

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 14 July 2025
1.00pm

Rachel Podger baroque violin
Elizabeth Kenny lute
Marcin Świątkiewicz harpsichord

Heinrich Biber (1644-1704)

Violin Sonata No. 1 in A (pub. 1681)

I. Adagio • II. Presto •

III. Variatio • IV. Finale. Presto

Violin Sonata No. 5 in E minor (pub. 1681)

I. • II. Variatio – Allegro • III. Presto • IV. Aria – Variations

Johann Jakob Froberger (1616-1667)

Suite in A minor FbWV630 (c.1650-60)

Heinrich Biber

Violin Sonata No. 6 in C minor (pub. 1681)

Violin Sonata No. 3 in F (pub. 1681)

I. Adagio – Presto • II. Aria – Variatio •

III. Presto – Adagio • IV. Allegro • V. Variatio



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In 17th-century Europe, Heinrich Biber and his older contemporary Johann Jakob Froberger were the leading virtuosi at their respective instruments, violin and keyboard. Whether they met is unknown but thought unlikely as Biber was only 23 and had hardly left his native Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) when Froberger, a German from Stuttgart, died in Vienna at the age of 51 in 1667. Biber's reputation was based on the complexity and brilliance of his published scores, Froberger's on the influence he had on subsequent generations of composers.

Biber was born the son of a gamekeeper and was apparently the first musician in his family. A century after Biber had lived, the English traveller and music historian Charles Burney discovered him. In 1789 Burney wrote that of all the violinists of the age before Bach, 'Biber seems to have been the best and his solos are the most difficult and fanciful of any I have seen in the same period'. Almost certainly, Burney formed this opinion after seeing the violin sonatas in this programme as Biber's other works for solo violin remained in manuscript until the 20th Century. The eight violin sonatas were published in Nuremberg in 1681. Those in A major, F major, E minor and C minor appear here.

Each sonata is a continuous piece of music divided into sections of different speeds – adagio, presto, allegro and so on. Each remains in its given key throughout. At the heart is a long section marked 'Variations', not melodic of a given theme, but harmonic over a recurring bassline or ostinato – obstinate-bass. In other situations this might be called a *passacaglia* which is the term used in the present C minor sonata.

Although one hesitates to call the sections movements, there are a few which stand out. The F major and E minor sonatas feature an Aria with a mellifluous singing melody, with the bass in the latter remaining the ground through the following Variations. The C minor sonata includes an attractive Gavotte, a courtly dance in four-time.

Biber writes the music on two staves, treble and bass. The violin plays the treble with much multiple-stopping (notes played simultaneously as chords). The bass is 'figured', that is with a numerical code written above the notes defining the harmony to be improvised by either or both of lute or harpsichord. The music looks simpler on the page than it sounds. Biber is also explicit about dynamics, indicating soft or *piano* passages, usually as an echo effect, and less frequently loud or *forte* sections.

Halfway through the C minor sonata, there is a pause while the violin retunes the top string from E down a tone to D. This is a technique called *scordatura* (literally 'putting out of tune') and is used here to enable the soloist to arpeggiate chords over a pedal G with an open string D for the fifth. The player reads the notes as if they were normal tuning, however, so

written E sounds as D. Biber used *scordatura* extensively for his most famous work, the 16 *Rosary Sonatas*, written in the 1670s but not published – and therefore not known – until 1904, the bicentenary of Biber's death. They were dedicated to his employer Archbishop Gandolph who was brought up as a Jesuit like Biber himself. In fact, so committed was Biber to the Jesuit order that he added as a student the names of the founders Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier to his own and generally signed himself thereafter Heinrich IF Biber where the initials stand for Ignaz Franz. In 1687, he composed the funeral music for Archbishop Gandolph. His devotion to the church brought him to the attention of the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I in Vienna before whom he was summoned to play. His performance led to promotion in Salzburg and eventually ennoblement and from 1690 he was proud to call himself Von Biber.

Johann Jakob Froberger also played before Emperor Leopold and indeed, as an employee of the Vienna court, was well known to him. He was born into an extensive musical family in Stuttgart, South West Germany, with generations of composers and keyboard players behind him. His talent won him recognition and in 1634 when he was still only 18 he was appointed court organist in Vienna. An enlightened employer paid for him to travel abroad as part of his education and besides two long stints in Italy he visited and engaged with musicians in Germany, France, Belgium and England.

His contribution to music was the development of the keyboard suite and the establishment of the four regular dance movements which later generations of students would learn as a mantra – Allemande-Courante-Sarabande-Gigue, although Froberger himself varied the order. It is perhaps no surprise, given Froberger's travels, that each dance derives from a different country: Germany, France, Spain, England. Froberger's suite then represents European unity which later composers adopted and transformed into the movements of the symphony.

The A minor suite played here was, like most of his works, unpublished during Froberger's life and remained so until the 20th Century. However its mournful *Allemande* has the title *Plainte faite a Londres pour passer la mélancholie* – dirge on melancholy composed in London – so it is certain that it dates from his 1652 visit here during the Puritan Republic. The somewhat unreliable music historian Johann Mattheson wrote later that the music records Froberger's misery after being robbed by pirates in the English Channel and that he arrived penniless and unknown in the capital where he worked as an organ blower until his talent was recognised and he obtained a position as court organist to Charles II then in exile. Fake news perhaps.

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