***Program Notes***

Judging by the numbers of surviving sources, Vespers was the second most popular service in the Catholic Church to be enriched by extravagant music. Taking place on the eve of Sunday services and the great feasts of the liturgical year, vespers has a regular framework like the mass with its prescribed five movements and fixed cycles of Biblical texts. The shape of any Vespers service is pre-ordained: after the introit comes a sequence of psalms, each with antiphons (before and after, though these were sometimes recited *during* the music by the celebrants), a hymn and finally a Magnificat. For the purposes of tonight’s concert, most of the antiphons have been replaced by instrumental works or smaller scale vocal pieces with instrumental accompaniment.

The most devout centre of Catholic worship outside Italy was arguably the court of the Hapsburgs in Vienna. The Holy Roman Emperor himself was the ruler of the vast Austro-Hungarian empire, and his influence stretched well beyond its borders. Like much else in life at the time, the celebration of religious worship was controlled from on high, and performed with military precision.

Although he never served Emperor Leopold I directly, Heinrich Biber (1644-1704) clearly sought his approval (he had shown signs throughout his early life of being an ambitious man – not least when, instead of collecting new instruments for his then employer in Kromeriz, he absconded and made his way to a better position in Salzburg). In 1690 he was finally ennobled by Leopold I in 1690 and became Heinrich Biber von Bibern.

The psalms and Magnificat that provide the framework for this evening were published in a magnificent set of partbooks by the Salzburg printer Johann Baptist Mayr in 1693. There are two books for each of the four voices (one for a soloist and the other for *ripieno* singers or players), and one each for the five strings and the organ. The surviving set in the Bavarian State Library also includes textless copies of the *ripieno* partbooks for cornetto and three trombones (the standard doubling instruments of the day) and a second copy of the organ (though without the figured bass symbols which tell the player what the harmonies in the upper voices are and therefore which chords (s)he should play).

In each of the pieces, Biber sets each phrase of the text to a separate musical idea, which results in a patchwork scheme; in some he opts for solos voices with and without instruments, in others the entire ensemble declaims the texts in a rhetorical fashion, in yet others he writes quite complex counterpoint in which each of the voices enters in turn with the same musical material. Unlike some composers of his day, Biber was not afraid to experiment with unusual forms – *Confitebor tibi Domine* is set in triple time throughout, for example, creating a slightly mesmeric atmosphere, while in the *Gloria* section of *Laudate Dominum* he deliberately sets the string band off one quarter note from the predominant rhythm, which gives a real frisson of excitement. All climax in brief but glorious Amens.

The service opens with a setting of *Deus in adjutorium* (the *ingressus*, or “song of entrance” as it is sometimes known) by Rupert Ignaz Mayr (1646-1712); from the opening of Psalm 70, the two lines serve as a call to prayer – Mayr’s typically brief setting sets the scene for what follows perfectly. Mayr is also represented in this programme by the fine Marian motet, *Sancta Maria, mater Dei*. This is scored for the slightly unusual combination of soprano, violin, two violas and continuo.

The hymn “Ave Maris Stella” was written by none other than the Emperor Leopold I himself. He was not alone in being a composer – Hapsburgs before and after him were well versed in the arts in general and music in particular. Several pieces survive which he co-wrote with his *Kapellmeister* Antonio Bertali (ca.1605-1659) and Johann Heinrich Schmelzer (ca.1620-1680). *Ave maris stella* is one of the best-known of Latin hymn texts, having also been set by Claudio Monteverdi in what is perhaps the most widely performed “Vespers” of all. Not only does it display the Emperor’s great ability to write strict counterpoint, there is a profundity about this setting of the words that raises him well above the level of an aristocratic amateur.

The final choral work is *Alma Redemptoris mater* by the Italian composer, Giovanni Legrenzi (1619-1690). Although he had secured one of the most highly prized positions in Italy (that of *maestro di cappella* at San Marco in Venice), it seems that he wished to curry favour with the Emperor, given that he sent manuscripts of his oratorios to the Viennese court and dedicated one set of his sonatas to Leopold I (even going so far as to re-design two of the pieces to be suitable for viol consort, in the knowledge that the instrument was still popular north of the Alps). Strictly speaking, this antiphon belongs to Compline (the prescribed service following Vespers), but it is appropriate to pay homage to the “mother of God”.

Interspersed with, and following the vocal music, we will hear instrumental contributions from Biber himself and his one-time colleague, Georg Muffat (1653-1704), who dedicated his *Apparatus Musico-Organisticus*, from which the two toccatas are taken, to Leopold I on the occasion of his son’s crowning as King of the Romans in 1690. Like the vocal music, rhetoric and kaleidoscopic sound worlds are the flavour of the day; Biber goes further than most in expanding the sound world, especially in the Rosary sonata, where he asks the fiddler deliberately to re-tune his instrument. As well as enabling a greater range of chords to be played, it gives the instrument a wholly different colour, since the different tensions on the strings and the intervals between them cause all sorts of new natural harmonics to be heard. Muffat’s place in history is secured by the forewords to one of his instrumental publications in which he recounts his experiences of playing at the French court and with the most renowned instrumental groups in Italy (with famed masters like Lully and Corelli), and codifying the performance practices in these centres. His music always has an air of majesty about it, whether it be for string band or, as tonight, for his own instrument, the organ.

This is not a strict reconstruction of a particular historical event; rather it is an exploration of the kinds of music that would have been heard during Vespers services around the end of the 17th century throughout the Holy Roman Empire – voices and instruments rejoicing together in the service of God and his representative on earth.

--Brian Clark