

This Evening's Music

The Sonatina attributed to **Augustinus Kertzing** comes to us from a large and famous collection of 17th-century manuscripts housed at the episcopal palace of Kromeriz (now located in the Czech Republic) and primarily assembled during the episcopate of Carl Liechtenstein-Castelcorn. The prince-bishop had close contacts with musicians from Vienna and elsewhere, including Heinrich Biber, Johann Schmelzer and Johann Kerll. Many sent him their new works.

Little is known of Kertzing. He was Kapellmeister at St. Veit Cathedral in Prague in 1658 and was at St. Stephen's in Vienna from 1666-1678. The Sonatina, composed in short contrasting sections as a kind of miniature *stylus phantasticus* work, seems to be a written-out improvisation. It shows clearly that the level of viol playing in central Europe was high. Biber, a performer as well as composer, may have played the work. In the manuscript, the viol piece is followed by a version for violin in a special scordatura tuning, a device used by Biber.

August Kühnel was also a leading bass viol player. He performed or directed music in Dresden, Munich, Zeitz, Darmstadt, Weimar and Kassel, and travelled to Paris to study and to London to perform. His career was affected by the various political and religious conflicts of the day: he was forced to flee Darmstadt in the face of attacks by the French, and reportedly turned down a position at the Catholic court of Munich because of his Protestant convictions.

He used one of the best-loved Lutheran chorale tunes, "Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut," as the basis of this beautiful set of variations. This piece comes from a collection for one or two bass viols and continuo published in Kassel in 1698.

Carl Friedrich Abel took a much different path in life than the other composers on tonight's program. He studied viol with his father, Christian Ferdinand, who played in J.S. Bach's orchestra at Cöthen. The families began their association there; they became friends and Bach stood as godfather to one of Carl Friedrich's sisters. The younger Abel became a brilliant viol player; after spending some years playing in orchestras, including with J.S. Bach in Dresden and Leipzig, he toured the capitals of Europe, finally settling in London, where he played his first recital a few days before Handel died. Soon he was active in London's musical and social scene. A performer, teacher, and quite notably an impresario, he directed various concert series, including a long-running one with Johann Christian Bach, son of Johann Sebastian. Both men met and were mentors to the young Mozart, who visited London in 1764-1765; one of Abel's

symphonies was long thought to be by Mozart. Abel's career is a model for the changing way of life for many enterprising musicians of the times; they were attempting to become less dependent on the church or upon noble patrons. Abel wrote primarily instrumental music (also unlike the other composers on the program); his viol pieces vary in difficulty and were probably intended for his students. He may have performed these more difficult unaccompanied pieces, but he was mostly known for the deliciousness of his public improvisations. His music is wonderfully idiomatic for the viol, taking full advantage of chordal writing, sonority and lyricism.

Abel was one of the last great gambists. When he died in 1787, the *Morning Post* of London noted, "his favorite instrument was not in general use, and would probably die with him." But the fortunes of the viol, which had been the preeminent string instrument for a few centuries, had already been waning; the Italian violin family and its bass instrument the violoncello had become much more popular. **Johann Sebastian Bach**, in writing the six cello suites, promoted this popularity. However, he seemingly had a very strong feeling for the expressive qualities of the viola da gamba. Some of the most poignant and mournful moments in his great Passions are reserved for the viol: "Komm, süßes Kreuz" in the St. Matthew and "Es ist vollbracht" in the St. John. He also used viols in the cantatas *Actus tragicus* and *Trauerode* — both funeral cantatas — in pairs for special effect. However, the three gamba sonatas with obbligato keyboard, although they use the expressive qualities of the viol well, do not look to the past nor are they predominantly mournful in character. They were formerly thought to have been composed in Cöthen; it is now believed that they were written in Leipzig, and quite possibly for Carl Friedrich Abel (see above!) — although Ludwig Christian Hesse, another great gambist, is a candidate. The D major sonata is probably the only one written originally for the viol, the rest being arrangements Bach made from other works of his. It is in a sonata da chiesa form (slow-fast-slow-fast). Aside from the third movement, an intense B minor sicilienne, the mood is joyous and expansive. The texture is three equal voices, but — unlike the Italian trio sonatas, for two treble instruments with bass — the middle voice (the viol) in the alto range makes for a rich sonority. And being by Bach, the keyboard part is at least as challenging as the viol part.

A few words about this evening's viols: the first two pieces will be played on a copy of a Barak Norman (London) instrument from the second half of the 17th century. The luthier John Pringle made the copy in 1986. It is in an English division viol style, a smaller, lighter instrument. It seems that English musicians influenced much of the technique of 17th-century German gambists; the variations of the Kühnel especially seem to be in the division viol style. The Abel and Bach will be played on a copy of a 7-string Guillaume Barbey (Paris) instrument from the first half of the 18th century made by David Rubio in 1979. It is in the high French Baroque style. By this time, French viol technique had influence all over Europe.