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Reviews

Musical (and other) gems from the State Library in Dresden

by Nora Hamerman

One might easily ask how anything could be left of what was once the glorious collection of books and manuscripts which were the Saxon Royal Library, and then after 1918, Saxon State Library in Dresden. After all, Dresden was razed to the ground by the infamous Allied firebombing in 1945, which demolished the Frauenkirche and the "Japanese Palace" that had housed the library's most precious holdings, as well as taking an unspeakable and unnecessary toll in innocent human lives. Then, the Soviets, during their occupation of the eastern zone of Germany, carried off hundreds of thousands of volumes, most of which have not yet been repatriated.

The question is partially answered in the exhibit, "Dresden: Treasures from the Saxon State Library," on view at the Library of Congress in Washington. As this review is being written, media reports say that the General Accounting Office is calling for the Library of Congress to scale back its activities, including diminishing the rate of acquisitions and reducing its calendar of exhibits and concerts. Judging from the three shows in honor of great European libraries which have been presented there so far (the Vatican Library and France's Bibliothèque Nationale preceded the present show, which will be on view until August), such a plan stands to further deprive our nation of the links to the sources of our civilization at a moment when we desperately need to increase them. Indeed, the present show's catalogue reflects the impact of budget cutbacks in its reduced detail and some lack of finish, compared to the previous two, although it is still a bargain at $19.95.

As to the history of the Saxon State Library in this century: Although the incunabula and other priceless holdings were moved to smaller towns for safekeeping and thus spared the devastation of the war, during the 40 years of communist rule in East Germany, what remained of the library was largely inaccessible to westerners. The show at the Library of Congress gives Americans a first taste of these riches, now.

These include manuscript illuminations which start with the huge, lavishly painted Jewish prayer book of ca. 1290, "a testimony to German Jewry of the Middle Ages," with poetry by a German rabbi and a Hebrew poet, calligraphy by a Jewish scribe, and illuminations by a Gentile artist painted in Christian Gothic style. An analogous "cross-cultural" blend is shown in two French-language illuminated manuscripts of works by Boccaccio and Petrarca, respectively, two of the "three crowns" of Italian 14th-century vernacular literature, produced in the 15th-century French royal courts. Then comes a printed book, with hand-painted illuminations, of 1496, *The Performance of Music* in Latin by Francesco Gaffurius, the music theorist whose career at the Milan ducal court overlapped the sojourns there of Josquin des Prez, the most renowned Renaissance composer, and Leonardo da Vinci, regarded by contemporaries as the finest improvisational musician. The page displayed is decorated with two scenes of singing youth: choirboys on the left whose master stands behind them and directs their gaze to an oversize score on a lectern while tapping out the beat on the shoulders of one youth; and girls on the right, who sit cross-legged, each reading from their own books while facing their director, who is also seated with a book before him. The left-hand illustration is typical of performance practice as seen with monks in liturgical choirs, while the right-hand group may show a classroom situation.

Also in the show is a splendid printed volume of 1511 opened to a page with one of Albrecht Dürer's large woodcuts of the Passion of Christ. The woodcut is beautifully hand-colored and embellished with a hand-painted border of flowers, probably from Dürer's own Nuremberg workshop. Although Dürer was a great Catholic artist for most of his life, in his last decade (the 1520s), he was among the prominent Nuremberg sympathizers of the dissident monk Martin Luther, which ripened into the Augsburg Confession, a confession of a separate faith, after Dürer's death, in 1530. These events, and their connection with the evolution of the library in Dresden as one of the great repositories of rare music books and manuscripts, shed light on the particular character of the show.

Reformation and music

The Saxon State Library was founded 440 years ago, in 1566. That was right in the middle of the tragic process by

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which Christendom, previously unified, was being divided into different denominations, and the Catholic Church no longer represented all Christians. What began as a reform movement within the Catholic Church against clerical abuses and the temporal enrichment of the hierarchy, hardened into an assault on the teaching authority of the Church and the pope, above all because of the perverse genius of the Frenchman John Calvin. Calvinism as such never made great inroads in Saxony, however. In the catalogue essay, "The Protestant Reformation in Saxony," Christian Zuehlke explains how the prince-electors of Saxony at first protected Martin Luther, perhaps out of a sense of justice, and later, for a variety of geopolitical and personal reasons, came to embrace the Protestant Reformation. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 established the principle that sovereign rulers could select the religious denomination of their territory.

Out of the terrible suffering of 16th- and 17th-century "ethnic" and "religious" wars, caused by the shattering of Christian unity, some good was also forged, particularly in the domain of music.

This process is amply documented in the show with a large number of artifacts by Martin Luther, including autograph letters and his famous German Bible—although right in the middle of this is also a copy of the five-language Polyglot Bible produced in Alcalà de Henares, Spain, which remained true to the Catholic Church and stood up to a lot of opposition within the Church, and belies the commonplace that the Protestants had a monopoly on translations of the Holy Writ.

The Electors of Saxony were the major sponsors of the Lutheran Reformation, and they benefitted from Martin Luther's emphasis on choral singing in worship. One of the most prolific and gifted Lutheran chorale writers, Johann Walther, was the first director and cantor of the Dresden Hofchor (court choir), and the show includes an unknown composition by him, dated 1548. Typically for the time, the four vocal parts (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) are not written as they would be today, on one grand staff, but on four separate sections of the two-page spread.

Ironically, given these strong Protestant traditions, the Dresden library also holds the manuscript of J.S. Bach's "Mass in B-Minor" of 1717, his only Catholic mass, which was apparently originally composed for Dresden. The Elector Augustus the Strong had converted to Catholicism in order to secure his election as king of Poland, in 1699. (By that time it was not required for the subjects to adhere to the confession of the ruler, so the overwhelming majority of Saxons remained Lutheran.) Bach appended a part of this mass to his application for a court appointment in 1729. It is not known when the work was first performed in Dresden, although from 1736 onward, the cantor of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig added the title "Composer to the court of the king of Poland and the elector of Saxony" to his name. The exhibition displays the vocal parts, written out on separate pages, for the Kyrie and Gloria of this mass.

Jewish Holy Day Prayer Book for the Whole Year. Germany, ca. 1290: Written by a rabbi and a celebrated Hebrew poet, and illustrated by a Gentile artist in Gothic style, this very large volume commemorates German Jewry of the Middle Ages.

Dresden's connections to Italy are underlined in another music manuscript, a Vivaldi concerto for violin and orchestra composed for the German violinist Pisendel, who later became *Kapellmeister* in Dresden. Inserted into the score, visitors to the show can see the cadenza which Pisendel wrote for his performance of the Venetian composer's piece.

Leibniz and Schiller

Contemporary with these musical rarities are other books of great interest to *EIR* readers. *EIR* has recently documented the unique, generally unrecognized role of the Saxon-born universal thinker Leibniz in shaping the United States (see the *Features* in our Dec. 1, 1995 and Feb. 9, 1996 issues). The Saxon State Library exhibit displays many objects related to Leibniz, such as the first year's issues of the oldest German daily newspaper, the *Daily New Incoming Military and Global Transactions,* of Leipzig, which began in 1660; the *Acta Eruditorum,* published first in Leipzig in 1682, the first scholarly journal, to which Leibniz frequently contributed

articles; and the first German edition of the *Theodicy,* Leibniz's main philosophical work, first published in French in 1710, seen here in the Amsterdam 1726 edition with a fine, engraved portrait of the philosopher on the frontispiece.

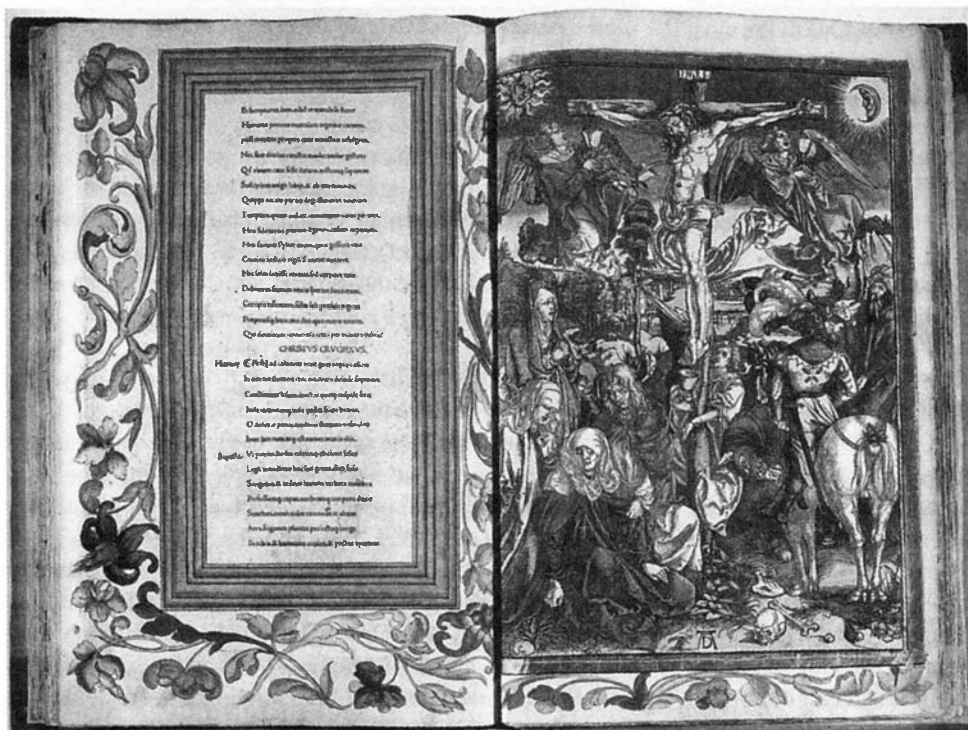
Another figure who spent time in Dresden, is the poet, dramatist, and historian Friedrich Schiller, for whom the Schiller Institute was named. Schiller's best-known works to Americans are the 1785 "Ode to Joy," set by Beethoven in the Ninth Symphony, and the 1804 play *Wilhelm Tell.* This exhibit affords an opportunity to meet him in these works and to get to know him better. The rare first edition of Schiller's early drama, *Die Raüber* (The Robbers), written in Dresden and published anonymously in Leipzig, the other major Saxon city, in 1781, is on view, as well as a letter of 1788 from the young Schiller to his good friend Gottfried Körner, praising the latter's setting of Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Körner's was one of the earliest of many attempts before Beethoven to set Schiller's beloved poem. Körner had rescued Schiller from Mannheim in 1784, when he had lost his job at the theater and was besieged by creditors.

A minor poet, Körner forms one of the few documented ties between Schiller and a kindred genius, Mozart. As David Shavin reported in a review published in *EIR* in the Sept. 6, 1991 issue: "Mozart accompanied Prince Lichnowsky on his 1789 trip to Prussia, where Mozart played concerts in Dresden, Leipzig, Potsdam, and Berlin, at many of the same haunts where J.S. Bach performed and composed half a century earlier. It was on this trip that Mozart met Friedrich Schiller's closest associates, although he seems never to have met Schiller himself. In Dresden, Mozart met with Schiller's friends, the poet Gottfried Körner and Körner's sister-in-law Dorothea Stock, who commemorated the occasion with a famous silverpoint likeness of Mozart."

Later, the composer Robert Schumann spent the years from 1844 to 1850 in Dresden with his wife, pianist Clara Schumann, who supported the family with her concerts even though she gave birth to several children during this period. It was in 1848 that Robert Schumann wrote his famous *Piano Album for the Young,* and in 1849, the less well-known *Song Album for the Young,* Op. 79.

Meanwhile, the evil Richard Wagner was *Hofkappellmeister* (1842-49) in Dresden, while Schumann was unable to find a job except for directing a choir. Schumann's animosity to Wagner was based on moral repugnance for the Romantic outlook which Wagner exemplified to the hilt. One of Wagner's bombastic compositions was a piece not well known today, the 1843 "Love Feast of the Apostles," scored in Venetian style for a large orchestra and several different groups of male singers. There were no fewer than 1,200 Saxons singing at the debut at the Dresden Frauenkirche, one of the city's noblest monuments destroyed in the 1945 firebombing. The manuscript survived, and is in the exhibit.

The political conditions which favored the proto-Nazi Wagner over the Classical composer Schumann came to a head in the 1849 revolutionary uprising. When it failed, Wagner deserted Dresden. Schumann was writing his setting of "The Cowherd's Farewell," a song from the opening scene of Schiller's play *Wilhelm Tell,* for the *Song Album for the*



Albrecht Dürer. The Passion of Our Lord Jesus. *Nuremberg, 1511. The hand-colored woodcut Crucifixion is bound in a sketchbook that includes the German Renaissance master's original drawings for his book on human proportions, now in the Saxon State Library.*

Johannes Brahms. "To a Violet," lyrics by Ludwig Hölty. Song for Voice and Piano, opus 49.2. This manuscript was a gift to the family of Robert and Clara Schumann.

Young. He and his family were forced to suddenly quit Dresden for a quiet village where he completed the cycle of songs. At the bottom of the manuscript page, which is exhibited in the show, Schumann wrote: "interrupted by the alarm bells on May 3, 1849."

The album—of which I presume the entire manuscript is in the Saxon State Library, although the catalogue does not say so—includes two Schiller songs from *Wilhelm Tell.* These charming songs are among the rare successful settings of Schiller's lyrics, and, of course, Schiller's play celebrated a notion of freedom quite opposite to the jacobin frenzy which mainly drove the German revolutionaries of 1848-49. Schumann, who from childhood on had had a special talent for creating a precise image of a specific personality, place, or narrative in his music, uses a drone-like base to evoke bagpipes and a flute-like treble melody in the piano part of the cowherd's song, as if to capture the typical sounds of an alpine sunset. One of the most original facets of the song is the way in which the second stanza trails off, leaving the voice suspended on the leading-tone. But in stark contrast to Wagner, where the music often builds up an emotion and then drifts off to nowhere, deliberately driving the listener into a state of rage, Schumann returns with the third stanza to the opening melody of the song, and leads it to a wistful, but emphatic "farewell." A children's chorus organized by the Schiller Institute in Leesburg, Virginia, which this author directed, has performed this piece and others from the Schumann *Song Album for the Young* beautifully, in English translation. It was for this reason that I was able to immediately spot a gaffe in the catalogue—the translator, unfamiliar with the word for an alpine cowherd, *Senne,* mistook it for a proper name! It is to be hoped that future editions of the book, if there are any, will correct this error, and perhaps add the identification that the poem is from *Wilhelm Tell.*

Dresden a crossroads

Dresden was and is a crossroads between eastern and western Europe. It is at Dresden that the gauge of the rail tracks changes, and many Russians spent at least a day in Dresden on their way westward. In 1849, one Russian who took part in the failed uprising in Dresden and then fled, was Mikhail Bakunin, who became the founder of the terrorist Anarchist movement.

The debate over freedom in the 1840s sets the context for Schumann's decision to include two Schiller pieces in his album. Schiller had been dead nearly a half-century and interest in setting his poems to music had waned. Yet in 1846-47, in nearby Leipzig, Schumann's friend Felix Mendelssohn had also put his hand to two Schiller settings, including a large-scale choral version of "Die Künstler" (The Artists), Schiller's ode exalting the responsibility of the artist for the fate of mankind.

Another of the treasures exhibited is a fair copy in the composer's own hand of a song by the last great Classical composer, Johannes Brahms, another Wagner antagonist. "An ein Veilchen," or "To a Violet," a setting of a poem by Hölty, was published by Brahms in 1868 as part of a set of five *Lieder* which also included his famous "Cradle Song." This manuscript with its delicate blue border was given by Brahms to the Schumann family, for whom Brahms wrote his own *Song Album for Children,* after the death of Robert Schumann in 1856.