

Jean-Marie
LECLAIR
Violin Sonatas • Book 3
Op. 5, Nos. 5–8

Adrian Butterfield, Violin
Sarah McMahon, Cello
Silas Wollston, Harpsichord



Jean-Marie Leclair (1697–1764)

Violin Sonatas • Book 3: Op. 5, Nos 5–8 (pub. 1734)

Jean-Marie Leclair was born in Lyon in 1697 to a lacemaker. He trained as a dancer and violinist and subsequently established himself as France's leading violinist in the 1720s with the publication of his first two books of sonatas, in 1723 and 1728, and with his dazzling performances at the Concert Spirituel. Formal recognition of his talents as both performer and composer came in 1733 when he was appointed Director of the Music of the Chapel and the Apartments by Louis XV, and he displayed his gratitude to the King by dedicating this third book of sonatas, *Op. 5*, to him in 1734. Sadly, a dispute with another violinist, Jean-Pierre Guignon, who had been appointed at the same time, led to his resignation in 1736. He subsequently worked at the court of the Princess of Orange and at the Hague in the Netherlands and then for the Duke of Gramont in Paris. His life came to a shocking end in 1764 when he was murdered. No one was formally charged for the deed, but strongest suspicion has fallen on his nephew.

This third book of violin sonatas builds on the previous two in several ways. In terms of form and use of tonality there are some developments but no radical changes. Eleven of the twelve sonatas have four movements while just one has three, and Leclair's charming mixture of Italianate lyricism and virtuosity and French sensibility and dance idioms continued to embody the aim of this fusion of styles, known as *les goûts réunis*, which was such an important aspiration of the age in which he lived. One element that is new is Leclair's use of variation form in three of the final movements, a convention that was to become particularly popular in the second half of the 18th century. His use of tonality is wonderfully expressive but still relatively conservative and within each sonata he rarely diverges far from the tonic major or minor or relative major or minor. He is more inclined than before, however, to change key signature during a movement and in one case (the *Adagio* of *Sonata No. 7*) to travel through a number of surprising keys.

In terms of violin technique some of the sonatas challenge the performer's dexterity to a higher degree than

before. Several movements include continuous multiple-stopping, and the figurations are more intricate and complex than before. There are two *Presto* movements and two marked *Prestissimo*, while the moderating markings of *ma poco* and *ma non troppo* added to *Allegro*, which were ubiquitous in the first two books, have become somewhat rarer. The second movement of *Sonata No. 9* includes almost constant undulating bow strokes on double-stopped notes. And the outer movements of *Sonata No. 8* sound like prototype concerto movements. It is surely no coincidence that Leclair's first set of six concertos was published just three years after this set, in 1737.

While it is clear from the style of writing and the range of the bass line in his first two books that Leclair had the viola da gamba in mind as the string bass instrument alongside the harpsichord, in *Book 3* the 'violoncello' is specifically mentioned in the *Ciacconna* of *Sonata No. 4* and at that point it is given a separate stave and its own line of music. This development indicates how the dominance of the gamba in France was beginning to wane and that the Italian cello was taking its place.

Leclair specified that two sonatas in *Book 1* and five in *Book 2* could be performed alternatively on the flute, no doubt with an eye to boosting sales; but none are specified in this way in *Book 3*. Perhaps he felt that he should focus exclusively on the violin in deference to Louis XV after his recent appointment as court musician. The focus on dance in French Baroque music, a legacy of Louis XIV who adored dancing, usually meant that a folk element was also never far away, as can be seen frequently in *Books 1* and *2*. But in *Book 3* almost every sonata incorporates some sort of drone moment and rustic elements appear frequently (in the last movement of *Sonata No. 10* the tonic bass note remains unchanged throughout). One wonders whether the King was especially fond of this style of music.

The *Fifth Sonata* is the only sonata in the set to have three movements instead of four. In the opening *Allegro*, Leclair manages to produce music of wistful beauty from remarkably simple material, and the slow dance that follows

has a similar touching simplicity. The *Allegro* finale is, in complete contrast, full of energy and leaping figurations, and a *Prestissimo* variation brings the sonata to a rousing conclusion.

A solemn tone is struck from the first bar of the opening *Grave* of the *Sixth Sonata*, which acquired the nickname 'Le Tombeau' (a composition commemorating the death of a notable individual). The writing is highly ornate, with multiple stopping throughout, and a special feature of the movement is the written out arpeggiation, down as well as up, of several of the chords, adding grandeur to the serious mood. The *Allegro* second movement is dominated by an arpeggiated musical *idée fixe* that is mostly rooted on the lower two open strings of the violin, reinforcing the grounded nature of the work. In the third movement *Gavotta*, the *minore* and *maggiore* sections each have simple themes set in regular gavotte dance phrases of four and eight bars but, as he does in the first movement, Leclair challenges the violinist with filigree ornamentation and continuous multiple stopping. The continuo players set the energetic but still serious character of the finale on their own, and although there are moments of lightheartedness, the intense mood drives the music through to the end.

The *Seventh Sonata* opens with a *Largo* that has many *siciliana* characteristics including lilting dotted rhythms and an air of gentle melancholy. The *Allegro* that follows is through-composed instead of having a midway repeat and is driven forward by a leaping octave figure that is treated contrapuntally with the bass. The music never stops so the

mood is one of unrelenting intensity and drama. The third movement *Adagio* opens in a much more relaxed vein in the relative major key of C. There is something almost Handelian about the musical lines but there are also numerous surprising twists and turns in the harmonies that take the listener on a journey before arriving on the dominant of A minor ready for the final *Tempo Gavotta (en rondeau)*. This is a double rondo, *minore* and then *maggiore*, the *minore* very rustic and lively and the *maggiore* gentler and more reflective, before the *da capo* ensures an energetic finish.

When he came to write the first and last movements of the closing *Eighth Sonata*, Leclair took what was for him a different approach. As already mentioned, three years after publishing *Book 3* the composer brought out his first set of violin concertos, *Op. 7* (1737), and these particular movements seem like a 'dry run' for those pieces. Both open with a unison statement that is orchestral in character and repeated at the end of the movement, much like a final orchestral *tutti* in a Vivaldi concerto. The second movement *Aria* is a gentle and charming rondo, also in D major, and the subsequent *Andante* switches to the tonic minor and has a more intense and slightly relentless nature, ending with a pause and the opportunity for a short, improvised cadenza. Both outer movements have a rustic quality and the inherent Italianate virtuosity of the violin part within the concerto genre is matched by the bass figuration in the finale.

Adrian Butterfield

Photo: © Chris Christodoulou



Adrian Butterfield

Adrian Butterfield is a UK-based period-instrument violinist, director and conductor who appears regularly at Wigmore Hall and across the world. He is musical director of the Tilford Bach Festival, associate director of the London Handel Festival and frequently conducts and directs the London Handel Orchestra and Players as well as working as a guest director in Europe and North America. London Handel Players made their debut at Carnegie Hall in 2014 and return to North America regularly. He leads the gut-string quartet, the Revolutionary Drawing Room, and is professor of Baroque violin at the Royal College of Music in London. He also works annually with the Southbank Sinfonia, gives masterclasses internationally and has taught on summer courses in several countries. He has conducted all the major choral works of Bach as well as numerous works by Handel and his contemporaries and directed ensembles such as the Croatian Baroque Ensemble in Zagreb, the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra and the London Mozart Players. www.adrianbutterfield.com

Photo: © Stephen Page



Sarah McMahon

Irish cellist Sarah McMahon enjoys a varied career as principal cellist with the Academy of Ancient Music, Irish Baroque Orchestra, Ensemble Marsyas and Camerata Kilkenny, collaborating closely with Peter Whelan, Malcolm Proud, Laurence Cummings and Richard Egarr among others. She also regularly plays as guest principal with the London Handel Orchestra, Florilegium, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Arcangelo and Dunedin Consort. She is a founding member of the Callino Quartet, and the group's recording of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross* was met with critical acclaim. Their collaboration with Canadian filmmaker Kaveh Nabatian premiered at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam in 2019 and toured festivals in Montreal, Kerala, Bilbao and Edinburgh. McMahon is professor of historical cello at the Royal College of Music in London and Berwick Academy at the University of Oregon. She gratefully acknowledges support from Music Network and Arts Council of Ireland through their Capital Award scheme.

Photo: © Tim Gander



Silas Wollston

Recognised as a leading early music specialist, Silas Wollston combines performance and academic research in a varied career. He studied the organ with John Scott before taking up an organ scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge. He then went on to study harpsichord and fortepiano at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Conservatoire Royale in Brussels. A longstanding member of the English Baroque Soloists, he played a major role in Sir John Eliot Gardiner's Bach cantatas cycle in 2000, performing the organ *obbligato* of BWV 146 on the Trost organ in Altenburg. He also has significant experience as a choral director, working as director of music at Queen's College, Cambridge between 2011 and 2015. He has published research on the string music of Locke and Purcell, and on Handel's compositional process. He is a member of the London Handel Players, The Bach Players, and the ensemble In Echo.

Jean-Marie Leclair's violin sonatas embody a stylistic fusion known as *les goûts réunis* in which the lyricism and the virtuosity of the Italian school are integrated with the dance idioms of French Baroque music. In this volume, the music reaches new heights of technical complexity in its filigree ornamentation and continuous multiple stopping while still incorporating much wistful beauty. In the *Sonata in D major*, however, Leclair's ambition expands yet further, as he combines innate lyricism and rustic drones in a prototype concerto form.

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**Violin Sonata in B minor,
Op. 5, No. 5**

13:06

- 1** I. Allegro ma non troppo 4:41
- 2** II. Largo 2:42
- 3** III. Allegro – Prestissimo 5:37

**Violin Sonata in C minor,
Op. 5, No. 6 'Le Tombeau' 14:03**

- 4** I. Grave 2:24
- 5** II. Allegro ma non troppo 3:41
- 6** III. Gavotta gratoso: Andante 4:17
- 7** IV. Allegro 3:38

**Violin Sonata in A minor,
Op. 5, No. 7**

14:41

- 8** I. Largo 5:45
- 9** II. Allegro 1:59
- 10** III. Adagio 3:55
- 11** IV. Tempo Gavotta: Allegro 2:59

**Violin Sonata in D major,
Op. 5, No. 8**

13:22

- 12** I. Allegro ma non troppo 4:28
- 13** II. Aria: Gratoso 2:54
- 14** III. Andante 2:19
- 15** IV. Allegro 3:33

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Recorded: 11 December 2020 **1–3** **12–15** and 11 March 2021 **4–11** at St John's Church, Loughton, Essex, UK
 Producer: Annabel Connellan • Engineer and editor: Ben Connellan • Booklet notes: Adrian Butterfield
 Publisher: Anne Fuzeau Productions (facsimile of 1734 printing) • Cover image: *Le Pont Neuf et la Samaritaine*
 (1777) by Nicolas-Jean-Baptiste Raguenet (1715–1793) / Musée Carnavalet, Paris