

**The Three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord by J. S. Bach:
Their Origins, Features, and Versatility**

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Introduction

The three sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord, BWV 1027-1029, by Johann Sebastian Bach hold a significant place in Bach's oeuvre, and, by comparison to similar works of his contemporaries, in baroque music history. This paper sheds light on differing hypotheses on their origin and collates the most current and compelling scholarship on these sonatas.

Long-perpetuated assumptions regarding their history are questioned, and each work's style and form are analyzed. In addition, the technical implications of performing gamba works on the viola are addressed, as well as a personal account from the perspective of a violinist and violist of these pieces' technical challenges.

The unique characteristics of the works which lend well to arranging them for other instrumentations are discussed. These sonatas feature the layering of three lines of nearly equal importance and contrapuntal intricacy. However rare a practice this would be for other composers of 18th-century sonatas (typically a singular line of primary interest above a supporting basso continuo accompaniment), it is not the most distinguishing feature of these pieces against other works by Bach. The unusually close and often overlapping range he employs between the gamba and harpsichord lines, however, is. Both the density of each line and the close proximity of range in these works supports their further arrangement for other instrumentations.

This paper serves as partial completion of a project that culminates in a recording of these sonatas arranged specifically for string trio: viola, violin, and cello. This paper also examines these works' histories—their extant scoring for other instruments (in the case of BWV 1027 in G major) by Bach and possible origins as works for other instruments—further underscoring the historical precedent of their arrangement for different instrumentations.

J. S. Bach in Cöthen (1717-1723)

When Johann Sebastian Bach accepted the post of Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt- Cöthen in 1717, his reputation as one of the greatest organists in Germany and a prolific composer of an already immense and growing body of vocal and keyboard works preceded him. He had already held posts as a violinist in Weimar, organist in Arnstadt, organist in Mühlhausen, and organist and orchestra leader after returning to Weimar, all Lutheran churches.¹ As director of choirs and instrumental ensembles Bach was required to continually produce new liturgical cantatas and organ works. But because Prince Leopold of the court of Anhalt-Cöthen was a Calvinist - a sect of Protestantism which does not subscribe to elaborate worship music - the primary direction of Bach's compositions shifted toward secular cantatas and instrumental works such as chamber music, concertos, and the unaccompanied solo sonatas & suites.² Much Bach

¹ Sartorius, Michael, and Lawrence Sartorius. "Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach." Johann Sebastian Bach: a detailed informative biography. BaroqueMusic.org, 2014. <http://www.baroquemusic.org/biojsbach.html>.

² Wolff, Christoph, and Walter Emery. "Bach, Johann Sebastian." *Oxford Music Online*, January 20, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278195>: 13.

scholarship, therefore, states as a matter-of-course that his three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord were composed during his time there.³

Prince Leopold loved music and competently played harpsichord, violin, and gamba. He curated a court orchestra of fine German musicians with whom he played and even traveled. As Kapellmeister, Bach came along on these trips and was reportedly afforded an unusual degree of comradery with his new patron. In the summer of 1720, Prince Leopold, Bach, and some of the court musicians embarked on a three-month trip to the waters of Carlsbad for the prince's health. During his absence, Bach's wife Maria Barbara, the mother of his first four children, suddenly died. Bach completed his six sonatas & partitas for unaccompanied violin while mourning her loss, leading some to ponder whether he intended a double-entendre with the inscription "sei solo" on the first page of the set, which literally translates to "you are alone." ("Six solos" in proper Italian grammar would be "sei soli": a linguistic detail Bach likely would have known.⁴)

Bach's life in Cöthen and his employment under Prince Leopold was quite positive, despite this unexpected tragedy. Bach married Anna Magdalena Wilcke in December 1721, and together the two would enjoy twenty-eight years of marriage and the birth of thirteen more

³ For instance, Dorothea Schröder in Anner Bylsma's 1992 recording's liner notes states the sonatas were written "in Köthen in 1720" with no substantiation; similarly Philip Spitta states the same in his biography *Johann Sebastian Bach* with no supporting evidence beside the possibility that they were written for Christian Ferdinand Abel. Laurence Dreyfus and Christoph Wolff were prominent Bach scholars who began to question this hypothesis.

⁴ Fabian, Dorottya. *A Musicology of Performance: Theory and Method Based on Bach's Solos for Violin*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015: 25.

children. Bach reported to find so much satisfaction composing and playing in Cöthen that he believed he and his family would remain there indefinitely.⁵ However, Prince Leopold himself married soon thereafter, and the prince's new wife disapproved of his musical interests. This fact, and Bach's growing family's need for a larger city with cultural and educational opportunities, marked the end of his time in Cöthen.⁶ After a fruitful six years in Cöthen, Bach applied for and was granted the position of Kantor of Thomasschule in Leipzig, one of Lutheranism's most important posts, and moved his family there.

Where did Bach compose the gamba sonatas?

It is understandable why, despite a dearth of evidence, musicologists would be satisfied assigning BWV 1027-1029 to Bach's time in Cöthen. After all, the alignment of undateable compositions with periods of Bach's life during which the requirements of his employment match his supposed output is topically sensible. But by the same logic, in both Weimar and Mühlhausen Bach led orchestras of varied and competent players and could reasonably have written and performed a great deal of instrumental chamber music, which is not the case, to say nothing of the instrumentalists with whom he later worked in Leipzig. Bach lived and worked in Leipzig from age thirty-eight until his death. Here he held the esteemed position as Kantor at Thomasschule, supervised various musical matters and activities in the city, and he directed the Collegium Musicum: a society originally founded by Telemann of professional musicians and

⁵ Sartorius.

⁶ Sartorius.

university students who gave weekly public concerts.⁷ As more details about Bach's life in Leipzig come to light, some scholars now suggest that more of his most notable instrumental chamber works which were previously attributed to his Cöthen period were at least completed, if not written entirely, during this later Leipzig period, including the gamba sonatas.⁸

Speculation regarding which gambist may have inspired the gamba sonatas further complicates the matter of dating the works. Prince Leopold was a violist da gamba, and both the violist in the Prince's court as well as a well known German gambist with whom Bach was later acquainted in Leipzig share the name Abel: Christian Ferdinand Abel, the former, and Carl Friedrich Abel, the latter.⁹ Still, definitive proof that Bach specifically intended the gamba sonatas for any of these three violists has not yet been discovered.

An investigation of Bach's entire *oeuvre* suggests his Cöthen compositions occupy a much smaller portion of his total chamber music output. Where the gamba sonatas are concerned, connecting Prince Leopold or Christian Ferdinand Abel directly to their composition because they were the gambists with whom Bach associated while in Cöthen seems plausible but unsubstantiated. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach mentions "a mass of other instrumental pieces of all kinds and for various kinds of instruments" in Johann Sebastian's obituary when he details his late father's list of works. But only a couple dozen original chamber works exist: hardly "a

⁷ Emery and Wolff: 18-33.

⁸ Wolff, Cristoph. "Bach's Leipzig Chamber Music." *Early Music* 13, no. Tercentenary (May 1985): 165-75.

⁹ Heinemann.

mass” for a composer of over one thousand BWV entries. Either C.P.E. was prone to hyperbole or J. S. wrote many more chamber pieces than survived.¹⁰ Furthermore, the lack of original chamber repertoire for the flute, oboe, and recorder, instruments that are regularly featured in both sacred and secular works of Bach, gives more reason to believe suspiciously few chamber works have survived.¹¹ More likely (and more tragically), Bach composed many more instrumental chamber music works than just those extant from his relatively short time Cöthen.

Comparing the Gamba Sonatas to Bach’s Other Work

In addition to historical context, stylistic clues in each of the gamba sonatas suggest Bach completed them as late as the 1730s in Leipzig.¹² Unlike the unaccompanied violin or cello works, the three gamba sonatas do not comprise a set, although distinctive and peculiar stylistic characteristics unify them as such. While the gamba sonatas may not revolutionize the world of gamba repertoire and technique to the same magnitude as do the aforementioned unaccompanied string works, all three sonatas challenge the conventional continuo role of the harpsichord in the sonata context. No longer relegated to providing mere harmonic motion in the bass and embellishments in the right hand, the harpsichord takes essentially two of three distinct and equal contrapuntal lines:¹³ a novelty compared to the works of Bach’s contemporaries and

¹⁰ Wolff: 166.

¹¹ Wolff: 166.

¹² Dreyfus, Laurence. “J. S. Bach 3 Sonaten BWV 1027-1029 Für Viola Da Gamba Und Cembalo.” In *J. S. Bach 3 Sonaten BWV 1027-1029 Für Viola Da Gamba Und Cembalo*, 62–68. New Haven, CT: Peters, 1984.

¹³ Jones, Richard Douglas. *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach 1717-1750: Music to Delight the Spirit*. Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 262.

predecessors. Because the three-line gamba sonatas share this innovative approach with the organ sonatas (BWV 525-530: also three lines for two manuals and pedal) and with the two sonatas for transverse flute (BWV 1030 & 1032: also three-movement works), and both the organ and flute works were autographed in 1730 and 1736 respectively, it follows that Bach probably wrote at least BWV 1029, the last of the three gamba sonatas no earlier than 1730.

ANALYSIS

Sonata in G Major, BWV 1027

The earliest gamba sonata honors the traditional Corellian *sonata da chiesa* structure with its four-movement, slow-fast-slow-fast form: *Adagio - Allegro ma non tanto - Andante - Allegro moderato*. An autographed (undated) manuscript exists only for this sonata: probably a reworking of an earlier trio for two flutes and continuo (BWV 1039). Bach may have based the flute trio on an even earlier version for two violins and continuo, which he could have completed in Cöthen around 1720 but which is lost.¹⁴

The opening *Adagio* prominently features long tied notes in the gamba part and the right hand of the harpsichord part. To create the effect of sustain, the harpsichordist must trill these notes, and their conspicuous presence on an instrument otherwise incapable of executing them gives strong credence to the idea that the versions for flute and/or violin came first. Furthermore, the first flute corresponds with (or became, accepting the flute version preceded the gamba) the

¹⁴ Heineman, Ernst-Günter. "Johann Sebastian Bach Gamba Sonata in G Major BWV 1027." In *Johann Sebastian Bach Gamba Sonata in G Major BWV 1027*. Munich: Henle Urtext, 2000.

right hand of the harpsichord, and the second flute part corresponds with the gamba part. The harpsichord part in BWV 1039 contains the same left hand as in 1027, but in the flute version Bach only provides a single stave with figures as opposed to both realized hands. So whether the flute trio sonata or the gamba sonata came first, Bach only ever explicitly wrote out three lines for this material, as shown in Examples 1a and 1b (only treble parts plus figured bass line):



Example 1b. *The harpsichord (above) and viola da gamba parts from BWV 1027, I. Adagio*

Even in this earliest and most conventional of the three gamba sonatas, Bach tests the bounds of the four-movement trio sonata structure. Throughout BWV 1027, the harpsichord part is fully and intricately realized and contains no figures, entirely unlike Corelli's works. All three lines of music equally present full statements of the main subject material before progressing into imitative dialogue of and development of thematic fragments. Bach's first movement ends relatively unconventionally by devolving the sixteenth-note motion back into long sustained

Contrastingly, Bach's second movement (*Allegro ma non tanto*) continues the intricate dialogue between three equal voices continues into Bach's second movement. Its transparency juxtaposes the density of the contrapuntal exploration of the first movement: quite a role reversal of the Italian convention. The third movement reduces the texture to transparent eighth-note harmonic outlining in the harpsichord left hand underneath ascending arpeggiations of the upper two voices. This seemingly simple and modest movement might have served to cleanse the palette of the previous movements' sophisticated counterpoints had Bach left it at that. But true to form, he inconspicuously elevates mere ascending arpeggios to the status of subject matter by cleverly moving them imitatively between voices, transforming what initially appeared to be static harmonic outlining into motivic fragments.¹⁶ Thus, in the *Andante* one still finds a sample of interactive dialogue artfully nestled within a texture of respite and stillness before launching into the final *Allegro moderato* fugue.

Sonata in D Major, BWV 1028

Apparently, no manuscript of BWV 1028 in Bach's hand has survived, so the earliest copy available is by Christian Friedrich Penzel of Leipzig in 1753, a composer, copyist, and student of Bach's.¹⁷ Like the G major, the D major follows the *sonata da chiesa* slow-fast-slow-fast movement structure (*Adagio - Allegro - Andante - Allegro*), though each movement challenges conventional expectations. The first movement features a bar-by-bar

¹⁶ Dreyfus: 62.

¹⁷ Oron, Aryeh. "Christian Friedrich Penzel (Composer, Bach's Pupil) - Short Biography." Bach Cantatas Online, April 2008. <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Penzel-Christian-Friedrich.htm>.

conversational development of a melodic fragment which yields a tightly-knit web of imitative permutations between the upper two lines:

Sonata a Viola da Gamba e Cemb: obligato di J.S. Bach

Interlocking chain of evolving antecedent (green) & consequent (blue) fragments in BWV 1028, I. Adagio on 1753

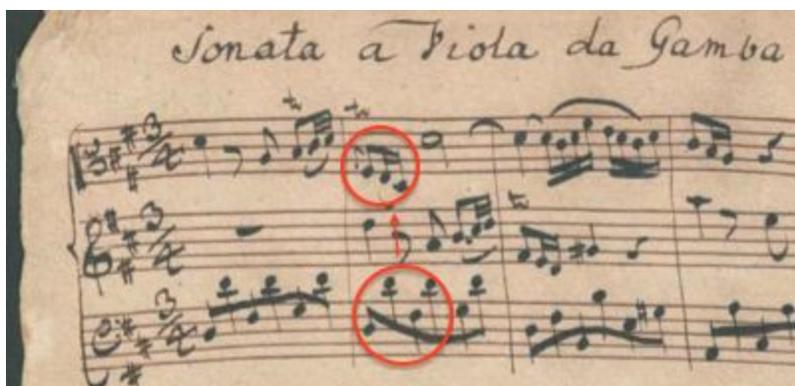
Penzel copy

Commentaries on BWV 1028 occasionally and vaguely suggest that with this sonata, Bach was paying homage to the popular *galant* style. The term is problematic. In different hands, *galant* style can be considered synonymous with rococo, meaning an extravagant or elaborate reaction to baroque balance and symmetry. Others simply use the word to connote an era of music post-baroque and pre-classical: a short period after 1750 and before the onset of classicism in the 1760s. Others still use *galant* to refer to fashionable dance music of the French upper class from 1730 to 1780.¹⁸ Despite the ambiguity of the term, *galant* may aptly describe the second movement's dance-like Lombardic rhythm and binary form. Perhaps *galant*, in another sense, also characterizes the third movement's ornate written-out embellishments, the pathos of its homophonic narrative and dark adherence to B minor, carried steadily forth by a kind of slow dance rhythm in the bass.

The fourth movement of BWV 1028 continues the theme of intricacy but in a contrasting and highly uplifting tone. This *Allegro* provides the highest level of technical difficulty for the gambist yet, replete with rapid sequences of unpredictably altered patterns, staggered suspensions as double stops, and large leaps and string crossings. Returning briefly to the question of the sonata's origin, the difficulty of this movement merits questioning whether Prince Leopold of Cöthen or his court gambist, who were reportedly moderately accomplished players, possessed the skill to master such technical passages, or whether an unknown player whom Bach encountered later was the intended recipient.

¹⁸ Radice, Mark A. "The Nature of the 'Style Galant': Evidence from the Repertoire." *The Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (1999): 607–47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/742618>.

In all three sonatas, especially the D major, Bach chooses to crowd the same register extremely closely, and on several occasions the bass line is actually higher than the gamba part [one of numerous examples below; see my comment below on this topic]:¹⁹



The gamba register dips below the bass in the beginning of BWV 1028, I. Adagio on 1753 Penzel copy

Why Bach would choose to do this remains mysterious. Perhaps he intended the close range to underscore the equality between all voices. Or perhaps he believed the difference in timbre between the gamba and keyboard would sufficiently distinguish each voice. Regardless, the voicing has led some modern performers to transpose the gamba line up an octave. Many recordings of these sonatas exist on viola or cello instead of gamba, which necessitates at least some transposition to avoid below-range notes (viola) and unplayable chords due to the gamba's different string tuning (both viola and cello). For example, when baroque cellist Anner Bylsma chose to record all three sonatas on cello piccolo, he transposed much of BWV 1028 an octave

¹⁹ Schröder, Dorothea. "Bob Van Asperen & Anner Bylsma Play Bach: The Suites for Violoncello Solo & Sonatas for Viola Da Gamba & Harpsichord." In *Bob Van Asperen & Anner Bylsma Play Bach: The Suites for Violoncello Solo & Sonatas for Viola Da Gamba & Harpsichord*, translated by Deborah hochgesang. Vivarte, 1992: 5.

higher, and even swapped the keyboard (he uses the trunk organ) right hand with the gamba line.

The following outlines Bylsma's transpositions in the second movement.²⁰

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the beginning of the second movement of BWV 1028. The score is annotated with several boxes and arrows to highlight specific transposition choices. A red arrow points to a passage with the text "Plays down octave". A green box highlights a passage with the text "At pitch". A blue box highlights another passage with the text "At pitch". The annotations are overlaid on the original manuscript, which is written in black ink on aged paper.

The

Bylsma recording cello piccolo line in BWV 1028, beginning of II. Allegro on 1753 Penzel copy²¹

²⁰ Schröder, Dorothea. "Bob Van Asperen & Anner Bylsma Play Bach: The Suites for Violoncello Solo & Sonatas for Viola Da Gamba & Harpsichord." In Bob Van Asperen & Anner Bylsma Play Bach: The Suites for Violoncello Solo & Sonatas for Viola Da Gamba & Harpsichord, translated by Deborah hochgesang. Vivarte, 1992.

²¹ Johann Sebastian Bach - Anner Bylsma, Bob Van Asperen – *The Suites For Violoncello Solo, The Sonatas For Viola Da Gamba & Harpsichord*, n.d.

Bylsma's alteration of Bach's voicing might go completely unnoticed by those unfamiliar with the work. The seamlessness of Bylsma's rearrangement proves the independence, equality, and versatility of Bach's contrapuntal lines. As they weave in and out of one another without a fixed hierarchy, the lines' artful transpositions and exchanges cause no discernable hierarchy violation. The sonata maintains its identity through this degree of alteration, to say nothing of the choice of cello piccolo and trunk organ instrumentation:

Good three-part invertible counterpoint remains good three-part invertible counterpoint no matter how it is scored and even when it is provided with additional harmonies from time to time (by the continuo harpsichord, for instance, or by accompanying strings)... Even Bach's choice for his sonatas of instruments (violin, flute, viola da gamba) with a long compass relates to this: the relative inflexibility of the oboe would reduce the potential of such invertible counterpoint and make it less adaptable.²²

Sonata in G minor, BWV 1029

Unlike the first two sonatas, the G minor (BWV 1029) contains three movements in a fast-slow-fast concerto-like form, or a *Sonate auf Concertenart* - sonata in three-movement concerto style - a term conceived in 1735 by Johann Adolf Scheibe. Other examples include Bach's six sonatas for organ (BWV 525-530; completed in 1730) and two sonatas for flute and harpsichord (BWV 1030 in B minor & BWV 1032 in A major; both completed in 1736).²³ The fact that Bach completed all the other pieces considered to be *Sonate auf Concertenart* between

²² Williams, Peter. "Bach's G Minor Sonata for Viola Da Gamba and Harpsichord BWV1029: A Seventh Brandenburg Concerto?" *Early Music* 12, no. 3 (1984): 345.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3137771>.

²³ Jones: 262.

1730-1736 further supports the hypothesis that, of the three gamba sonatas, he wrote at least the G minor after his move to Leipzig.

Some contest that J. S. Bach's *Sonate auf Concertenart* -- these works which seem to hover in the space between concerto and sonata -- were not originally sonatas at all, but are rather distillations or reductions of earlier, lost concertos.²⁴ Even if this were so, any work by J. S. Bach ought to be examined at face value before explaining away its irregularities. "With the philological accounts professing an actual concerto preceding BWV 1029, there is no longer a need to fuss over any tensions between sonata and concerto that manage to coexist."²⁵ At worst, to logic away the peculiar presence of the three obligato lines within a sonata as simply a concerto reduction fails to recognize the potential merits the specific instrumentation has to offer, which may have been well understood by Bach and worthy of a closer look.

The G minor's kinship with concerto form goes beyond its movement structure. Bach implements *ritornello* form within each fast movement, whereby "orchestral" episodes of the main subject alternate with "solo" material. Bach learned this form by transcribing for keyboard several of Vivaldi's concerti during his first residency in Weimar (the Italian composer helped

²⁴ Swack, Jeanne R. "On the Origins of the 'Sonate Auf Concertenart.'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46, no. 3 (1993): 370. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/831926>.

²⁵ Dreyfus, Laurence. "J. S. Bach and the Status of Genre: Problems of Style in the G-Minor Sonata BWV 1029." *Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (1987): 57. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.1987.5.1.03a00030>.

popularize ritornello form through his over 500 concerti).²⁶ In Vivaldi's concerti, sections are easily demarcated by alternation of *concertino* (solo) and *ripieno* (tutti), but in the context of a sonata, the clearest delineation of sections comes from full statements of the motivic subject versus incomplete developmental fragments. The *Vivace* first movement of BWV 1029 contains either three or seven parts (depending on the significance imparted to the convincing but incomplete motivic statements in measures 35 and 73) but adheres to ritornello form regardless.²⁷

Ritornello form in BWV 1029: I. Vivace

Measures	
1-10	Gamba ritornello (complete)
11-18	Harpsichord right hand ritornello (complete)
19-94	Sequences of motivic fragments in dialogue between all voices; Deceptive unison moments of ritornello at 35 & 73 which do not complete
95-end	Ritornello (expanded and weaves through all voices)

The gamba and harpsichord each fully state the ritornello subject in the beginning of the movement, alluding as they do to the exposition of a concerto. But unlike a concerto, while the harpsichord takes the lead with the ritornello, the gamba recedes only slightly into the background with its involved countersubject: not at all a simple *ripieno* accompaniment.²⁸ An orchestral string section would have difficulty executing this level of intricacy with as much clarity as a single voice. A sonata instrumentation affords this contrapuntal greater transparency.

²⁶ Alwes, Chester L. "J. S. Bach and the Concerto: Ritornello as a Guide to Rehearsal." *The Choral Journal* 41, no. 4 (November 2000): 21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23553616>.

²⁷ Dreyfus "Problems of Style:" 57.

²⁸ Dreyfus "Problems of Style:" 57.

Though the concept of a sonata as a three-movement concerto-like piece seems to defy category, Bach's contemporaries made use of the practice often enough to create a new genre. Both Johann Joachim Quantz and Pietro Antonio Locatelli employed the same format in their sonatas for flute and basso continuo in the 1730s - the exact time period in question. In fact, Quantz altered earlier four-movement sonatas of his own by removing the slow third movement to yield three-movement works containing two fast and one slow movement. Beginning in the 1730s, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach began composing a set of nineteen sonatas, including two for the viola da gamba, all of which contained only three movements.²⁹ The existence of other three-movement sonatas by Locatelli, Quantz, and later C. P. E. Bach both legitimizes the form in its own right and reinforces the likelihood that Bach wrote the G minor in 1730 or later.

The thematic material between the G minor sonata's *Vivace* first movement bears some resemblance to that of the third Brandenburg concerto (G major, BWV 1048), which perhaps perpetuated the common assumption that Bach wrote the gamba sonatas in Cöthen around the time he wrote the Brandenburgs. But certainly he could have referenced the Brandenburg material, reworking a catchy and versatile motivic idea, without needing to work on the pieces in close chronological proximity. This was a practice Bach employed frequently. Of the forty or so

²⁹ Oleskiewicz, Mary. "Carl Philip Emanuel Bach The Complete Works II/1. Solo Sonatas." In Carl Philip Emanuel Bach The Complete Works II/1. Solo Sonatas, xi-xxi. University of Michigan: Packard Humanities Institute, 2008.

instrumental chamber works that exist, only twenty-four are not reconfigurations of other works.

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A few other aspects of the G minor sonata *Vivace* subject resemble the opening of
Brandenburg Concerto No. 3:

Concerto $\frac{3}{4}$ a tre Violini, tre Viole, e tre Violoncelli, col Basso per il Cembalo.

descent to G

start of sequence

GM: I V iv ii iv V I V I V I

Opening of Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major, Bach's manuscript 1721

Vivace

descent to g

rising subject

Viola da gamba

Cembalo

gm: i V

3

start of sequence

i 6/4 iv7 VII 6/4 iv7/VII VI 6/4 V7/V

6

V7 i vii°7 i V

9

PAC

tr

tr

i 1 2 3 4 2 5 5 3 2 3 2

I. Vivace of BWV 1029 in G minor, G. Henle Verlag 2016 score

The (circled) lower-neighbor anapestic motive (G-F#-G) contains the exact same notes for two beats in both works, albeit not in the same location. (To be fair, it bears mentioning that the opening of Brandenburg 6 and many other Italian *concerti grossi* liberally employ this rhythmic kernel as well.) Both pieces begin with a pickup note value of an eighth. The average contour of the subject in the each's first complete measure descends and then rises in the second measure to begin a set of sequences in the third measure. While the gamba sonata has a *Vivace* tempo indication in common time, the Brandenburg opening has no tempo indication at all and a cut-time signature. However, both works feel idiomatic around the same quarter-note tempo, as the sixteenth-note passagework in both necessitates clarity, constraining performance to certain range of tempi.

The binary form *Adagio* second movement (in B-flat major) features a kind of duet between the top two voices, not in imitation but rather in commentary with one another, one floridly ornamenting while the other sustains and suspends above the harmonic rhythm of the bass. In this way the *Adagio* of the G minor most closely resembles the *Andante* third movement of the D major, and even perhaps the second movements of both the fifth and sixth Brandenburg concertos. In all cases, the bass harmony steadily ambles underneath two elegantly balanced cantilena voices. In listening to the two aforementioned slow movements, one can just as easily envision the bass line played by an entire continuo section as imagining the bass lines of the Brandenburg slow movements reduced to a harpsichord. The third and final *Allegro* movement returns to the ritornello form of the first movement.

Differences between Viola da Gamba & Viola

The viola da gamba belongs to the viol family, not the violin family. The viola is officially called *viola da braccio*, or “viola of the shoulder.” Unlike the violin family, members of the viol family have a flat back and sloping upper shoulders. (The modern double bass shares this aspect of its construction, earning it dual citizenship in both families.) Viols have C-shaped sound holes instead of F-holes. Because viol instruments today exist almost exclusively within the historical performance realm, their low-tension setup for gut strings remains essentially unchanged since the Baroque: they are still lightly constructed with thin wood and have low fingerboards and bridges. With their long string length and light tension, violas da gamba have an unusually long period of resonance after the initial attack, but the same physics compromise their capacity for projection (even compared to the standard viola).

Viols have frets and typically six strings tuned in fourths except one third in the middle, similar to a guitar: g'-d'-a-f-c-g (high to low) for a standard tenor six-string gamba.³¹ Their tuning and frets afford them some advantage over the violin family in playing chords. Composers can write chords with closer voicing and the frets allow for less left-hand strain. Due to the gamba's flatter bridge, on the gamba, triple and quadruple stops need not be broken or rolled quite as separately as on violin.

³¹ “Facts about the Viola Da Gamba.” About the Viol. Viola da Gamba Society of America. Accessed February 13, 2020. https://vdgsa.org/pgs/the_viol.html.

On the viola, Bach's gamba sonatas contain unplayable chords and some out-of-range low notes, so viola editions must rearrange some chords (three chords in the D major, two chords in the G minor) and transpose a dozen relatively short sections up an octave (two sections in the G major, three in the D major, seven in the G minor), which, in many sections, happens to yield the additional benefit of aiding to aurally distinguish the viola line from the equally active and complex harpsichord lines. But considering that the earliest version of BWV 1027 may have originally called for two violins, then two flutes in BWV 1039, Bach himself had to impose far more range alterations and transpositions between the flute and gamba versions than modern editors need to make from the gamba to viola versions.

Besides range, tuning, and frets, which require relatively minimal restructuring of the actual sonatas, perhaps the gamba's underhand bow-hold poses the greatest difference in actual technique. Gambists use convex baroque bows and hold the bow entirely underhanded. If the modern German double bass bow hold is rotated approximately ninety degrees clockwise from the standard violin bow hold, the gamba bow hold is rotated an much further so that the gambist's middle and ring fingers actually grasp the bow hair (an advantage in controlling hair tension) and only the thumb and pointer fingers grasp the bow stick:



*Gambist Meineke van der Velden playing BWV 1028;*³² *modern German bass bow hold*³³

Unlike modern bass players, gambists play with a light bow similar to a baroque cello bow. Traditionally, gambists reverse bow direction based on the idea that if the hand is rotated nearly 180 degrees from overhand violin bowing, then the bow directions reverse roles to achieve the same effect in sound. Therefore, down-bows are weak and up-bows are strong, so gambists typically play downbeats, strong beats, and chords with an up-bow.

Gamba vs. Viola Playing Implications

A typical baroque violist da gamba would have played not just the tenor gamba, but also the bass and alto members of viol family. Similarly, the term *violinist* in the baroque generally referred to a musician who played the instruments (plural) in the violin family; a violinist who did not also play viola (*da braccio* - the shoulder viola), for example, nor read multiple clefs, would have been hard to find indeed. While some notable musicians played instruments in

³² Bach - Sonata for Viola Da Gamba in D Major BWV 1028 . YouTube. Netherlands Bach Society, 2018. <https://youtu.be/XVtkxtwWr5M>.

³³ Gollihur, Mark. "Bows: French and German Grip." BOWS: French and German Grip - FAQ courtesy of GollihurMusic.com. Gollihur Music. Accessed February 14, 2020. https://www.gollihurmusic.com/faq/14-BOWS_FRENCH_AND_GERMAN_GRIP.html.

different families (ex. Castello played both the violin and the cornetto), at the minimum, musicians played several members of a single instrument family with some degree of competency. So while it may never have been expected - neither in the baroque nor modern eras - that a violinist could also play the viola da gamba (note that the gamba is a member of the viol family, not the violin family), in the baroque, it certainly would have been expected that a violinist would certainly also play viola da braccio. Thus, a baroque and modern violinist alike would only be able to play the gamba sonatas after transcribing them for viola, the violin family member with the closest pitch range.

While discussions of the history of the innumerable musicians who play both violin and viola, or the practice of multi-instrumentalism in the baroque, or the complex genealogical history and divergent evolution of the viol and violin families over time, are all rich and intriguing topics, they are beyond the purview of this paper. But a very brief discussion of the somewhat differing technical implications for a musician between the violin and the viola (shoulder) bears mentioning. The viola's thicker strings and larger size provide the player with a constant reminder that inefficient muscle use proves unsustainable over time. Thus, she may find that playing larger instruments serves to promote efficacious habits for violins of all size, but which the larger instruments more persistently demand, such as the practice of harnessing gravity with the bow arm such that arm weight falls directly into the strings (instead of manufacturing pressure in the bow hand), or taking advantage of an articulate left hand to clarify passagework,

or maintaining a relaxed left thumb to allow finger flexibility for reaching large intervals. These are just a few of many possible technical advantages multi-instrumentalism affords.

Both horizontally and vertically held instruments must contend with different force vectors of the player's anatomical asymmetries. The playing orientation of the violin and viola (strings horizontal) maximizes gravity's effect on the difference in strength between down-bow and up-bow, as the down-bow motion comes closest to parallel with the gravity force vector, and the opposite for up-bow. By contrast, the gravity force vector's effect on the bow direction on cello, bass, and gamba (strings vertical) is negligible. For example, a gambist may feel a much higher degree of ease and natural momentum in an up-bow, because as his outstretched arm moves back toward his body center, his bow arm loses potential energy as it gains kinetic energy. The opposite is true of the gambist's down bow, which involves a kind of backhanded outward pull. It may seem to lose momentum the farther he reaches from his body's center, gaining potential energy but losing kinetic. So while gravity imposes little to no asymmetry on the gambist's bow direction, anatomical proclivities account for the bulk of the bow direction inequality. The reverse applies to the viola: gravity's largely asymmetrical effect on viola bow direction far outweighs the degree to which deviation from body center effects bowing.

In recorded performance, the listener may find difficulty in discerning the direction of the player's bow. Perhaps the gamba's proclivity to long-ringing reverberation obscures most of the audible differentiation between strong and weak bow direction, and maybe gambists'

reverse-bowing approach effectively equalizes the strengths of both bow directions. The central question a violist must ask, then, is whether to emulate the gamba's resonance but lack of projection as well as practically indiscernible bow directions, or embrace his own instrument's superior projection and the aforementioned qualities found in bowing a horizontal instrument. That Bach assigned the same part in BWV 1027 to a violin, flute, or the right hand of the harpsichord (not to mention that he was an accomplished player on the viola) suggests what he might have believed: that the material and its treatment contained in his composition transcends the instrument for which it may have been intended, and that a reasonable arrangement or even an orchestration is acceptable so long as good taste is applied.

Conclusion: Arranging the Sonatas for String Trio

The versatility of Bach's counterpoint and the fact that he himself wrote the same material for strikingly different instrumentations nullifies any historically-based compulsion to replicate a particular sound or instrument-specific idiosyncrasy. Not only were these works realized for different instruments, in some cases by Bach himself, their unique qualities may be enhanced by doing so. An arrangement which assigns a viola to the viola da gamba line, and violin and cello to the harpsichord right and left hands, respectively, and which transposes the lines appropriately for each instrument's range, offers the listener the advantage of parsing each contrapuntal voice to a different timbre, while ensuring that the three instruments are able to balance one another.

Furthermore, the range transpositions required when adapting the gamba line for viola (moving out-of-range low notes up an octave) lifts the line so that it no longer overlaps with the bass line while maintaining plenty of headroom beneath the range of the treble line. Any long notes which were impossible to sustain on a harpsichord benefit from their assignment to a bowed string instrument which can sustain indefinitely and at any volume, with or without ornamentation, not to mention the endless possibility a string player's ability to articulate, shape, and dynamically vary every note introduces. Thus, arranging the gamba sonatas for string trio aligns with their eclectic origins, amplifies the individual expressive power of each of Bach's intricately crafted contrapuntal lines, and underscores the perennial versatility of his music.

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