

J.S.Bach (1685-1750) Sonata for Viola da Gamba in D, BWV 1028 (c.1740)

Adagio – Allegro – Andante - Allegro

Although Bach wrote much of his instrumental music between 1717 and 1723 when he was employed at the court in Cöthen, it now seems likely that this sonata was written about 20 years later, well into his time in Leipzig, where his enormous responsibilities were mainly ecclesiastical rather than instrumental. The sonata is in the *da chiesa* (church) style - its four movements alternating slow and fast tempi. The style originated in the previous century and often provided instrumental entertainment as a substitute for the date-specific *Proper* (rather than the everyday *Ordinary*) part of the Mass. This *da chiesa* sonata style contrasted with the *da camera* (chamber) style which consisted of a suite (or *partita*) of usually dance movements.

Two other aspects of this D-major sonata are rather more progressive than its overall *da chiesa* structure. First, the harpsichord is *obbligato* rather than *continuo*: it matches the solo instrument in melodic line and invention, rather than merely providing an accompaniment that embellishes a given harmonic sequence. Second, the sonata is starting to move away from the strict formalities of the baroque towards the easier-listening of the *galant* style favoured by Bach's sons Carl Phillip Emmanuel and Johann Christian.

Less progressive is the choice of gamba as the solo instrument. Although the gamba retained its popularity as a solo instrument long after consorts of viols had faded from fashion mid-17th century, it too was waning by the 1740s. Interestingly, the D-major sonata's taxing gamba part unusually required a large 7-string gamba as did both the companion sonata in G and Bach's contemporary rewriting of the gamba parts for two movements of the St Matthew Passion. All these works may well have been inspired by the playing of a talented young student of Bach's, Christian Ferdinand Abel, whose gamba-playing father was known to Bach in Cöthen. The son eventually moved from Leipzig to London where he composed extensively for gamba and worked with Bach's son Johann Christian.