



Bach

Sonatas for
viola da gamba
and harpsichord

Robert Smith viola da gamba
Francesco Corti harpsichord



Deutschlandfunk Kultur

J. S. Bach (1685–1750)

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About Robert Smith:

'Never one to rush the music he is playing, Smith imbues this wonderfully eloquent repertoire with the time to breathe and the results are truly revelatory'
Early Music Review

About Francesco Corti:

'His playing is a powerhouse of unbridled vivacity, exciting and excitable in equal measure'
BBC Music Magazine



Deutschlandfunk Kultur

A co-production with Deutschlandfunk Kultur

J. S. Bach (1685–1750)

Sonata in G minor, BWV 1029

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 1. Vivace | [5:18] |
| 2. Adagio | [5:22] |
| 3. Allegro | [3:34] |

Christopher Schaffrath (c.1710–1763)

Sonata in A major, CSWV:F:29

- | | |
|---------------|--------|
| 4. Allegretto | [8:12] |
| 5. Adagio | [4:48] |
| 6. Allegro | [5:10] |

J. S. Bach

Sonata in D major, BWV 1028

- | | |
|-------------|--------|
| 7. Adagio | [2:01] |
| 8. Allegro | [3:31] |
| 9. Andante | [3:48] |
| 10. Allegro | [4:03] |

Robert Smith (b. 1980)

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| 11. Dido's Torment | [4:55] |
|---------------------------|--------|

J.S. Bach

Sonata in G major, BWV 1027

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| 12. Adagio | [3:48] |
| 13. Allegro ma non troppo | [3:30] |
| 14. Andante | [1:45] |
| 15. Allegro moderato | [2:58] |

Total playing time [62:51]



J.S. Bach: Viola da Gamba Sonatas

With the exception of the new work by Robert Smith, the sonatas on this disc are all examples of a genre which reached its zenith in the middle decades of the eighteenth century: the cembalo-obbligato sonata. These works look and sound similar to a solo sonata, which in the eighteenth century meant a sonata for a solo melody instrument accompanied by an instrument such as a harpsichord. However, they require a different approach from the performers, and it is helpful to listen to them differently. Rather than solo and accompaniment, the obbligato sonata comprises two equal melody parts over a bass line: it is therefore a subgenre of the trio. It differs from the trio sonata in that one of the upper lines is played by the melody instrument, the other is played by the harpsichord right hand, and the bass is played by the harpsichord left hand. In fact, many sonatas exist in both forms: the trio sonata with two melody instruments over a bass line, and the obbligato sonata.

The four obbligato sonatas on this disc represent an interesting and surprisingly diverse cross-section of the genre, even though only two composers are present. Unlike many other sonatas, none of them

was ever printed in the eighteenth century, and none was ever offered for sale as part of a typical collection of six sonatas. They have in common the fact that they are all found in German manuscript sources from the middle decades of the eighteenth century, and were probably written within a period of about twenty years; but the three Bach sonatas vary significantly in texture, and the Schaffrath sonata then speaks to us with a different, more modern voice.

The Bach Sonatas

There has been some debate about the origin of these works. They were thought to date from Bach's period at the princely court of Cöthen, (1717/18 – 1723), for reasons that are not particularly convincing: because there he wrote many of his smaller chamber music works, and also because two gamba players were available there. These were Christian Ferdinand Abel and Prince Leopold himself. However the manuscript sources can all be dated to his later Leipzig period, when he wrote his other significant works for gamba, including the arias with gamba obbligato in the two great Passion settings. It seems likely that these are products of the last fifteen years of Bach's life; but as suggested above, were probably conceived

for different purposes and at different times.

The traditional trio sonata enjoyed enormous popularity during Bach's lifetime. Bach wrote surprisingly few of them, though no doubt many of his works have been lost. Bach was however a pioneer of the obbligato sonata, and in general for the soloistic role of the harpsichord in ensemble music. As well as these three works, there are obbligato sonatas with flute and violin, as well as the harpsichord concertos; Bach could be said to have invented this genre with his Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, BWV 1050.

J.S. Bach, Sonata in G major, BWV 1027

This work is the only one which survives in Bach's autograph. Of the three works, this most closely resembles the traditional trio sonata, and for good reason: it is Bach's rearrangement of his trio for two flutes and basso continuo, BWV 1039. Therefore, uniquely on this disc, it quite strictly follows the rules of trio composition which were articulated by many contemporary theorists. The trio was a vehicle for cooperation rather than individual display. Its contrapuntal nature determined that at least the two upper parts share the same melodic

material, and while they may be played on different types of instrument, there must be stylistic compatibility between the two players.

In converting the trio to obbligato sonata, Bach has kept mainly the same bass line, but added more detail and more interest to it, adding extra semiquavers, syncopations and octave leaps. The first flute part becomes the keyboard right hand, and the second flute part is of necessity transposed down the octave to form the gamba part. In the original, the second flute often plays higher than the first. In this version, the octave transposition of the second part means that this is hardly ever the case; but Bach's invertible counterpoint survives the octave reversal perfectly.

This work is in the originally Italian sonata da chiesa or church sonata form: four movements, slow-fast-slow-fast. These can often be further consolidated into two large sections, each comprising a slow introduction and a substantial fugal fast movement. This is clearly the case here, since each slow movement concludes on an unresolved dominant harmony. The first movement commences with an interesting example of an adaptation which Bach might have made, but chose

not to. The keyboard right hand has a long note of about ten seconds, a beautiful sign of skill and musicianship for the flute player, but quite impossible on the harpsichord without the addition of a trill – an ornament which of course is always available to the performer. Towards the end of the movement is a passage in which Bach picks up a seemingly insignificant descending scale passage from the main theme, and weaves it into a beautiful texture of close overlapping imitations between all three voices. The following 'Allegro ma non tanto' is a masterpiece of fugal composition. Almost the entire movement is generated by two themes: the more significant one in the harpsichord right hand at the very beginning, and the subsidiary passage of semiquavers, also in the right hand, accompanied by the gamba's first long held note. After a cadence in G major about a third of the way through the movement, Bach weaves the inversion of the main theme into the texture. It is interesting how an inversion of the theme can change its affect and mood quite dramatically.

When rewriting the work, Bach altered the tempo marking of the third movement from *Adagio e piano* to *Andante*. This was perhaps because the capacity for rich

harmonic and melodic improvisation in the harpsichord right hand was removed, and the more transparent texture of the new version encouraged a faster tempo. Bach also updated the slurring in both voices. The movement concludes with a long solo passage of gradually increasing tension for the harpsichord right hand (formerly first flute); further proof, if any were needed, that these works are quite different from the accompanied solo model. The last movement is another cheerful fugal movement, perhaps lighter in mood than the second movement.

J.S. Bach, Sonata in D major, BWV 1028

Also in *sonata da chiesa* form, this sonata adheres broadly to the traditional trio style as detailed above. However, its treatment of counterpoint is less strict; it shows influence of the modern galant style which became fashionable in the 1730s, eventually forming the basis of the simplified, more approachable and symmetrical Classical style. The first movement has the traditional imitative entries, but these are abandoned in the second movement, where the upper voices enter together in parallel tenths. This movement is in binary form with two repeated sections, which is quite normal in Baroque sonatas generally, but one of only two such movements in these three

sonatas.

The third movement, marked Andante, adheres to the traditional trio rules, but there is a nod in the direction of the solo sonata: the harpsichordist, when not busy playing Bach's written-out part for the right hand, is required to improvise a presumably more discreet accompaniment using Bach's figured bass to guide the harmony. This movement is built around a gentle *siciliano* theme which appears first in the home key of B minor, then in F sharp minor, A major, E minor and D major before returning to B minor. The theme is never absent for long, but each time it appears, the accompaniment in the other upper voice is different; in fact, that voice just continues its own melodic line with no apparent acknowledgment of the theme, another example of Bach's sometimes quite unostentatious genius. The final 'Allegro' is a harmonious combination of contrapuntal and galant styles. Here for the first time, we find truly idiomatic writing for both instruments, in the form of a cadenza-like passage for the harpsichord, immediately by another quite different one for the gamba. It seems clear that this work could only have been conceived for this combination.

J.S. Bach, Sonata in G minor, BWV 1029

This work has been conceived quite differently from the other two sonatas. There has been speculation that it may also be a rearrangement of an earlier work; but in this case, that work, now lost, would have been a concerto. BWV 1029 has the form of the three-movement (fast–slow–fast) Italian concerto which was firmly established by Vivaldi. The outer movements also show signs of the *ritornello* form found in Italian concertos, in which sections for the entire ensemble alternate with sections for the soloist(s), always delineated by cadences. It is quite a skill to convey this impression with only two instruments, but there are other examples of scaled-down concertos, which were known at the time by the term *Sonate auf Concertenart*: sonata in the style of a concerto. In this work the delineations are not always quite clear, but this also applies in Bach's famous six Brandenburg concertos, with which this work has been compared. The central 'Adagio' is quite different again. It is cast in binary dance form in B flat major with the expected central modulation to the dominant. It resembles a sarabande, but is even further removed from the dance floor than the *sarabandes* in Bach's cello suites. Placed over a slow walking bass line,

the two upper parts seem to flow independently of each other and the bass, creating an extraordinarily bare and meditative atmosphere, pared down to its essentials.

Schaffrath, Sonata in A major, CSWV:F:29

Christoph Schaffrath was born in Hohenstein near Dresden, but little is known about his student years. In 1733, he was shortlisted for the position of organist at the church of St Sophia in Dresden, but was beaten at the audition concert by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. The next year, Crown Prince Frederick appointed him as keyboardist in his fledgling Kapelle in Ruppin near Berlin, and with the other musicians he followed Frederick to Berlin on the king's coronation in 1740. In 1744 the king's younger sister, Princess Anna Amalia, offered Schaffrath a position as keyboardist and chamber musician, a post which would perhaps have allowed him more creative freedom than Frederick's court. Schaffrath remained in Amalia's employment until his death. His music collection, including many of his own works, was willed to Amalia, and was incorporated into her extensive library, the Amalien-Bibliothek, which is the only surviving eighteenth-century source of Schaffrath's works for viola da gamba. This

work is preserved there in his own hand.

This sonata is typical of the post-1730 galant style, in which beautiful singing melody is more important than counterpoint. Although the work is a unified whole, each movement presents a different experience to the player or listener. The first movement is a good example of the singing allegro style, with the same thematic material shared between both instruments. The superb Adagio typifies Berlin Empfindsamkeit (sensitivity), the best-known exponent of which is C. P. E. Bach. The expressive intervals, chromaticism, dynamic shifts and rhetorical pauses all combine for a strongly emotional effect. In the finale, Schaffrath abandons the trio model by giving different and idiomatic themes to each instrument; the piece becomes a true obbligato sonata, for which no other texture is possible.

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Dido's Torment

Early on a Saturday afternoon, if you tune into the Dutch classical music radio station, Radio 4, you might hear a great little slot called *Vrij Spel*, or Free Play. Musicians are invited to reinterpret well known classical

works and perform them live on air. When I played on the show in late 2019 I took Henry Purcell's *Dido's Lament* as a starting point. I deconstructed the recitative and aria and reassembled it together with elements of Marin Marais' *Préludes* and Metallica-inspired riffs. The result was a brand new composition with elements of Purcell's work flickering here and there to the fore. I became quite fond of *Dido's Torment* and happily added it as a little extra to this recording.

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Instruments

Viola da gamba: Pierre Bohr, after Colichon
Harpsichord: Christoph Kern, after Mietke

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Oliver Geisler and Musikfest Erzgebirge for their gentle push to make a solo viola da gamba programme at their festival *Nachtklang* event. It was a cross between baroque music, heavy metal and many other things, and led to this wonderful opportunity to record as a guest at the *Deutschlandfunk* in Cologne – for which I am also deeply grateful.



Robert Smith

Robert Smith is a viola da gamba and cello player from Yorkshire in the North of England. Since winning the Bach-Abel Viola da Gamba Competition in Köthen in 2012 Robert's life as a basso-continuo player and soloist has taken him down many interesting and varied paths. He has regularly criss-crossed Europe from his home in Amsterdam to play baroque music with many leading ensembles and orchestras. Robert is a member of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and with his own ensemble Fantasticus he has recorded critically acclaimed albums for Resonus Classics.

In music as in life Robert likes to get off the beaten path. His albums often feature previously unrecorded repertoire such as the lra-viol music on *Tickle the Minikin* and the virtuoso Jenkins duets with his former teacher Paolo Pandolfo on *The Excellency of Hand*. He enjoys exploring different genres of music and working with artists from other disciplines. This has led to interesting performances such as playing Metallica songs for death-defying acrobats in historical circus tents.

As a solo player Robert has had live concerts broadcast by BBC Radio 3, Deutschlandfunk

Kultur and worked as a soloist for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. In 2017 Robert released one of the first ever recordings of Telemann's newly discovered Fantasias for solo viola da gamba, which *The Observer* reviewed as 'playing of exceptional quality'. His 2019 release *La Gracieuse* with music by Marin Marais was *Gramophone Magazine's* Editor's Choice.

www.baroquebass.com

Photography: Alex Giacomelli



Francesco Corti

Francesco Corti was born in 1984 in Arezzo, Italy, to a musical family. He studied organ in Perugia, then harpsichord in Geneva and in Amsterdam. He won top prizes at the Johann Sebastian Bach Competition in Leipzig (2006) and the Bruges Harpsichord Competition (2007).

As a soloist, he has appeared in recitals and concerts all over the world. He has been a guest at festivals such as Mozart Woche and the Salzburger Festspiele, BachFest Leipzig, MusikFest Bremen, Utrecht Early Music Festival and Festival Radio France Montpellier. He has performed in halls such as Salle Pleyel (Paris), Bozar (Bruxelles), Konzerthaus (Vienna), Tonhalle (Zürich), Mozarteum and Haus für Mozart (Salzburg) and Concertgebouw (Amsterdam).

He is a member of Les Musiciens du Louvre (Minkowski), Zefiro (Bernardini), the Bach Collegium Japan (Suzuki), Les Talens Lyriques (Rousset), Harmonie Universelle (Deuter) and Le Concert des Nations (Savall).

Since 2015 he has been a regular conductor for Les Musiciens du Louvre and was appointed principal guest conductor of il Pomo d'Oro

in 2018.

Among other projects with this ensemble, he has conducted a European tour of Handel's *Orlando*. He was invited to lead B'Rock, the Nederlandse Bachvereniging and Holland Baroque. In 2021 he will conduct a production of Handel's *Agrippina* at the Royal Theater in Drottningholm (Stockholm, Sweden).

His solo recordings include a CD of Louis Couperin Suites; the Partitas by J. S. Bach; Haydn Sonatas; and the two piano quartets and the piano concerto K. 488 by Mozart. His has also recorded Bach's complete keyboard Concertos with Pomo d'Oro for Pentatone. His latest album, *Little Books* (Arcana), was awarded a Diapason d'Or.

He has taught in masterclasses all over Europe, in Latin America and in Asia. Since September 2016, he has been Professor of Harpsichord at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis.

www.francescocorti.com

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