

Introduction

With no affectation or false modesty, Gottlieb Muffat described the 1739 publication of his *Componimenti musicali per il cembalo* as ‘the most beautiful product to be met with in all Germany’. It was patently one of the most lavish and cosmopolitan productions of all 18th-century music printing; with paper of large format and high quality, an extravagant title-page, meticulous and calligraphic engraving, prefaces in several languages and a dedication to the Holy Roman Emperor, Muffat aimed to set it apart from other volumes of keyboard music of this period such as Couperin’s *Pièces de Clavecin* or Bach’s *Klavierübung*, and also from his earlier collection of versetts and toccatas aimed at the professional church musician (*72 Versetl sammt 12 Toccaten*, Vienna, 1726). The *Componimenti* represent a polished selection from his secular keyboard music and the publication was directed at the royal household. His title-page proudly announces that he was not only *Organista di Corte e Camera* (i.e. in public and private) to the Emperor, but also *Maestro di Cembalo* to the two arch-duchesses, Maria Theresa and her sister Maria Anna.

The Emperor himself composed, played the harpsichord, and on occasion conducted the court band. He had been taught as a boy by Johann Joseph Fux (whom Muffat, another of Fux’s pupils, described as ‘without flattery the best master in the world’). By the date of this publication Muffat had been in his employ as organist for more than 20 years. However, a possible second and less overt dedicatee for this volume might have been Maria Amalia of Austria, niece to the Emperor, younger daughter of Emperor Joseph I and, at that time, the wife of Charles of Bavaria (later Holy Roman Emperor). She was born on 22 October 1701 and thus would have been celebrating her thirty-eighth birthday in 1739. The unusual *Ciaccona con 38 Variazioni* which is added to this otherwise normal collection of six suites follows a precedent already set in Vienna for a birthday tribute by Alessandro Poglietti; in his 1677 collection of pieces entitled *Rossignolo* (written for Leopold I and his wife Eleanora, the parents of Charles VI), he included an *Aria Allemagna con alcuni variazioni Sopra l’Età della M[ae]s]ta V[os]tra*, with twenty variations to correspond to her majesty’s age. For those who support numerology over anniversary, 38 is the largest even number which cannot be written as the sum of two odd composite numbers.

Only the *Particolari Segni delle Maniere* – the table of ornaments (the information most essential for a newcomer to this repertoire) – would appear almost as an after-thought, on the final folio of the volume and with minimal explanation of the various un-named symbols, were it not for the fact that it is mentioned in the preface. It clearly assumes some prior familiarity with his style of notation and reinforces the impression that this collection is a luxury production for ‘insiders’. The fact that no more than 25 examples of the *Componimenti* seem to have survived, most of these are elaborately leather-bound and gilded, confirms the impression of a presentation volume and a small print-run; not all copies contain the dedication pages, and the sequence of the Italian and German prefaces varies amongst the surviving copies.

* * *

In contrast to the graphic display of the publication, Muffat’s titling is ultra-modest; *Componimenti Musicali* (simply *Musical Compositions*) was very rarely used as a title for musical collections; while there were many publications of *componimenti poetici*, we previously find only the 1623 *Componimenti Musicali* of Lucrezia Vizzana (sacred vocal works) or a passing use of the term in elaborate titles such as *Il Perche musicale, ouero staffetta armonica nella quale la ragione scioglie le difficoltà, e gli esempi dimostrano il modo d’isfuggire gli errori, e di tessere con artificio i componimenti musicali*. (Angelo Beradi, 1693).