

Little Missenden Festival 2017



Robert Smith on the 'lost' Telemann Fantasias

Amongst his many hundreds of compositions in many different styles and settings, **Georg Philipp Telemann** wrote sets of fantasias for four solo instruments - harpsichord, flute, violin and viola da gamba. The 36 fantasias for harpsichord, and 12 for flute were published in 1732-33. In 1735 Telemann published 12 fantasias each for violin and viola da gamba. Typically for the commercial strategy of his own "Telemann Publishing", the fantasias for viola da gamba were published two at a time on a fortnightly basis in a sort of "collect them all" action.

The fantasias for flute and violin especially have remained popular to this day - the varied and short movements provide compact musical messages that delight and refresh performers and listeners alike. The fantasias for viola da gamba however were lost until 2015 when they were rediscovered in the collection of Ledenburg Manor held at the Lower Saxony State Archive in Osnabrück. Until that point all that remained were tantalising newspaper announcements from the time advertising the forthcoming release of the fantasias.

I personally felt it was sad and perhaps even unfair for viol players that "our" set of fantasias were lost. Anyone who had played or heard the sonata for solo viola da gamba from *Der Getreue Music-Meister* in D major, TWV 40:1, got a sense of the way in which Telemann could write originally and idiomatically for the instrument. The sonata, published in 1729, is 5 movements long and features beautiful melodies, athletic allegros, self-accompanied recitativo and chromatic counterpoint. Knowing the pleasure of playing this sonata most certainly leaves one hungry for more!

And then in 2015 something happened that viol players dreamed about but perhaps never expected would happen: a complete copy of the 12 fantasias was discovered. The manuscript was released to the public in 2016 and we could ask some important questions. Is it good music? Does it fit well on the instrument? Is it written for professionals or amateurs? Is it more in a harmonic or melodic style? How does Telemann let the viola da gamba be both accompaniment and soloist at the same time? And by opening up the manuscript and playing through, the questions began to be answered.

There is something magical about learning a newly discovered score. It is a direct and pure link to the past, between the performer and Telemann. There are no conscious or unconscious memories to cloud our interpretation, no favourite recordings, no performance traditions, no influences from a masterclass with a great professor. This clean slate is something very seldom and worth cherishing. Compare this to interpreting the cello suites by J.S. Bach - with eighty years of recordings made and a cellist's musical education full of lessons and masterclasses it can be hard to find one's own voice and personal relationship with Bach.

The 12 fantasias are in 12 different keys and mostly contain three movements. The last, binary, movement of each Fantasy tends to be the most light-hearted and dance like, acting as a digestive to the weightier material that comes before. Reading through the score for the first time I became yet more convinced with each fantasy that the music was indeed very good and incredibly varied. The opening notes of Fantasy No.1 in C minor set a very serious tone giving way to a densely woven chromatic counterpoint, geniously inverted in the second half of the movement. The Fantasy No.6 in G major by contrast is a country feast, the frequent drone notes reminding us of a hurdy gurdy, the lively figuration of a laughing crowd!. Fugal and canonic writing features in Fantasies 1,3,5,7,9, and 11 - the Presto of Fantasy 9 is notable for its long theme and chromaticism while the Allegros of Fantasy 11 give the impression of an italianate concerto. And so each fantasy surprises us with new characters, new structures and new compositional devices.

The style of writing for the instrument is most definitely forward looking with melodic writing, or *jeu d'melodie* gaining the upper hand over *jeu d'harmonie*, or chordal playing. Harmonic progressions are more often implied through skipping melodies rather than use of chords outright. This is a move away from the dense sequential chords found in earlier germanic viola da gamba music and the fantasias nestle stylistically between Schenck's Opus 9 of 1710 and Carl Friedrich Abel's solo pieces from later on in the century.

As with many new discoveries, the suggestion has already arisen that these fantasias may not be by Telemann, but rather by a contemporary or one of his students (see German early music magazine, Concerto, No. 268). This theory however, based on personal feelings rather than substantiated evidence, has not gained much traction either in the musicological world or with me. Judging from my own experience, the way the motifs in these fantasias fit together and the work that one has to do to successfully bring out all the rhetorical devices contained within them is very similar to what is needed for other compositions by Telemann. It is perhaps this way of working, which is rather specific to Telemann, that convinces me most that these works are indeed genuine.

The fantasias would have been approachable by good amateurs of the time - they were after all the intended target of Telemann's own publication. It would be wrong however to think that this music is easy for professionals - dealing with rapid changes of register and contrapuntal writing whilst keeping the character of the music are some of the big challenges on offer.

Perhaps Telemann's talent lies partly in his ability to write music for the amateur market that never ceases to challenge great virtuosos.

Robert Smith: June 2017

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