Adlersfeld (died between 1737 and 1741) into the famous ‘London’ manuscript of Weiss’s lute works. Prague had been a major centre of lute activity for several decades when Weiss first visited in 1717, and he went there several more times, including a trip to the coronation of Emperor Charles VI in 1723, when, in order to hear the new opera composed for the occasion by Fux, some Dresden musicians, including Weiss, the cellist Benda and the oboist Quantz (later famed as a flute-player) found places as ripienists in the orchestra. In the manuscript, the Prelude was copied later onto some staves left empty following the imposing Allemande; again this shows that Weiss did not regard the prelude as an essential part of the composition of a sonata, preferring to leave it to be improvised on the spot.

An earthy Rigaudon is followed by a Sarabande composed in Weiss’s cantabile style but without the continuous additional embellishment we saw in the late C major sonata. In the Gavotte Weiss exercises the player’s right-hand thumb with a three-note descending bass-line motif that continually recurs throughout the piece, while the Menuet has a lilting quality enhanced by another repetitive three-note motif in the melody, this time moving upward.

The character title of the final piece, Le Sans Souci (‘the carefree’), might raise the possibility of another royal association. In January 1728 Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia (later known as Frederick the Great, 1712-1788) visited Dresden with his father, King Frederick Wilhelm I; on 26th January he wrote to his sister: “I performed as a musician. Richter, Buffardin, Quantz, Pisendel and Weiss accompanied. I admire them. They are the best artists at the court.” In May of the same year, the Saxon Elector paid a return visit to Berlin with Quantz, Pisendel, Weiss, and Buffardin among his retinue. Some years later, in 1745, Frederick, by now the Prussian King, began work on his palace at Potsdam, ‘Sanssouci’, named after the same French phrase. But, to be frank, this is more likely to be a mere coincidence.

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 at the Festival of Flanders, the Utrecht Festival, ‘Music Before 1800’ in New York City, as well as at 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.
Silvius Leopold Weiss (1687–1750)  

Lute Sonatas, Volume 11

One of the most remarkable things about the music of the Silesian lutenist Silvius Leopold Weiss is its individuality. Much is common in the prevailing ‘mixed’ Italian/French style popular in early eighteenth-century Germany, and familiar to us today from the works of Bach, Handel and Telemann. The exception is a few movements of the lighter kind, it could be mistaken for any of those three great masters. The fact that one of Weiss’s works, Sonate no. 27, exists in an arrangement by J. S. Bach, the so-called Suite for violin and harpsichord, BWV 1025, partly copied in his autograph, did indeed mislead the nineteenth-century compilers of the great Bach-Gesellschaft edition into attributing it to the Leipzig genius, but its authenticity was always in question – it certainly does not sound much like him.

We know very little about Weiss’s training in composition; we are told that, like his younger brother Johann Sigismund and his sister Juliana, he was taught the lute by his father, Johann Jakob Weiss (1662-1715). Whether Johann Jakob engaged in composition, as such, we do not know, but undoubtedly he would have been a highly skilled improviser on his instrument, and equally certainly this would have been a central element in the training of the young Silvius. The boy was an infant prodigy, and even performed for Emperor Leopold I’s father, Ferdinand III. At this time, the end of the seventeenth century, the boy was an infant prodigy, and even performed for Emperor Leopold I’s father, Ferdinand III.

French lute music was certainly revered in Austria and Silesia, and was consciously imitated by later composers for the instrument, including Weiss himself in several of his earlier works – he seems to have retained an affection for a particular allemande by Gallot, L’Amant malheureux, to which he returned in a number of surviving variations and imitations, no doubt based in turn on his own improvisations around the works he most admired. Gallot’s allemande, probably a product of his later career, possibly as late as 1680, makes prominent use of the device of a descending sequence of suspensions which was synonymous with the concept of ‘lament’ during the baroque period. Most of Weiss’s allemandes, even those in ‘happy’ major keys, and other movements, too, contain such sequences, and this is one of the most distinctive features of his style. Sometimes, these seem – on paper – to be taken to an extreme, but this is to forget the importance of improvisation in the make-up of a lutenist composer and virtuoso performer such as Weiss. Weiss’s sequences are also one of the special features of Weiss’s compositions in the explicitly improvisational style typical for preludes, capriccios and fantasias, of which he left dozens of examples. These would most likely have been written out at the request of patrons, or for the instruction of pupils, and they do not seem to have formed an essential part of Weiss’s repertory with this composer at this time. In the works which like all Weiss’s movements in ‘folk’ style allows him to display his keen wit. Although the manuscript does not actually give the melody of the Sarabande in its simple, unadorned form, it can easily be reconstructed, as it is here. In the stream of music that follows, Weiss’s lyrical embellishments treat the melody of the Sarabande with an aestheticism which is utterly, and uniquely, Brahmsian.

Unlike other lute composers, Weiss seems to have used the minuet form as a kind of test-bed for compositional purposes, playing with and against the expectations of his audience, of which he would all have been familiar with the conventional steps of this most popular of dances. In the movement of this sonata it seems possible to imagine a minuet form, but, as in all the best improvisations, one is never sure where the music is going next. The Presto is one of Weiss’s most energetic finales, where the music is transformed, perhaps unexpectedly, from an allegro of the Sarabande into a Presto. Its resemblance to the flute sonata in the same key ascribed to J. S. Bach, BWV 1033, the following sonata on this recording. No. 96 in G major, survives in a manuscript copied in Moscow some time after 1762, over a decade after the composer’s death, was actually taught fine Russian (or, more probably, Ukrainian) lutenist named Timofei Bielogradsky (c. 1710-after 1770) in the 1730s, and it has been speculated that it was he who brought the music later copied into this manuscript book with him to Moscow, where he enjoyed a high status at court, receiving a state pension on his retirement in 1767.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there exist many ouvertures in lute manuscripts from the late eighteenth century, and it is certainly a work of Weiss’s high maturity, possibly even as late as the early 1740s. It opens with a majestic Ouverture, a genre which consciously apes the orchestral style of the French court. Surprisingly, perhaps, there exist many ouvertures in lute manuscripts from the late eighteenth century, and it is certainly a work of Weiss’s high maturity, possibly even as late as the early 1740s. It opens with a majestic Ouverture, a genre which consciously apes the orchestral style of the French court. The short Ouverture, probably dating from between 1725 and 1730, was copied out in Prague for the Tsarina’s family. There is no doubt that Weiss’s experience as an instrument-maker was of the plain variety, without any embellishment, between 1725 and 1730, was copied out in Prague for the Tsarina’s family. There is no doubt that Weiss’s experience as an instrument-maker was of the plain variety, without any embellishment, and like other works, the Ouverture and the Sarabande from the same manuscript, it can easily be reconstructed, as it is here. In the stream of music that follows, Weiss’s lyrical embellishments treat the melody of the Sarabande with an aestheticism which is utterly, and uniquely, Brahmsian.

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The Intermezzo is a fast opening movement leaves no room for the habitual allemande, so it is followed directly by a Courante whose opening few notes provide the musical motive for the whole movement. This is cheerfully spirited, in the restrained and elegant style of Weiss’s early years; while the Fughetta is a treble piece with changing facial effects of orchestral performance, like the roulades of fast notes which embellish the opening slow section, or the successive high to low entries in the fugal which serve to convincingly transformed into a style which suits this least orchestral of instruments.

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