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EARLY MODERNS: EXTRAVAGANT AND INVENTIVE NEW MUSIC OF THE 17TH CENTURY

The seventeenth century is often called the "early modern period" by historians, a useful term that reminds us what a transformative moment this was in Western cultural history. This was the moment when Europe became modern. New technologies were emerging, our modern economic system was developing, the earth was no longer at the center of the universe.

Among these cultural revolutions was one in music, as composers began to invent a *nuove musiche* or *stile moderno*. This self-consciously "modern" music delighted in dramatic oppositions and vivid emotional statements, in striking contrast to the smooth tapestry of Renaissance polyphony.

Tonight's concert is an examination of this modern music, as it was created by virtuoso instrumental composers first in Italy and then in Germany. It is also an exploration of their new invention, the *sonata:* a pure instrumental work, a piece simply meant to be "sounded," with no agenda but the imagination of the composer – and no standard formal shape except the passionate give-and-take of friends in conversation.

German theorists described this new instrumental style as the *stylus fantasticus,* "the most unrestrained style" in which composers are free to use whatever their imagination suggests. One particularly ingenious composer in this style was **Matthias Weckmann**, who studied with Schütz in Dresden, where he learned the latest Italian styles. As director of music at the Jacobikirche in Hamburg, he created a series of weekly concerts with distinguished musicians who performed "the best things from Venice, Rome, Vienna, Munich, Dresden etc." Doubtless his own fiercely dramatic ensemble sonatas were heard among these foreign pieces.

Far less well-known, but quite wonderful, is the Netherlandish composer **Nicolaes a Kempis**, who composed a truly rocking ***Ciacona*** that appears anonymously in the *Ludwig Partiturbuch*. This large anthology was prepared by the musician Johann Ludwig as a present for his highly intellectual patron, Duke Anton Ulrich of Braunschweig. Little is known about Kempis; apparently Florentine by birth, he somehow ended up in Brussels, where he became organist at one of the city's principal churches and wrote several volumes of sonorous, impassioned instrumental works.

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We're very happy to have discovered a wholly overlooked master, the Flemish composer **Philippe van Wichel**, who is so completely obscure that even the magisterial Groves Dictionary of Music has no record of him. He spent most of his career at the Hofkapelle in Brussels, where must have known Kempis. His one collection of sonatas was published in Antwerp three years after his death, and is beautifully composed in the Italian style.

Another Flemish master that is little-known today is **Carolus Hacquart**, who moved from his native Bruges to the flourishing arts scene in Amsterdam and The Hague, where he organized a concert series with the support of the influential scholar and polymath Constantijn Huygens.

Hacquart dedicated his 1686 set of chamber sonatas to one of his wealthy pupils, the future mayor of Rotterdam. His ***Sonata no. 5*** is a fascinating mix of Italian invention, Teutonic counterpoint, and a kind of quirkiness that seems influenced by English masquing ayres.

After another of Weckmann's deeply unexpected sonatas, which ends with a quite wonderful sequence of visionary sonorities, we turn further south to the Imperial court in Vienna, where **Johann Schmeltzer** was the first German to become Kapellmeister; alas, the honor came only a few months before he died from one of the great epidemics of plague.

Schmeltzer's fame reached far beyond Vienna, and was considered "the nearly most distinguished violinist in all Europe." His festive ***Sonata la Carolietta*** was commissioned by the Prince-Bishop of Olmütz, Karl Lichtenstein-Castelcorno, to celebrate his name-day.

The second half of our concert is framed by works from a figure who wrote some of the most striking flights of seventeenth-century musical imagination. Apart from his music, we know very little about **Dario Castello**. Thanks to some recent archival research, we have been able to establish his dates, and confirm that (as the title page of his sonatas indicates) he worked at San Marco, where he was a close colleague of Monteverdi's.

One of Castello's more outrageous sonatas is his ***Sonata decima*** from his second book of sonatas "in the modern style." Its form actually follows the classical structure of a public speech, with an introduction, a statement which is then elaborated, a discussion of opposing ideas, and a final closing speech. Castello puts this discourse in vivid musical figures, full of virtuosic passagework and declamatory solos, finally closing with a disconcerting trill in parallel fourths. (In his preface, Castello recommends trying these pieces out once or twice before performing them, "since nothing is hard to those who love it.")

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With **Johann Rosenmüller**, we come to a major composer whose unexpected life events led to some interesting musical developments. Rosenmüller was the leading musical figure in Leipzig in his day. He was about to take over as Thomaskantor (the same job Bach had thirty years later) when he was arrested for homosexuality. He managed to escape from prison and fled to Venice, where he found employment at the Ospedale della Pietà and San Marco.

This dramatic trajectory transformed his musical style as well as his career. In his Leipzig days his instrumental music was largely dance suites for the university students, but once he got to Venice, he discovered the power of operatic melody and theatrical gesture. His late set of sonatas published in 1682 combine heartbreaking adagios with beautifully well-wrought fugues.

Matthias Weckmann's close colleague, the great North German composer **Dieterich Buxtehude**, is best known for his keyboard works, although (like Weckmann) he was also one of the early pioneers of the chamber concert series or *Abendmusik*. The florid arpeggiation of Buxtehude's *manualiter* ***Praeludium in G*** makes it particularly apt for the harpsichord. Like so many of his works, this Praeludium is very much in the *stylus fantasticus,* with its abrupt discontinuities and unexpected turns of phrase.

One of Schmeltzer's colleagues at the Imperial court was the organist **Johann Caspar Kerll**, who studied in Rome with Carissimi. Kerll began his career as Kapellmeister at the Munich court until a dramatic falling-out with his Italian opera singers prompted him to move to Vienna, where he became one of the Emperor's court organists.

Kerll's ***Sonata à 2*** appears in a huge manuscript anthology of 157 trio sonatas assembled by a cleric, Franz Rost, probably for the use of the Margrave of Baden-Baden. In this sonata, Kerll explores the extravagance of the Italian sonata, with extended solos for both violins, but places all this virtuosity in a context of characteristically South German lyric melancholy.

We return to **Castello** with one of his more elaborate works, the ***Sonata decimaquarta*** from his second book. This work opens with a canzona worthy of Gabrieli, but then we find ourselves in the midst of a highly rhetorical adagio.An ornate duet for the two violins follows, like something out of the Monteverdi Vespers. After a dancing triple, the sonata's coda features a brilliant series of duets that recall the grand spaces of San Marco where it was first heard.

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— Robert Mealy

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