

j.s. bach

the gamba sonatas
for string trio



renée hemsing
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J o h a n n S e b a s t i a n B a c h



1685 - 1750

The three sonatas for viola da gamba & harpsichord
arranged for viola, violin, & cello

Sonata No. 1 in G major, BWV 1027 [12:03]

- I. Adagio
- II. Allegro ma non tanto
- III. Andante
- IV. Allegro moderato

Sonata No. 2 in D major, BWV 1028 [14:48]

- I. Adagio
- II. Allegro
- III. Andante
- IV. Allegro

Sonata No. 3 in G minor, BWV 1029 [14:51]

- I. Vivace
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegro

VIOLA

Jean-Baptiste Salomon
Paris, 1750

RENEE HEMSING

VIOLIN

Aegidius Klotz
Mittenwold, 1772

SUSANNA OGATA

CELLO

David Tecchler
Rome, 1704

GUY FISHMAN





The arrangement for string trio of the three sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord

BWV 1027-1029, by Johann Sebastian Bach, intends to provide an accessible window into these dense and intricate works. They hold a significant place in Bach's oeuvre, and, by comparison to similar works of his contemporaries, in baroque music history. These sonatas feature the layering of three lines of equal activity and contrapuntal intricacy: the viola da gamba line (in alto clef) and the right and left hands' lines of the harpsichord (treble and bass, respectively). In doing so, they 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, in these sonatas, the harpsichord takes on two of three distinct and equal contrapuntal lines. However remarkable and rare a practice this would be for other composers of 18th-century sonatas—which typically feature a single line of primary interest above secondary basso continuo accompaniment—this is not the most distinguishing feature of these pieces against other works by Bach.

The unusually close and often overlapping pitch range he employs between these lines, however, is. In all three sonatas, especially the D major, Bach crowds the same register extremely closely, and on numerous occasions the bass line is actually higher than the gamba part. Thus, the D major sonata incurs the greatest degree of change in these arrangements, with one section in particular reassigning a low and sparse passage from the gamba part to the cello, liberating the viola to participate in a remarkably active dialogue with the violin which was previously contained to the harpsichord right hand alone. Why Bach would choose such overlapping ranges remains curious. 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 many modern performers to transpose the gamba line up an octave.

The range transpositions required when adapting the gamba line for viola lift the line so that it no longer overlaps with the bass and maintains headroom beneath 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 introduced by a string player's ability to vary the articulation and shape of each note. Arranging the gamba sonatas for string trio amplifies the individual expressive power of each of Bach's intricately crafted contrapuntal lines and underscores the perennial versatility of his music.

The unusual history of the gamba sonatas' origins lends further credence to their arrangement for string trio. Much scholarship states as a matter-of-course that Bach must have composed them while in Cöthen, when his post as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold (1717-1723) did not require him to compose worship music. This was the only time in Bach's life during which the primary direction of his composition shifted toward secular cantatas and instrumental works.

But as more details about Bach's life after Cöthen come to light, scholars now suggest that at least the G major sonata, if not all three gamba sonatas, was an arrangement of other works, and that all were completed later, during his Leipzig period, which began in 1723. Unlike the unaccompanied violin and cello works certainly dated to the Cöthen period, the three gamba sonatas do not comprise a set written and published together, although the distinctive and peculiar stylistic characteristics discussed here unify them as such.

Bach himself used the same material for strikingly different instrumentations, nullifying any historically-based compulsion to replicate a particular sound or instrument-specific idiosyncrasy. When adapting these works for other instruments, not only did Bach adapt them with little change, their qualities transcend and may even be enhanced by doing so: a testament to the versatility of his counterpoint.

Renee Hemsing, 2020

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 likely 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. This trio arrangement takes most of its material from BWV 1027—the version for gamba and harpsichord, not from the flute trio sonata (BWV 1039)—as the bass line Bach assigned to the harpsichord's left hand in the former contains more realization. That Bach assigned the same upper part in BWV 1027 to a violin, flute, or the right hand of the harpsichord suggests that he might have believed 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.

Sonata in D Major, BWV 1028

Apparently, no manuscript of this sonata in Bach's hand has survived, so the earliest copy available is by Christian Friedrich Penzel of Leipzig in 1753. Like the G major, the D major follows the *sonata da chiesa* slow-fast-slow-fast movement structure (*Adagio - Allegro - Andante - Allegro*). The technical difficulty of this sonata merits questioning whether Prince Leopold of Cöthen or his court gambist (moderately accomplished players believed to be possible candidates for whom the sonatas were written) would have ever possessed the skill to master such technical passages, and suggests the likelihood that a later unknown player whom Bach encountered in Leipzig was the intended recipient.

Sonata in G minor, BWV 1029

Unlike the first two sonatas, the G minor contains three movements in a fast-slow-fast form. It is a *Sonata auf Concertenart*, or a sonata in three-movement concerto style: a term conceived in 1735 by Johann Adolf Scheibe for this popular structure of the mid-eighteenth century. 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). The fact that Bach completed all the other pieces considered to be *Sonaten auf Concertenart* between 1730-1736 further supports the hypothesis that he wrote the G minor, if not all three sonatas, after his move to Leipzig.

Renée Hemsing, 2020

B a c h THE GAMBIA SONATAS *for* STRING TRIO

Renee Hemsing, viola • Susanna Ogata, violin • Guy Fishman, cello

Sonata No. 1 in G major, BWV 1027 [12:03]

1. Adagio	3:39
2. Allegro ma non tanto	3:30
3. Andante	1:58
4. Allegro moderato	2:56

Sonata No. 2 in D major, BWV 1028 [14:48]

5. Adagio	1:56
6. Allegro	3:45
7. Andante	4:58
8. Allegro	4:09

Sonata No. 3 in G minor, BWV 1029 [14:51]

9. Vivace	5:00
10. Adagio	6:12
11. Allegro	3:39



Recorded by Frank Cunningham
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