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RUDOLF STRAUBE

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Of Rudolf Straube's limited output for solo keyboard, only one was published; the other two languished in manuscript, much like his reputation as a musician. He had had success as a composer for the lute, having in 1746 published two sonatas in Leipzig. But for some reason he decided to join the throngs of foreign musicians seeking their fortunes in London. Not unexpectedly, his move to England did not bring him instant success. William Jackson of Exeter reported that Thomas Gainsborough found the "German professor" dining upon a roasted apple in a garret, and bought his lute from him for 10 guineas.[1]

But the fact that the painter—a notorious collector of famous musicians' instruments and an even more infamous amateur performer—tracked Straube down, and strong-armed him into selling some lute music, is an indication that the composer, despite his apparent penury, had by then achieved some sort of recognition, if only among the cognoscenti. Straube adapted his skills on the lute to capitalize on the burgeoning popularity of the "easy and agreeable" English guitar (actually a cittern), resulting in the *Lessons for two guitars* (*c.*1765) and the *Five Sonatas* (1768) for guitar and sundry accompaniment (three of which are keyboard).

Indeed, the rise in popularity of the English guitar was sufficient to warrant extreme measures by those with vested interests. Ladies were reportedly disposing of their harpsichords at auctions for one third of their price, or exchanging them for guitars. The famous harpsichord maker Jacob Kirkman, after almost ruining himself by buying up his discarded harpsichords, attempted to besmirch the guitar's image by buying several cheap ones and giving them to prostitutes and street vendors, so that the ladies might be "ashamed of their frivolous and vulgar taste, and return to the harpsichord".[2] Straube did not, however, continue to issue guitar music; he turned his attention to the keyboard, publishing a short *Gavotte* with six variations in 1768, after which date all activities ceased.

There is neither record of Straube's participation in London's concert life, nor evidence of any attempt to join the network of compatriot émigrés—referred to by Johann Christian Bach (in a letter dated 26 June 1764) as the *"Hierarchie allemande"*—which supplied the ranks of court musicians as well as musical luminaries of the Bach-Abel concert series. It is unlikely that they did not know of each other. If not, the collector of musician-friends Gainsborough might have reminded Bach that he was still a child when Straube left the *Thomasschule* to study at the university in Leipzig in 1740.

According to Adlung, Straube was, apart from being a good lutenist, a "well-taught" keyboard student of J.S. Bach.[3] Certainly Straube could have basked in the reflected glory of having once been associated with the Bachs. This was a ready-made "brand" with universal recognition that enabled J.C. Bach to become the Queen's music master within a year of arrival in England. The royal pupil had been inherited from his brother Carl Philipp Emanuel, who had often travelled from Berlin to Strelitz (a mere day's journey) to teach the young Sophie-Charlotte the harpsichord.

Why Straube should name his *Gavotte* "Mecklenburgh" remains a mystery; the obvious reference is Queen Charlotte. The airy melodious theme of the *Gavotte* calls to mind the "singing Allegro" style of Bach, while the variations format is not dissimilar to the "God save the King" variations from the last movement of the sixth sonata of Bach's opus 1, the dedicatee of which is the queen.

Like Bach, Straube, too, experienced some sort of an epiphany that led to a change of compositional style from the *Empfindsam* of the two manuscript sonatas to the undemanding Italianised *galant* style of his *Gavotte*. (Bach had composed some concertos in the Berlin style, the result of the personal tutelage of C.P.E. Bach; but upon his arrival at Milan, he abandoned his training and his religion, to embrace the Italian style and Catholicism.)

Another candidate may be the dedicatee of Bach's opus 5, advertised in the *Salisbury Journal* on 18 August 1766 as "Six sonatas for the Harpsichord, dedicated to the Duke of Mecklenburgh".[4] This was Prince Ernst of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, a "major-general of the army of His Britannic Majesty" and the queen's third brother. Bach's opus 5 sonatas were enormously popular, and are the first published in London to mention the piano-forte, an option Straube was also to offer in his *Gavotte* in 1768, a date made significant as the year of the piano's public debut in England as a solo instrument.

The *Public Advertiser* announced on 2 June 1768 a benefit concert for the oboist Johann C. Fischer in the Thatched House Tavern in St James's Street, London, with a "solo on the Piano Forte". The performer was J.C. Bach, who had been championing the new-fangled piano, his keen commercial eye always eager to exploit a novelty. The instrument may have been a grand or a square, the latter built by Johann Christoph Zumpe, maker of the earliest known piano in Britain, dated 1766.

Had Straube been trying to curry the favour of the queen? Charlotte's patronage was, after all, weighted heavily in favour of German musicians. Was it mere coincidence that his *Gavotte* was published in the same year as the wedding of the queen's second brother Karl II to Frederica of Hesse-Darmstadt? The queen was remarkably close to her brothers. In 1771 Ernst, on his visit to England accompanying Karl, godfather to the queen's eighth child, later Duke of Cumberland and King of Hanover. Or was the work a trifling dance reflecting the partying of the celebrities of the day?

The *Gavotte* was no chance publication, for Straube clearly intended to ride the crest of the music-publishing wave. More had apparently been planned: the composer announced on the title page that "soon will be published three Sonata's by the same Author"[sic]. The promised sonatas are nowhere to be found. These, if they had ever been written, are unlikely to be the (almost certainly earlier) manuscript sonatas. These are charming pieces, beautifully but by no means perfectly crafted. But they are written in the erratic *Empfindsam* style, which never quite gained a foothold in England, much like Straube's damp squib of a career.

1 William Jackson, *The Four Ages; together with essays on various subjects* (London, 1798), 152-3.

2 Abraham Rees, *The Cyclopaedia; or Universal dictionary of arts, sciences, and literature* (London, 1819), s.v. "Guitar".

3 Jacob Adlung, *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit* (Erfurt, 1758); facs. repr. (Kassel, 1953): 722: "*ein guter Lauteniste, und auf dem Claviere ein wohlgerathener Schüler des Kapellmeister Bachs...*"

4 Betty Matthews, "J.C. Bach in the West Country", *The Musical Times* 58 (1967): 702.