

Silvius Leopold WEISS

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Lute Sonatas, Volume 6 Nos. 7, 23 and 45

Robert Barto



Silvius Leopold Weiss (1686–1750) Lute Sonatas, Volume 6

The three sonatas recorded here span the whole of the career of the great lutenist Silvius Leopold Weiss. The composer himself dated the *Sonata in C minor* (Smith/Carwford No. 7) as one of his earliest works, from the first decade of the eighteenth century, while the *Sonata No. 45 in A major* is one of a series of mature works which may have been completed as late as the 1740s. The *Sonata No. 23 in B flat major* comes from a period roughly midway between the other two, probably composed not long after Weiss's appointment to the Dresden court in 1718, a position he retained until his death in 1750

The magnificent A major sonata is one of Weiss's crowning achievements as a composer for the lute, and therefore among the greatest works for the instrument from any period. His choice of the Italian word Introduzzione for the sonata's opening movement, in the form of a French overture is no mere whim: it is suffused with the spirit and style of the advanced Italian orchestral music favoured in Dresden rather than the formality and decorum of the French. The central fugal section presents not just a single theme, as in a conventional French overture (Weiss left several of these for solo lute), but also an accompanying countersubject which makes use of repeated notes in the manner of the latest galant music from Italy. This section has much of the flavour of the concerto about it, just as some orchestral overtures by Telemann do, and Weiss relishes the opportunity for a little virtuoso display in the course of a movement of great energy and wit.

The following Courante is one of his longest, perhaps the longest courante ever composed. At 183 bars it far exceeds the normal extent of the dance movements of the old suite form. Compare, for example, the 49 bars of the early C minor Courante included here, itself notably longer than most courantes composed by his contemporaries such as Bach or Handel. As was his habit in these extended dances. Weiss traces a kind of

fantasia-like exploration of a few musical ideas, which he subjects to ever-evolving transformation and modulation in a way entirely his own, yet firmly delineating the structure of the movement with great clarity. In others of his later works we find abstract movement-titles (Allegro, Adagio, and so on) rather than dance-names: the connection with the old French courtly dances is here stretched about as far as it could be. The same might be said for the somewhat shorter Bourrée. which might easily be imagined shorn of its dance associations with an abstract title such as Allegro. Yet Weiss retains the feeling of the dance throughout this catchy movement. The Sarabande, in the relative key of F sharp minor, is, unusually, in 6/4 metre, but is marked Grave lest a player be tempted to confuse its rhythm with the siciliano which it superficially resembles. Here Weiss exploits his famous skill in the cantabile style by using discreet embellishment of a singing melody over a simple bass line rather than using a densely expressive three-part texture as he often does in such slow movements. The following Menuet has a rhythmic swing which tends to disguise Weiss's characteristically asymmetrical phrase-lengths. It is built on a small number of musical ideas, but just as one feels sure a phrase is ending the melody will take a new turn, as if showing the listener that there is always something new to discover in the basic musical material. The concluding Presto maintains the same lively spontaneity, but has the driving momentum of a concerto finale; just as with the opening movement of this wonderful sonata, one can easily imagine it in an orchestral setting.

The Sonata No. 7 in C minor survives in two manuscript copies; its Allemande also appears as an isolated movement in a third manuscript. In one of the complete copies the composer himself has written in a number of corrections; to the other, which is actually rather inaccurately copied, he added, apparently near the

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very end of his life, a pencil note. Von Ano 6. In Düsseldorf, Ergo Nostra giuventù comparisce (From 1706 in Düsseldorf, thus our youth presents itself). This confirms that it is one of his earliest surviving compositions, a fact further supported by the Allemande's appearance in a lute book which can be shown to have been compiled in Rome and Venice during the period when Weiss was in Italy serving the former Polish Royal Family, between 1710 and 1714. The Allemande is a grave movement in a style which. though clearly Weiss's own, owes much to earlier models, notably to works by the French *luthistes* of the mid- to late-seventeenth century. The spirit and style of the late works of Jacques Gallot (d. before 1699) seem to be present throughout the piece. One work in particular by Gallot seems to have fascinated Weiss: there exist two separate arrangements by him in different keys of the melancholy Allemande, L'Amant malheureux, probably a late work, and notable for its prominent use of a descending four-note figure that was a common feature of baroque laments. This lamentfigure, which suffuses Weiss's Allemande too, was especially associated with the instrumental genre known as the tombeau (tomb), usually composed in memory of a great person. An anonymous Tombeau pour l'Empereur Joseph, also in C minor, and also the first member of a suite, can be found in two Austrian manuscripts, and bears a family resemblance to the Weiss piece, though it cannot have been composed before 1711, when Joseph I died. This possibly suggests either that Weiss's Allemande enjoyed a good deal of currency in the first decade of the eighteenth century or, perhaps more likely, that both works drew on a common stock of lament-material, as did the Gallot Allemande. In both works there are fleeting references in the ensuing movements to the opening Allemande. Weiss's visit to the Palatine Electoral court in Düsseldorf in 1706 is confirmed by surviving documents, and took place precisely a year after the death, on 5th May, 1705, of the music-loving Emperor Leopold I, before whom the lutenist is known to have performed on the lute as a child prodigy at the age of seven in 1694 or 1695. This raises the distinct possibility that the Allemande was composed and performed by him at the Palatine court as a tombeau for the late Emperor after the normal year of official mourning. The final movement of the sonata, the Gigue, contains a musical reference to Vienna; its opening motif, which does not recur in exact form elsewhere in the piece, can be found in several lute gigues from the seventeenth century, two of which bear the title, Les cloches de Vienne (The Bells of Vienna), further circumstantial evidence for an Imperial connection, one might think.

The last sonata recorded here. Sonata No. 23 in B. flat major, comes from Weiss's middle period, not long after his Dresden appointment perhaps around 1720 Although the single surviving copy is for the larger form of the lute, with thirteen courses or pairs of strings, that Weiss himself introduced around this time, the two extra notes in the bass that are essential for instance in the late Sonata in A major, when they occur, infrequently, in this sonata, can quite easily be played an octave higher without any perceptible damage to the music. This suggests that it was composed for the earlier elevencourse instrument, which remained standard in Germany until the 1740s. As the title written at the head of the music, Divertimento à Solo, might suggest, the individual movements of this sonata are modest in scale though they are assembled into a ten-movement structure which in performance lasts about as long as a normal Weiss suite of about six movements. The opening prelude does little more than set the scene by introducing the key and allowing the player to check the lute's tuning. The French title of the Entrée reminds us that we are here in a world where courtly ballets, by this time usually in the context of the opera, were a frequent occurrence, although in Weiss's hands it is hard to distinguish the musical style from that of the conventional allemande. There follow pairs of lively Bourrées, stately Gavottes and graceful Menuets, the last preceded by a single Sarabande. In each case we can easily see from the manuscript that the second dance of

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the pair has been added later, offering a technically more involved reflective commentary on the preceding movement. While the 'original' un-paired state is a sequence of dances of rather modest difficulty, the technical demands and length of the final version make the work into something more substantial, perhaps representing the composer's later thoughts on a work that was originally intended as light entertainment. The

two *Menuets* are good examples of Weiss's quirky attitude to phrase length: units of two, three, four and five bars are juxtaposed in a way that on paper looks eccentric, but in performance sounds perfectly natural. The divertimento ends with a sparkling movement called a *Saltarella*, a gigue in all but name.

Tim Crawford

Robert Barto



Robert Barto graduated from the University of California, San Diego, having specialised in historical lute performance. A Fulbright scholarship brought him to Europe, where he continued his studies with Michael Schaeffer in Cologne and Eugen Dombois in Basle. In 1984 he was awarded first prize in the International Lute Competition in Toronto, as well as top prize of all instrumental soloists in the Musica Antiqua Competition in Bruges, Belgium. Robert Barto has performed throughout Europe and North America including solo recitals in the Festival of Flanders, the Utrecht Festival, 'Music Before 1800' in New York City, as well as in London's Purcell Room. Also in demand as a teacher, he is often on the faculty of the Lute Society of America summer school and has given courses in Sweden, Italy and Spain. Recent tours have included concerts and a masterclass in Tokyo.

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9 Gavotte

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The three sonatas recorded here span the whole of the career of Silvius Leopold Weiss, a prodigious composer of almost 600 works for solo lute and by far the most outstanding lutenist of the Baroque era. At times deeply felt, at others infectiously lively, the Sonatas are among the most technically challenging music in the lute's repertory. The magnificent Sonata No. 45, suffused with the spirit and style of contemporary Italian composers such as the Scarlattis and Corelli, is both one of Weiss's crowning achievements as a composer and among the greatest works for the instrument from any period.

Silvius Leopold WEISS (1686-1750)

Sonata No. 45 m A major	33:30	o Sarabanue	3.33
1 Introduzzione	5:38	11 Menuet	3:14
2 Courante	7:43	12 Gigue	2:14
2 Doumnée	4.21	_	

3 Bourrée 4:21 Sonata No. 23 in B flat major 22:53 6:28 4 Sarabande 13 Prelude & Entrée 3:33

5 Menuet 3:43 14 Bourrées I & II 4:35 6 Presto 6:04

15 Gavottes I & II 4:20 Sonata No. 7 in C minor 17:51 16 Sarabande 3:03

5:14 17 Menuets I & II 7 Allemande 3:41 8 Courante 2:13 18 Saltarella 3:09

1:22

Robert Barto, Baroque Lute

Recorded at The Green Room, Offord Hall, Aurora, Ontario, Canada from 4th to 7th October 2002 Producers: Norbert Kraft & Bonnie Silver • Engineer: Norbert Kraft • Editor: Bonnie Silver Lute made by Andrew Rutherford • Booklet Notes: Tim Crawford Cover Picture: *The Lute-Player*, French School, (17th century) (Hamburg Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany / Bridgeman Art Library)



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