A visitor to Vienna during the reign of Emperor Leopold I wrote: “Even if one were the greatest music lover, a few months’ stay in Vienna is enough to kill that love forever. The poor musicians have to be on duty at least 800 times annually for chamber music recitals, banquet music, oratorios, and theatrical performances — and this number does not include rehearsals!” Hyperbole, perhaps, but it is indicative of the importance placed on music by the ruling Hapsburg family and by Leopold especially, who was himself a busy musician and composer. His love of music never flagged: he got into trouble for sneaking into performances held while the court was in mourning, or at the embassy of an enemy. His musicians serenaded him on his deathbed.

It must have been an exciting place to work for those who could bear the gruelling schedule. As seat of the Holy Roman Empire, Italianate church music and opera were central to court life, and the highest musical positions were usually given to Italian composers with a command of this “official” style, but there were also musicians from Austria, Bohemia, and elsewhere in the empire who excelled in their craft and prospered both at Vienna and in smaller courts like Salzburg. These musicians were more likely to weave in elements of the local music of their homelands.

One native Austrian that made it to the highest Imperial post was Johann Joseph Fux. His registration at the Jesuit university at Ingolstadt describes him as “student of logic, pauper.” The details of how he ascended from poverty to court are not well documented. He dedicated a mass to Leopold I in 1695, and by 1698 was a composer at court. Legend has it he once successfully passed off his work as that of an Italian in order to embarrass those at court who had previously snubbed him as a local. The pinnacle of his career as a composer was a lavish outdoor performance of an opera for a coronation in Prague in 1723, but his music has been upstaged by the overwhelming success of his treatise on counterpoint, the Gradus ad Parnassum of 1725. It was used by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and has never gone out of use; it is now, in fact, the theoretical basis of a software program that teaches counterpoint.

The Ouverture in D Minor has surprisingly few dance movements and an unusual key scheme that takes the listener on a complicated emotional journey through three major keys.

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber was praised as a “superb virtuoso” by Jakob Stainer, the leading German violinmaker of his time. Biber was born in Bohemia and may have studied with Schmelzer in Vienna. The intellectual wordplay found in his prefaces and dedications show a high level of education. In 1670, he entered employment with the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, Maximilian Gandolph, with whom he seems to have enjoyed a close friendship.

Both of the Biber works on the programme date from 1673, and were probably intended for festivities
celebrating Carnival. The Battalia depicts warfare and army life with a panoply of unconventional playing techniques and a large dose of humour. It is dedicated to Bacchus, who is most evident in the second movement, in which eight actual folk tunes are combined with no regard for concord, “for thus are the drunks accustomed to bellow with different songs.” Those who do not cover their ears may wish to listen for one of the same tunes used by J. S. Bach in the much more palatable quodlibet that concludes his Goldberg Variations.

A march evokes another mythological figure: Mars, the God of War. It is possible that the Battalia was intended for performance as a pantomime, and this would have been a stunning entrée for that character. Biber instructs the bass player to make a snare drum effect by putting paper under the strings and striking them with the wood of the bow. The actual battle is fought with vigorous repeated notes, punctuated with aggressive pizzicatti: “the string must be whipped with the right hand like a cannon and LOUD.” There is no celebration of victory at the end, but rather a chromatic lament for the wounded.

The Austrian courtiers often amused themselves with pageants in which they “dressed down” as common people of a diverse range of nationalities and métiers. “The Peasant Wedding” was another favorite motif. Die Pauern-Kirchfahrt (The Peasants’ Procession to Church) is probably meant in a similar spirit. Once again Biber uses existing popular music in a striking way, in this case a song to the Virgin Mary. The six-part sonata is essentially interrupted by a procession of the faithful “singing” in a monophonic, call-and-response style. Each phrase is presented by the violins in unison and answered by the whole ensemble in octaves. Harmony resumes in a movement that imitates the tremolando stop of the organ, and possibly a failed attempt at modulation on the part of the organist.

Johann Heinrich Schmelzer was by all accounts an excellent violinist, who developed an international reputation through three published books of sonatas, travels with the emperor, and correspondence. By 1649, he was a full-fledged member of the Imperial court orchestra. He was a confidante of Leopold I and was given many responsibilities at the court, including writing vast amounts of ballet music for operas by Cesti, Draghi, and others. He was eventually promoted to Kapellmeister, but died soon after of plague.

In the Harmonia a 5 we can see Schmelzer building on a past tradition. At the end of the renaissance era, it was customary for string ensembles to perform vocal pieces such as madrigals on their instruments, and the top part would often be decorated with faster notes. The Harmonia begins with the lower four voices playing in an antique consort style, then the top voice joins with a more active part that soars above the ensemble in range. The middle section is a curiosity: Schmelzer drolly refers to it as a “Tripla,” indicating a change to triple meter, but this is not mathematically correct, as the music is in 5/4 time, a metre not ordinarily found in baroque music. It could be an early experiment in unconventional division of time, or maybe he had encountered (like Bartok later) folk music that could only be notated in this irregular way.

The court of the bishops of Olomouc, in Kroměříž, Czech Republic deserves mention alongside the Austrian courts, as their musicians were closely connected. The Prince-Bishop Karl von Liechtenstein-Kastelkorn maintained an excellent ensemble that the emperor would come to hear. Its library is the best collection of music by these composers. Among the treasures there is a work entitled Harmonia Romana, in a copy identifying no particular composer. One contender for the honour is Philipp Jakob Rittler, who served the Prince-Bishop from 1674 on as clergy, eventually obtaining the hybrid
position of “Honorary vicar and cathedral conductor” in Olomouc. Inventories of music collections show that his music was widely circulated during his lifetime. He owned five violins, including one by Stainer.

The title of the work clearly states an interest in what was going on in Rome. This is reflected mostly in the constant exchanges between a single violin and a larger ensemble. Composers in Rome like Stradella and later Corelli had been experimenting with this kind of scoring; it eventually led to the concerto grosso form, although it usually involved a concertino group of at least two violins rather than an single soloist. The solo part is adventurous, with double-stops, including octaves, and cadenzas over pedal tones.

Georg Muffat studied music as a teenager in Paris during the heyday of Jean Baptiste Lully. After law school in Bavaria and forays to Vienna and Prague, he settled in Salzburg in 1678 as cathedral organist and chamber musician. He was granted leave to study in Rome for a year; there he was introduced to the concerti grossi of Corelli, and began to write sonatas employing similar principles. He dedicated five of these to his employer in 1682, but continued to revise them and later published a set of twelve in 1701 in Passau, where he had become Kapellmeister in 1691.

Muffat aimed to improve both composition and performance by combining the best qualities of the French and the Italian in “a prelude to the unity, the dear peace desired by all peoples.” The prefaces to his works (which he wrote in four languages) continue to advise us today about proper performance of both the Corelli and Lully idioms to which he was a witness.

The Concerto XII, titled Propitia Sydera (To appease the stars), alternates Corellian contrast with Lullian lightness of feet. At one point in the Ciaconna, the opening refrain occurs simultaneously with the more vigorous, syncopated rhythm of the older type of ciaconna that had figured so prominently in Italian sonatas and songs, but was now going out of style. National styles, the old and the new, and three different metres all converge in a moment of euphoric pandemonium.

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