

Johann Sperger: An Entrepreneurial Composer in the Era of Haydn and Mozart

Johann Sperger (1750-1812) was one of the greatest eighteenth-century virtuosos of the Viennese contrabass; he was also a prolific composer writing over twenty concerti (mostly for his instrument), forty-five symphonies, and many sacred and chamber works. Armed with business savvy, Sperger stood out as an entrepreneurial composer through three musical strategies. First, he composed works with selling points or gimmicks. Sinfonia in G, D-SWI, Mus. 5164 (1777) has theatrical characteristics similar to those found in Haydn's Symphony no. 60 "il Distratto." A later work, Sinfonia in F "Arrival Symphony," D-SWI Mus. 5155 (1796) was counter to Haydn's "Farewell Symphony," players entered the stage two at a time. Next, Sperger methodically catered to noble dilettantes. On January 26, 1788, after a performance before the Prussian court, Sperger honored King Wilhelm II (1744-1797)—who was an amateur cellist—with a specially composed symphony. Sinfonia in G "Sinfonia per il Violoncello Concert:" D-SWI, Mus. 5157 (1787) has solo cello obligato in all four movements. Lastly, it was how Sperger wrote for the contrabass, marketing himself as a composer-performer, that really set him apart. In Quartetto in B-flat, D-SWI, Mus. 5191(6) (1791), the contrabass takes on the role of the second violin. The part is notated in the treble clef and requires scordatura. Rather than the B-flat, appropriate to the oboe (which takes the first part), the contrabass is in the key of A. In 1791, the same year that W. A. Mozart entered *Per questa bella mano*, "Bass aria with obligato Contrabass" into his catalog, Sperger wrote his own recitative-aria for soprano and solo contrabass. In order to promote himself, he composed and performed various showcase pieces such as these throughout the Empire. He would then lease and sell music to his noble audience. His manuscript *Catalog: Über Verschückte Musicalien*, D-SWI, Mus. 3065 (3) (1777-1802) confirms that almost all of his symphonies were dispersed to various members of the aristocracy for financial gain or enticement. Through these marketing strategies, Sperger was able to network and secure future employment opportunities.