Chapter VIII

Dresden at the Time of Heinrich Schütz

GINA SPAGNOLI

The Lutheran court at the Saxon capital Dresden possessed a musical life as rich as any court in seventeenth-century Europe. The wide variety of music performed at court in services, in stage works, on special state occasions, and even at the royal table is known today largely because of the preservation of an abundance of archival material pertaining to Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672), the central figure of the city’s musical life. Many of Schütz’s own letters as well as a wealth of other documents relating to court life at Dresden – court correspondence, Hofkapelle lists, musicians’ contracts, court account books and receipts, music and instrument catalogues, Kantoreiordnungen (chapel orders) and court diaries – provide vivid details of the role of Dresden’s court musicians. These records also form an illuminating portrait of Schütz and the factors that influenced his productivity.

In a memorandum of 14 January 1651 to his patron, Elector Johann Georg I, Schütz provided special insight into his role as Kapellmeister. He regularly played an important role

at many diverse festivities in the past, which occurred during this time at imperial, royal, electoral, and princely gatherings, in this country and abroad, but particularly at each and every one of your own royal children’s weddings, and no less at the receiving of their sacred christenings as well. . .1

During his more than 40 years of service, Schütz’s principal duties as Kapellmeister included the composition of theatrical and festive music for court occasions and the direction of the ensemble on high feast days in the palace church, particularly, as he wrote in a letter of May 1645, ‘in the presence of foreign rulers or emissaries’, such as Emperor Matthias’s visit to Dresden in 1617, for which Schütz was instructed to ensure ‘that His Electoral Grace’s ensemble . . . acquit itself with honor and glory before the visitors’. Schütz himself wrote
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in a letter of July 1646 that the ‘principal and best performance of my office consists not so much in my perpetual presence and attendance but rather in the composition and arrangement of all sorts of good musical works, as well as in the supervision of the entire operation’. His absences from Dresden, in fact, always fell during periods when no festivities were planned, which seems to indicate that his chief concern was the music for special festivals rather than that for ordinary Sundays.²

Just such a special occasion had first brought Schütz to Dresden as a young man of nearly 29. The Elector of Saxony, Johann Georg I, proposed that he come to Dresden to assist with the music at the christening of the elector’s son Prince August on 18 September 1614. Johann Georg I has been characterized as a ruler of honest intentions whose efforts on behalf of Germany during the Thirty Years War were sincere, if lacking in political perspective.³ Upon his accession in 1611, he began immediately to enhance the musical forces at his court. During these early years, the court Kapellmeister was still officially Rogier Michael, who was in semi-retirement from 1613, with Michael Praetorius, Kapellmeister of the court at Wolfenbüttel, serving as Kapellmeister in absentia. The elector was therefore in need of musicians, and Schütz, a promising young organist in the employ of Landgrave Moritz of Kassel, had come to his attention. There ensued a long struggle between the two rulers to secure Schütz’s services; the elector, as the more powerful political figure, prevailed.

At Schütz’s arrival in Dresden, the Hofkapelle had 27 members: four altos, four tenors, three basses, five discantists and eleven instrumentalists; by 1632, membership had increased to 39.⁴ By 1634, however, the severe effects of the Thirty Years War were manifest in a drop to 30,⁵ which continued precipitously until, by 1639, only ten members remained.⁶ In fact, the hardships of war had reached Dresden as early as 1623. In a petition to Johann Georg I dated June 1625, the entire ensemble, including Kapellmeister Schütz, complained that they had not been paid for nearly two years.⁷

During this period, as indeed throughout his lifetime, Schütz was plagued by economic conditions that prevented him from publishing many of his works scored for large forces. In his preface to the first volume of Kleine geistliche Concerte, which appeared in 1636 as the forces of the Hofkapelle were rapidly approaching their nadir, he wrote almost apologetically:

Everyone can see how, as the result of the still continuing, dangerous vicissitudes of war in our dear fatherland of German nationality, the laudable art of music, among the other liberal arts, has not only greatly declined but at some places has even been completely abandoned, succumbing to the general ruination and disorder which unhappy war is wont to bring in its train. I myself am