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Halfway between Oratorio and Opera: Early Moravians Love of Sacred Dramatic Music

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**Halfway between Oratorio and Opera:
Early Moravians Love of Sacred Dramatic Music**
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The Moravian Music Foundation, where I work as the Catalog Project Manager, holds the manuscript and print music owned by Moravians in Moravian settlements and churches in America from the 1740s through church congregations today. There is a heavy collection emphasis on the early years from the 1740s through the Civil War. I've had the pleasure of working on records that describe the music of the Collegia Musica in North Carolina and Pennsylvania -- specifically the Salem Collegium Musicum, Lititz Collegium Musicum and the Bethlehem Collegium Musicum (later called the Philharmonic Society of Bethlehem).

Collegia Musica in the early Moravian context were performing groups consisting of town folk, students and clergy. The communities were closed communities into the 19th century, meaning that one had to be a member to live in the town.

As I was working my way through the records, I realized that there was a significant gathering of oratorios. Not only that, but oratorios of a particular kind. Oratorios that were Biblically-based, but told dramatic stories narrated by personages in the stories; that were like opera in nature and length, but were not staged; that had unusual accompanied recitative patterns and, that sometimes included chorales.

[Slide -- terms]

Research in Howard Smither's *A History of the Oratorio* revealed the identity of oratorios known as "sacred dramatic music" or "musikalisches Drama" or "musikalisches Gedicht" or "Abendmusik" or "geistliches Gedicht". This type of oratorio was written in Germany during the 1760s through 1803 (the end marked by Beethoven's *Christus am Oelberge*). Smither notes textual and musical differences between oratorios written in the southern German Catholic area and the northern German Protestant area. These oratorios, or sacred dramatic music, were used in festival church services or more informal settings. As the style developed during the 18th century, the music had a greater emphasis on the chorus; the recitatives evolved from simple to accompanied recitatives; choruses often had

imitative passages or even fugues; and the music favored long complex passages of solo -- ensemble -- chorus settings instead of the usual alternating recitatives/chorus/solo format. The librettos were set to music by various composers -- librettists, such as, Johann Samuel Patzke (librettist for Johann Heinrich Rolle's *Die Leiden Jesu* and *Saul oder der Gewalt der Music*), August Hermann Niemeyer (librettist for Johann Heinrich Rolle's *Thirza und ihre Söhne* and *Lazarus* or *Die Feyer der Auferstehung*), Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (libretto for Rolle's *Leiden Jesu* and *Die Auferstehungs Gesang*) and Carl Wilhelm Ramler (librettist for Karl Heinrich Graun's *Der Tod Jesu*).

Empfindsamer style is displayed in the librettos and music in dramatic dialogues and events, sharp contrasts, descriptions of nature, mystical experiences, frequent use of sigh motives and "sentimental" harmonies or melodic passages and an overall simplicity of style. The texts are more closely identified to an empfindsam influence, rather than the music. In music the Empfindsamer Stile is usually chamber music with clavichord. Today we are exploring large vocal works with orchestra – hardly the intimate setting for which C.P.E. Bach wrote many works.

The texts of these works were of two kinds – lyric / contemplative or dramatic narrative texts. The lyric or contemplative texts generally were about Jesus' nativity, crucifixion, resurrection or ascension, but mostly passion oriented works. They were settings of Biblical texts and reflections in the form of choruses, recitatives, solos and chorales. The dramatic narrative librettos, on the other hand, were based on Bible stories or legends, such as David and Goliath, but were embellished narratives sung by personages in the story. Librettos originated as long poems written by the poets mentioned earlier. The music includes choruses, recitatives, solos and some chorales. The recitatives were generally accompanied and had a mix of solo, ensemble and chorus.

To be sure, the Moravians in the American settlements of Salem (NC), Bethlehem, Lititz and Nazareth (PA) owned and performed the well-known oratorios, such as, Handel's *Messiah*, Haydn's *Creation and The Seasons*. Those works have a story of their own. Today I am concentrating on the lesser known works, identified as sacred dramatic music.

[Handout]

The handout, "Survey of Sacred Dramatic Music at the Moravian Music Foundation", gathers basic information about sacred dramatic music in the Foundation's collections – composer, librettist, title, manifestations, locations of the music and early performances. Only one of these composers was a Moravian -- Christian Ignatius LaTrobe.

This list comes from working collections of full scores, vocal scores and instrumental and vocal parts, Full scores when owned were mostly used as a source for copying parts. When no full score is in the collection, we must assume that copyists had access to a full score to copy parts. The full scores may have been in New York, Philadelphia, Germany or England. The musicians had an intriguing network that spanned the Atlantic Ocean and reached into each settlement congregation.

[Slide: pictures of Verzeichniss] [enlargement]

We know that the music was performed in Salem, Bethlehem, Lititz and Nazareth because the working collections were copied and held there. The only comprehensive list of performances is the "Register of music performed in concert, Nazareth, Pennsylvania from 1796 to 1845" (*Verzeichniss derer Musicalien welche im Concert sind gemacht worden, Nazareth von 1796 zum 1845*).

[Slide: title page and jan/feb 1797] [enlargement]

Nazareth, Pa., about 10 miles north of Bethlehem, was the location of the Paedagogium, the Moravian boy's school. They had their own Collegium Musicum -- Paedagogium Collegium Musicum Nazareth (PCMN). During January and February, 1797, the weekly concerts at the Nazareth Paedagogium included selections from Handel's *Messiah*, symphonies by Haydn, Eichner, Pleyel and Stamitz, Rolle's *Thirza und ihre Söhne* (divided over three weeks), Haydn's *Stabat Mater* (divided over two weeks) and the first section of Graun's *Der Tod Jesu*. We believe that the PCMN was a student/teacher/community ensemble. The Paedagogium music collections in Nazareth were eventually folded into the collection for the Philharmonic Society of Bethlehem.

[Johann Heinrich Rolle]

From the repertoire played in 1797, I am going to focus on Johann Heinrich Rolle and two of his sacred dramatic works. I believe that Rolle and his compositional style became the exemplar for Moravian composers. As this presentation unfolds, I hope that you agree with me.

Johann Heinrich Rolle was born near Magdeburg to a father, Christian Friedrich Rolle, who was cantor, then city music director in Magdeburg. Johann studied violin, viola and organ with his father until he left in 1737. He went to Leipzig and then Berlin, where he was hired in 1741 as a violinist (then violist) in the orchestra of Frederick the Great. Among his acquaintances were Benda, Graun, Quantz and C. P. E. Bach. In 1747 he secured a release from the orchestra and returned to Magdeburg to take the position as organist at the Johannis kirche. In 1751, after the death of his father, he became the city music director. His duties included providing service music for the city's six parishes, performing a Passion once a year, and presenting a new composition every 4 to 5 years. He far exceeded these expectations. During the 34 years in his position he composed 8 passion settings (based on the 4 Gospels and 4 new librettos) and over 20 sacred dramatic works.

After the Seven Years War (1756-1763), he participated in a weekly gathering of intellectuals (Mittwochsgesellschaft). This group generated an idea in 1764 to sponsor a series of public concerts under Rolle's direction, which continued after Rolle's death in 1785. Rolle wrote over twenty dramatic concert works (musikalische Dramen) which were offered at these public concerts.

Let me remind you that we are looking at a very thin slice of music history here. According to scholars Thomas Bauman and Janet Pyatt, Rolle was virtually alone in writing biblical-historical works at the time (starting 1766), which followed trends in German literature but not in music. At that time most German composers continued setting contemplative texts, such as Ramler's *Tod Jesu*, in which the plot and characterization are peripheral to a core of meditative verse.

For the majority of his music dramas, Rolle used dramatic texts written by two members of his Mittwochsgesellschaft: Johann Samuel Patzke, pastor of the Heilige Geist Kirche and later the Johanniskirche in Magdeburg; and August Hermann Niemeyer, a poet, teacher and later chancellor in Halle.

The characteristics of this hybrid model include:

- subjects, which are primarily Biblical
- texts that determine the bi-part or tri-part structure of the musical work (which were called *Theile* or *Handlungen*)
- great emphasis on the chorus and its dramatic role
- presence of stage directions (scenery, costumes and gestures), although there was no evidence of staging. These directions even appeared in printed librettos, which prompted the imagination of the listener.

Baum and Pyatt concisely describe the inter-dependent marriage of text and music: “Patzke’s librettos show a wide range of literary influences, including Classical literature, English moral journals and Shakespeare’s plays, which became known in Germany during the 1760s and 1770s. Niemeyer intentionally sought to create works that were religious yet resembled opera more than oratorio. In prefaces to the published editions of his librettos, Niemeyer described his ideas on sacred opera and offered his texts as examples. Both writers often chose sacrificial themes and expressed them with vivid, sometimes grotesque images and strongly emotional language that have their roots in 17th century Protestant Pietism and reflect its continuing influence in North Germany. Such language was designed to elicit strongly emotional yet religious responses from the main characters and similar religious feeling with the listener. Following closely the dramatic intentions of his librettists, Rolle’s settings became increasingly operatic. All his mature scores are continuous; traditional aria-recitative patterns, though unnumbered, are clearly perceptible, but at important moments the music is allowed to respond to a situation with a fluid mixture of *arioso* and *obligato recitative*.”

Rolle’s musical style, reminiscent of Graun, includes simple melodies full of repeated diatonic patterns, square phrases, an abundance of parallel 3rds and 6ths, melodic sighs and cadential *appoggiaturas*. When the text becomes more emotional, the music employs disjunct melodic lines, chromaticism, sudden tonal shifts and unusual harmonies, reminding one of C.P.E. Bach.

[Slide with audio clips from *Thirza*]

Let's listen to excerpts from Rolle's *Thirza und ihre Söhne*. This is a Biblical legend -- a story of martyrdom. The cast includes Thirza (a mother of seven sons),

her youngest son, sixth and seventh sons, the King of Syria, Epiphanes, and his confidant, a chorus of Syrians and a chorus of Israelites. The scene is near the Temple in Jerusalem and near the altar to the statue to Olympus.

[Slide with audio clip from *Der Tod Abels*]

Let's listen to an excerpt from Rolle's *Der Tod Abels*. This is the story of Cain and Abel. The opening chorus "Lobt den Herrn" was much beloved by the Moravians. As you listen, think about the characteristics of Moravian anthems that you know. Do they sound like this chorus?

[Listen]

The Moravians loved music by Rolle. As you can see on the survey, his works were performed frequently in Nazareth and vocal scores and parts are part of each collection. For example, the opening chorus, *Lobt den Herrn*, is found to have been used in a variety of ways and places.

[Slide contrafactum and arrangements]

The text to *Lobt den Herrn* was altered at least 13 times (there may be more variations) and/or the music was arranged for different medium of performance.

[Slide on locations of 38 instances]

The music manuscripts were actually spread far and wide as you can see. It is common to find choruses from these works of sacred dramatic music turned into anthems with altered texts. This type of contrafactum was employed over and over; so that, beloved choruses from oratorios became beloved choruses with altered texts.

The fact that sacred dramatic music was owned and performed by Moravians in Pennsylvania and North Carolina as well as in Germany and England is not a surprise considering the network that this missionary church maintained from the 1730s through the 19th century. The richness of resources comes from the extraordinary Saxony and Dresden culture of the 18th and 19th centuries. The early Moravians were fostered by Count Nicolaus Zinzendorf in Herrnhut (which

is in Saxony), who was in service to the Dresden Court. Many of the leaders were educated in Jena, Halle, Leipzig or Wittenberg. Through Zinzendorf they also had a connection to the Danish Court with its rich musical tradition.

Because of the fluid nature of the Moravian settlements, leaders were assigned to various posts across America, Greenland, West Indies, Africa and Europe. Some leaders were musicians and were part of that network that purchased or copied music. So, we can observe an extraordinary distribution of printed and manuscript scores, vocal scores and parts.

We have explored the components of sacred dramatic music -- both textually and musically; identified the context in northeastern Germany as transplanted to America; surveyed the repertoire found in Moravian Music Foundation collections in America and listened to excerpts of the music. As far as I know this is the first study of this type from the Moravian collections. I hope you that you have enjoyed learning about this extraordinary music and the people who performed it.

[Slide – Research at MMF]

Why is analysis of these collections in their context important?

- These collections preserve a transitional repertoire that has largely been ignored, but is being explored and performed more often, especially in Europe.
- Music and music like this was performed regularly in Nazareth, Bethlehem and Lititz (PA) and Salem (NC) at a time when the musical life in other American communities was not as sophisticated. This is incomparable.
- The scope of the repertoire in the Moravian collections, the level of musicianship required to perform works, and the longevity of their practice (from 1760s through 1880s) is extraordinary and unmatched in American music history.
- "High quality" is a characteristic of music found in these collections -- both vocal and instrumental. This is good music, worthy of study and attention.
- This discussion of sacred dramatic music shows one aspect of the Moravian music collections -- abundant research opportunities are available in cooperation with the Moravian Music Foundation. See "Research at the Moravian Music Foundation" on the Foundation's website.

<http://moravianmusic.org/research/>

Visualize again those cold and snowy weeks in Nazareth, Pennsylvania during January and February, 1797 and the weekly concerts at the Nazareth Paedagogium, which included selections from Handel's *Messiah*, symphonies by Haydn, Eichner, Pleyel and Stamitz, Rolle's *Thirza und ihre Söhne* (divided over three weeks), Haydn's *Stabat Mater* (divided over two weeks) and the first section of Graun's *Der Tod Jesu*. This is a story worth telling and worthy of research by more scholars.

Audio excerpts from: Rolle, Johann Heinrich. *Thirza und ihre Söhne*. Libretto by August Hermann Niemeyer. Hermann Max, Conductor. Das Kleine Konzert, Performers. Recorded 1998. Capriccio, 2000. CD.