

## Chapter 4

### Johann Rudolph Ahle: A portrait

The oft-overlooked Johann Rudolph Ahle was born in Muhlhausen on Christmas Eve, 1625. Little is known of his formative years, but Rathey suggests music lessons as early as the 1630s, presumably with one of the organists at either of the two main churches in town, Divi-Blasii or the Marienkirche. By 1643, Ahle was attending school in Göttingen, and two years later he was a student in Erfurt, with the position of cantor at the Andreas Kirche. He returned to Muhlhausen by 1650, and accepted the position of organist at Divi Blasii in 1654, the position he would hold until his death in 1673, when he was succeeded by his son, Johann Georg Ahle (who was in turn succeeded by a young Johann Sebastian Bach). From 1655 he was involved on city council, and held a variety of positions until he was elected mayor in the year of his death.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout his time in Muhlhausen, Ahle published a number of collections of music. At the center of his output are his four *Lustgarten* collections, published in 1657, 1658, 1663, and 1665. While this study does not attempt to examine all four collections in detail, the four prefaces and the dedicatory poems provide valuable information about both Ahle and performance practice of his music.

In a series of articles on the publishing practice of German composers in the seventeenth century, Stephen Rice describes how composers would, for a variety of reasons, include various elements in addition to the music in their collections.<sup>36</sup> Dedications, dedicatory poems, and prefaces were all ways for

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<sup>35</sup> Biographical information drawn from Rathey, *Johann Rudolph Ahle*, 101-138.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Rice, "Music, Print and Presentation in Saxony During the Seventeenth Century," *Germany History* 23, no. 1 (2005): 1-19, "The Composer as Self-

composers to assuage their “anxiety of judgement” – particularly, as Rice notes, due to “the stylistic upheavals at the start of the seventeenth century [which] had caused uncertainty about how to judge compositional competence and led to angry disputes.”<sup>37</sup> Ahle was clearly no stranger to this controversy – he makes sure to include a special mention of the “concerto haters”<sup>38</sup> in the preface to his 1663 collection, and while he says Ambrosius Profe has dealt with them handily, he still makes sure to suggest in great detail that “those who don’t know, hate”<sup>39</sup> and perhaps it’s merely the result of poorly performed concertos, as opposed to poorly crafted pieces.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps in an effort to dispel such criticism, Ahle included, in each collection, a variety of dedicatory poems. The poems come from a variety of authors, such as other composers (Michael Jacobi and Christian Flor), his predecessor at Divi Blasii (Johann Vockerodt), hymn writers (such as Johann Rist, Frans-Joachim Burmeister, and Johann Starcke), as well as members of the clergy or educators in Mühlhausen. While these poems are extremely complimentary, perhaps to the point of exaggeration, they paint a picture of Ahle’s stature at the time, at least to his friends.

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Publisher in Seventeenth-Century Germany,” in *Varia Musicologica: Dissemination of Music in Seventeenth-Century Europe: Celebrating the Düben Collection* (Berne, Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2011), 239-260, and “Publication and the Anxiety of Judgement in German Musical Life of the Seventeenth Century,” in *Music & Letters* 85, No. 1 (2004): 22-40.

<sup>37</sup> Rice, “Publication and the Anxiety of Judgement,” 23.

<sup>38</sup> “Nun hette ich Ursach mit den *Concerthassern* zu reden,” J. R. Ahle, preface to *Lustgarten Nebengang*, 1663.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. “Qui non intelligit, odit.”

<sup>40</sup> In his 1663 preface, Ahle makes the joke that perhaps the problem is that his pieces are being performed by *non-certisten* as opposed to *concertisten*, so that not only the concertos, but also the composers are insulted.

In a poem written for Lustgarten I, for instance, Michael Jacobi writes:

*Monteverdi, who is prominently displayed among those who shine forth, who has recently through his art achieved an immortal name, let him come...boldly daring to announce to Ahle that he was Monteverdi to the Germans.<sup>41</sup>*

He goes on to write that Ahle attempts to exert himself to create music at the level of Schütz, Herbst, Selle, and Hammerschmidt. A similar sentiment is expressed in the first Lustgarten by Johannes Girbert, rector of the Mühlhausen Gymnasium:

*As far as music is concerned, 'S' among the abc's (as is well known) has previously captured all the praise. Schütz, Schein, Scheidt, Schop, Schild, Schulze, Selle, and Scheidemann, eight they are all together, all begin with 'S.' I can't think of others who are equally to be praised – these, it seems to me, ought justifiably to swim above the rest. These are the best; they've stood out with well thought heavenly art – to these eight remains all praise and favour. Now 'A' breaks out – our councilman, our Ahle, our master of keyboards, after a long time brings forth his well screwed together little pieces.<sup>42</sup>*

Of course, these poems would not be printed if they said anything less laudatory towards Ahle. Yet that Ahle could find composers established across the country (Jacobi was based in Lüneberg, some 300 km north of Mühlhausen) willing to sing his praises, and he was clearly well regarded in his hometown.

The other fascinating element of Ahle's prefatory material are the prefaces he wrote to the performers of his music. In the preface to Lustgarten II, the

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<sup>41</sup> "Monteverd/ welcher nebst anderen pranget Unter den Welschen/ der leuchtet herfür/ Daß er auch längsten dach Kunst hat erlanget Einen unterblichen Namen alhier: Lasset ihn fahren/ Treter bei Paaren alle herbei: Kunlich es waget/ Ahlen ansaget/ Daß er der Teutschen ihr Monteverd sei."

<sup>42</sup> "Es hat S im ABC was Music thut anbelangen/ Wie bekantlich ist/ bißher allen Preiß fast eingefangen: Schütze/ Schein/ Scheid/ Schop/ Schild/ Schulße/ Sell'/ und letztlich Scheidemann/ Achte sind ihr gleich beysammen: Alle vom S. fahen an. Anderer gedenk ich nicht/ die dergleichen sind zu loben: Diese/ diese/ deucht mich gantz/ solten füglich schwimmen oben. Diese sinds/ die hochherraben mit gedachter Himmels-kunst/ Diesen Achten allen bleibt diese Zeit der Preiß und Gunst. Itzo bricht das A. herfür. Unser Rahts-herr/ unser Ahle/ Unser Meister des Claviers gibt nach langer Zeit einmahle/ Seiner wolgeschraubten Stüklein Ersten Theil ans Tage-liecht/"

collection that is the focus of this study, he gives relatively little instruction – aside from suggesting that works can be performed both with and without the *capellen*, some works with and without the violins.<sup>43</sup> He states that some pieces can be performed without the basso continuo – these are the four to eight part vocal pieces in the older motet style.<sup>44</sup> Beyond these instructions, he directs the reader to the preface to his previous collection, *Lustgarten I*, published the year before.<sup>45</sup> The preface to *Lustgarten I* contains similar instructions regarding the use (or not) of various instruments and *capellen* but also contains this direction: “so one should use: throughout, a fine slow tactus.”<sup>46</sup> This direction is repeated again in the 1665 preface. Ahle’s *Lustgarten* collections were predominantly filled with sacred concertos – and perhaps he speculated the feared attacks of the “concerto-haters” were a result of improper tempos in performance.

While these excerpts do not give us as extensive a picture of performance practice as other contemporary sources, they can help us paint a picture of Ahle as a well-regarded local composer, and possibly one hearing reports of his music being performed with less-than-adequate forces. His detailing the flexibility for performance of music implies an (understandable) desire to have his music frequently performed – but also a desire to portray his skills as being able to write music that could be performed well in a variety of circumstances. At the close of his 1658 preface, he writes, “those who are left out, because these pieces

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<sup>43</sup> “So sind die Violini im 1 und 4 *ad placitum* hinzu gethan/ und können/ wie auch die Capellen im gantzen Werkke/ gebraucht/ oder außgelassen werden.” *Lustgarten II*, preface.

<sup>44</sup> “Das 10, 13, 16, 24, 25 und 26 kan man mit und ohne Fundament/” *Lustgarten II*, preface.

<sup>45</sup> “Was über die Erinnerung/ so im Ersten Theile altberreit beschehen/” *Lustgarten II*, preface.

<sup>46</sup> “Allwege eines feinem langsamen Tacts.” *Lustgarten I*, preface.

would be somewhat too difficult for them, will also be served...various pieces are appended to this collection which can be done without particular effort.”<sup>47</sup> Ahle wished to serve as many as possible with his music – but never at the cost of appearing to be a poor composer.

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<sup>47</sup> “denen jenigen so sich heraußgelassen daß ihnen diese Sachen was zu schwer weren/ gedienet werden/ wie den deßwegen diesem Theil unterschiedliche Stükke mit einverleibet/ so ohne sondere Mühe wol zu Musiciren.” Lustgarten II, preface.