

Hamburg - Queen of Cities

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What an enigma history is! We are told that the truth generally lies within that vague area between the various sides to a story, but then again, the romance of history has really very little to do with the 'truth,' doesn't it? Rather, history is a thing of beauty because it tells us more of what we wish to think ourselves rather than what we really are - as Anatole France once quipped, 'history books that are full of no lies are generally dull' (!). A propos the topic at hand, there is a special attraction in examining how a sense of collective history or culture shapes the artistic expression of a people or nation. In the case of Hamburg, both the historian and musician find much food for thought. Crammed between expansionist empires and impoverished German mini-states, the 'Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a centre of great social and commercial progress, open to all sorts of foreign visitors and adventurers, religious minorities and refugees, and, of course, a huge number of musicians and artists seeking to make their fortunes in the German-speaking world's leading metropolis.

Hamburg's artistic expression naturally reflected the diversity of peoples that regularly came through its gates. Let us not forget, after all, that Hamburg was

the main centre of a legendary trade alliance whose cultural influence resonated throughout Northern Europe, from England to Scandinavia and Poland, the Netherlands and Protestant Germany. Socially speaking, the predominance of the merchant class in a city-state lacking a titled nobility produced what can be seen as an artistic 'democracy' of sorts in an age that saw music largely produced for courtly and ecclesiastical consumption. Hamburg thus boasted the largest commercial opera company in Germany: the Gänsemarkt or 'Goose Market' Theatre, founded in 1678.



The operas produced in this theatre in turn displayed the artistic diversity of the city, many of these works being written recitatives in German and arias in both the vernacular and in Italian. As with contemporary Venetian theatres, admission to the Gänsemarkt was open to anyone who could afford the price of a ticket; accordingly, the fact that artistic demand was

shared by both the rich and the middle-class resulted in a type of opera whose subject matter - based around a mixture of heroic and comic themes - vastly differed from that produced for such courtly centres as Hanover, Vienna, and Dresden. Likewise, concurrent to the considerable activity occurring in the city's secular sphere, Hamburg's church music led an equally distinguished life. A list of organists and city music directors (or 'Director musices,' responsible for the music of the city's five largest churches) throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries includes such distinguished names as Matthias Weckmann, Heinrich Scheidemann (a pupil of Sweelinck's), Christoph Bernhard, Thomas Selle, Georg Böhm, Jan Adam Reincken, Georg Philipp Telemann, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

Like its mercantile sisters London, Venice, and Amsterdam, Hamburg was also a centre for the dissemination of ideas, and thus enjoyed a reputation as a hub for music publishing. Whereas Amsterdam's publishers, for example, largely focused on the latest instrumental music from Italy or France, Hamburg's publishers seem to have focused on Germany's own prodigious and musical talent, offering opportunities to the countless capellmeisters of various

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck
1562 - 1621

Heinrich Scheidemann (pupil of Sweelinck)
c1595 - 1663

Heinrich Schütz
1585 - 1672

Matthias Weckmann (pupil of Schütz)
c1616 - 1674

Thomas Selle
1599 - 1663

Christoph Bernhard
1628 - 1692

Dietrich Becker
1623 - 1679

Jan Adam Reincken (pupil of Scheidemann)
1643 - 1722

Georg Böhm
1661 - 1733

Georg Philipp Telemann
1681 - 1767

German states to publish the best of their vocal and instrumental works. Such enterprising composers as Telemann virtually invented the genre of the musical periodical in which churches subscribed to series of cantata scores, or musical amateurs bought, for example, a first volume advertising a work of chamber music, only to discover that the latter movements were contained in volumes not yet published! With

such wily schemes, Telemann and his colleagues innovatively ensured continuous sales for a series of issues. Even a composer like the organist Reincken - seemingly so entrenched in the culture of the city's church music - was not above publishing his 'Hortus Musicus,' a thoroughly secular collation of sonatas for strings, for the purchase of the city's many mercantile families who were intent on aping courtly manners and tastes.

The programme that I prepared for the recent Lufthansa Baroque Festival - 'Hamburg: Queen of Cities,' reflects the multifarious artistic culture of this fiercely independent port city. The opening set, a suite of orchestral pieces, is taken from Handel's (or, at this period in his life, Händel's) first opera, 'Almira' (premiered in January 1705). Written when its composer was still a teenager, this wildly popular opera, performed no less than twenty times in its first run and later revived by Telemann at the Gänsemarkt, was based on a crude translation of a fantastical Venetian libretto of the 1670s, replete with comic characters, hopelessly complicated romantic intrigues, and incredulous stories of lost princes - in short, exactly the kind of things that appealed to Hamburg's socially diverse theatre audiences. The score is a pure delight from start to finish, and is marked by Handel's special gifts for melodic invention and nuanced characterisation.

The Sonata Prima from Jan Adam Reincken's Hortus Musicus ('Garden of Music,' 1687) and the g-minor Pavana from Dietrich Becker's Musikalischen Frühlingsfrüchte ('Musical Spring Fruit,' 1668) are works that show many influences indeed - the old English manner of five-part string writing is combined with the suave and virtuosic style of string playing that throughout the period was making its way over the Alps from Italy. This moving combination of the sombre and the flashy, which truly can be called 'German' in its character, made a profound impression on a later composer whom I think we can say was the last progenitor of the spirit of the seventeenth century: Johann Sebastian Bach. In contrast to Handel who as soon