

---

## REVIEWS

---

**Samantha Owens, Barbara M. Reul and Janice B Stockigt, eds,**  
*Music at German Courts, 1715–1760: Changing Artistic Priorities*

Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011

ISBN 978-1-84383-598-1. xx+484pp. Hbk, incl. tables, index.

Reviewed by Michael O’Loughlin

I wish this book had been around a few years ago, when I was writing about Berlin court music. Although studies of the music history of some of the German cities exist, they are generally rather old, difficult to obtain, and in German. There has been until now no work which offers both the broad scope and fine detail of this one. This suggests that the book would need to be rather large, and indeed it is: fifteen chapters plus a foreword and a preface, one or more tables for each of the thirteen courts, and a massive index.

Although each of the court music establishments is presented by a different author, the highly standardised format and style of both the articles and the tables which follow them speaks of tight editorial control. The courts discussed are divided into the four kingdoms and electorates, which generally had the wealthiest and largest musical ensembles; the six duchies; and three landgraviates and margraviates. These thirteen chapters form the meat of a rather thick sandwich; this is where the reader will find an overview of each court’s musical activities, including the types of works which were composed and performed, and a quite detailed account of the comings and goings of the most significant musicians. For readers who do not have an initial interest in the musical history of a particular court, the first and last chapters may be the most interesting place to start. The first chapter is an excellent overview by Samantha Owens and Barbara M. Reul entitled ‘“Das gantze *Corpus* derer *musicirenden* Personen”: An Introduction to German Hofkapellen,’ and the last is Steven Zohn’s fascinating review of contemporary writings, entitled ‘“Die vornehmste Hof-Tugend”: German Musicians’ Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Court Life.’

At this point it may be useful to clarify what the book does and does not cover. The first group, the major courts, comprises the court of Saxony-Dresden, the Saxon court of the Kingdom of Poland, the court of Brandenburg-Prussia, and the Palatine court in Mannheim.

The next group, the duchies, comprises the courts of Württemberg-Stuttgart, Saxony-Gotha-Altenburg, Saxony-Weißenfels, Saxony-Merseburg and Saxony-Zeitz (the last three in a single chapter), Anhalt-Zerbst, Sondershausen and Würzburg. Finally, there are the courts of Hesse-Darmstadt, Baden-Durlach in Karlsruhe, and Brandenburg-Culmbach-Bayreuth. Outside of the purview of this book lie the German-speaking courts which were within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire but not within the current borders of Germany, such as Vienna; the musical establishments of the free cities such as Hamburg and Leipzig; and many smaller courts such as Arolsen and Bückeburg. This book is about the musicians who made up the complex picture of German musical life, and about the musical tastes, volatile finances and political alliances of the rulers who controlled them. If it is about music, as the title indicates, we must think of that term as representing the activity of professional music-making and all of the systems which are necessary to support it, rather than the mere notes on the page. Beyond a brief mention about whether French or Italian style was in fashion, there is no room for analysis of the music itself, or for an investigation of how compositional and performance style may have differed from court to court. Readers seeking, for example, a reassessment of the musical innovations of the Mannheim School will need to look elsewhere. However, the book is well focussed on its subject matter, and deals with it comprehensively.

An important aspect of this comprehensiveness is the voluminous referencing. References are contained in footnotes, on average about one hundred per chapter. Each contributing author has based their work on surviving court documents; although there is a strong emphasis on these original sources, much secondary literature is also cited. An example of the latter group is the first footnote in Chapter One, which contains a half-page of references on courts which are not included in this book. It seems that the sheer volume of these references encouraged the publisher to omit a bibliography, which would have added at least fifty pages to an already thick volume. If you find an interesting reference, best make a note of it immediately, as it may be hard to find again! Another large-scale item is the index, a thorough fifty-eight pages which has, unusually, earned Samantha Owens a credit for preparing it.

It is often stated that the richness of German cultural life in the eighteenth century was because Germany was ruled by dozens of princelings, all trying to compete and perhaps imitate Louis XIV as far as possible with their more limited means. This book does not set out to disprove this assumption, but it goes much further in explaining the complexity of this cultural life, and the many factors influencing it. The typical *Hofkapelle* – and here even the statement that there was such a thing could be challenged – comprised several groups of musicians, with greater or lesser interaction and collaboration. As well as the regular musicians, who might be divided by rank into *Cammermusici* who played in the princely chambers, and ordinary *Hofmusici*, there could be trainees, apprentices, choirboys and girls, and copyists and other servants who may have also performed music. Then there might be collaboration with ordinarily separate ensembles, perhaps paid from a separate section of the treasury, such as the oboe band or the trumpeters and drummers.

In the introductory chapter, the editors quote Johann Mattheson ridiculing the expectation among smaller courts that relatively unqualified lackeys double as musicians. This was written in 1725, quite early in the period under consideration. It introduces a theme which will recur throughout: the conflict between versatility involving potentially lower standards, and specialisation bringing higher standards. At the smaller courts such as Gotha, musicians'

versatility was a valuable resource, to help cope with missing players and changes in taste over the years. Players even doubled on wind and string instruments, and received instruction in different instruments as needed, as an alternative to hiring new players. On the other hand, the famously virtuosic Mannheim orchestra relied on increasing specialisation to improve its standard. I find it interesting that this issue has not entirely gone away: in major symphony orchestras only the few standard doublings are expected, whereas in small German *Kurorchester* which play operettas and waltzes for light entertainment, doublings such as tuba and double bass are found.

This brings me to another theme which, although hardly articulated, seems to step out from the pages. In this group of *Hofkapellen* from the early modern period, we can clearly see the foundations of the modern symphony orchestra. This honour is sometimes given to the *Vingt-quatre violons* of Louis XIV, but in the larger German *Kapellen* we find both an increasing attention to the proportions within the string section and between the strings and wind, and an increasing proximity of those proportions to our own. This book also reveals many regulations governing hours of duty, types of performance, clothing and standards of behaviour which seem very familiar. Another 'innovation' of modern symphony orchestras turns out to be quite old: mentoring of younger players by senior members of the *Kapelle*. I had seen some apparent references to this in Berlin court records and had some difficulty in interpreting them, but I have now learnt from this book that the practice was quite widespread.

In preparing this review, I read the book from cover to cover, but I expect that most readers will not do this. The chapters of most general interest will be those mentioned above, the first and last. The first sets out to provide an answer to the question posed in its first sentence: 'What was musical life at German courts really like during the first six decades of the eighteenth century?' Owens and Reul explain in some detail the many different groups of musicians, their ranking system, and some of the conditions of their employment, insofar as these can be generalised. The final chapter is about musicians' writings, 'including personal letters, autobiographies, theoretical treatises, and even novels [that] offer valuable, if fleeting, glimpses of *Hofkapelle* life as seen from the musician's perspective.' Fortunately, Zohn spends no time on the treatises, which are readily available and the subject of extensive secondary literature. The authors surveyed are Wolfgang Caspar Printz, Johann Beer, Johann Kuhnau, Georg Philipp Telemann, Johann Georg Pisendel, and Johann Joachim Quantz, represented here not by his more famous treatise but by his autobiography. This chapter revisits the theme of versatility among musicians, and also revisits another: the cultural cringe of German musicians (and their rulers) in favour of Italians.

Each of the intervening thirteen chapters will be a valuable resource for anyone who wishes to research the music produced or performed at the relevant court. Searching the larger German archives can be a daunting and time-consuming experience, and the careful attention to referencing will be very helpful. The tables at the end of each chapter are also a very valuable contribution to documentation of *Kapelle* membership. Each one provides three or four snapshots of the *Kapelle* in various years across the period, according to a standard formula: first the ruler, then a numeric overview, then a list of the musicians according to instrument(s) or voice type. Some of the most interesting and sometimes amusing moments are provided by extensive quotations from the court documents, which are provided first in German (or French) and then in translation. Having a research interest in the subject matter,

I welcomed the detail in these chapters, but some may find them dry. To increase the interest for more general musical readers, the editors could perhaps have included contemporary illustrations of court theatre, church and concert performances; facsimiles of documents or scores; seating plans of orchestras; or portraits of rulers and musicians. However, they would perhaps argue that these would have added volume and expense, and that many are available in the well-known study by Spitzer and Zaslaw, as well as on the internet.

This book could not have been written by a single person. It benefits from the expertise and thoroughness of its fifteen contributors, including the three editors, each of whom has written a chapter, and Michael Talbot, who has provided the foreword. It benefits also from the hard work of the editors in tightly controlling the material, and translating several chapters from the original German. It will be a valuable resource for any historical musicologist investigating this extraordinarily productive and fascinating period of German music history, and I hope it encourages and enables more research in this area, and ultimately more performances of its many forgotten treasures.

**Peter Holman, *Life after Death: the Viola da Gamba in Britain from Purcell to Dolmetsch***

Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010

ISBN 9781843835745, 432pp. Hbk, incl. index, ill.

**Reviewed by James Hobson**

Peter Holman's latest musical offering explores a hitherto overlooked aspect of English music history, the fashion for playing the viola da gamba—or bass viol—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Holman, Professor of Historical Musicology at the University of Leeds, is well known not only as a researcher and academic (and co-editor with Rachel Cowgill of Boydell's series of publications *Music in Britain, 1600–1900*, from whose stable this volume comes), but also as director of the Parley of Instruments, amongst other musical outfits. Thus it is with his meticulous eye for detail and a deep sense for the performance of the music—the whole underpinned by scholarly apparatus—that Holman restores life to the viola da gamba on these pages. Holman explains that a seed of interest in the instrument had first been planted in the 1990s, growing into an article written for *Early Music* in 2003,<sup>2</sup> before its full flourishing in the research for the present book.

Over the course of nine chapters, Holman traces the thread of the survival of the gamba in England from the 1660s onwards. It has commonly been believed that the viola da gamba drew its last in the 1690s, with Purcell the last composer to write for it, but on the basis of the evidence exhibited by Holman, this appears not to be so. His first chapter, "Musicians on

<sup>1</sup> See also Holman's other single-author works, *Four and Twenty Fiddlers: The Violin at the English Court 1540–1690* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); *Henry Purcell* (Oxford: OUP, 1994); *Dowland: Lachrimae (1604)* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> 'A New Source of Bass Viol Music from Eighteenth-century England', *Early Music* 31 (2003): 81–99.