in nature, the most difficult of the three sonatas (I believe), and offers the violist greater opportunity to shine technically. The slow movement, in repeated binary form, offers the opportunity to ornament on the repeats almost like a singer would in a da capo aria. The counterpoint is intense and always interesting.

Another benefit to adding any one of these sonatas to your repertoire is the fact that there are several versions available for free on IMSLP (www.imslp.org) including cello versions as well as viola da gamba versions for comparison. All three sonatas have been recorded multiple times on gamba, cello and viola. In addition, there are hundreds of YouTube videos of all three instruments playing these pieces.

In addition to adding viola da gamba sonatas to your repertoire, it is again time to take the opportunity to remind everyone that any student with a smart phone should have a tuner and a metronome installed. There is no longer an excuse not to have these crucial tools at your disposal.

Tip for the issue—make violas and violins swap parts (not instruments). Violas must be able to read treble eventually and violins should at least know that alto clef exists. Fiddle players can learn something new and violists can learn something useful. If nothing else, it should lead to a nice conversation about clefs. Don't give them the hardest piece in the folder though.

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