

# CONRAD HÖFFLER: CHAMBER MUSICIAN AND VIOLIST DA GAMBA AT THE COURT OF DUKE JOHANN ADOLPH I OF SAXE-WEISSENFELS

Thomas Fritsch  
English Translation by Christine Kyprianides

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## Abstract

Conrad Höffler's *Primitiae Chelicae* (1695) consists of twelve suites for viola da gamba and bass. This introduction to a new edition of this work presents new material concerning his career as a court musician in Weissenfels and his personal life, derived from archival sources as well as the testimony of his colleague Johann Beer, a prolific writer. From this material it is clear that Höffler was well respected for both his musical abilities and his personal qualities.

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I was sixteen years old, and had just begun my cello and viola da gamba studies at the Leipzig Conservatory of Music, when I found an original edition of twelve gamba suites from 1695 in the reading room of the venerable library of the council-school in my hometown of Zwickau. The composer's name, Conrad Höffler, meant nothing to me, and with an enthusiasm typical of youth I decided to become better acquainted with my newfound treasure. I invested a small fortune in a photocopy of the print, which was remarkable for its ability to roll up tightly as soon as it was placed on a music stand. The music itself was difficult, but it appealed to me and was so inspiring to practice that in the end I chose it as the subject of my diploma thesis.

When the Güntersberg music publishers requested a preface to their edition of Höffler's gamba suites a few months ago (now available as G211), I realized once again that biographical information about Conrad Höffler had scarcely been touched. The

search for traces of Höffler's life was indeed fruitful, and the more details I discovered in the ensuing weeks, the closer I felt to this man with whom I share enthusiasm for the viola da gamba and its repertory.

Today I live among the vineyards of the Unstrut Valley, in the neighborhood of Höffler's home; looking from the window of our house, we can see the Neuenburg, which served as a hunting lodge for the dukes of Saxe-Weissenfels during Höffler's lifetime. My article is a tribute to an outstanding gambist and an appreciation for the gift of his music.

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"Hoeffler (Conrad), a chamber musician from Weissenfels at the end of the past century, born in Nuremberg, published in his 48th year 12 Suites for viola da gamba and figured bass, engraved in copperplate, and printed in elongated folio format." This brief entry in Johann Gottfried Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732) sums up the output of an important seventeenth-century gambist.

Conrad Höffler was probably born on January 28, 1647, in Nuremberg, the son of Hanns Höfler, a yarn dyer, and his wife Elena, and baptized in the Evangelical-Lutheran parish church of St. Lorenz on January 30. He began his musical training in his hometown in his youth under Gabriel Schütz, the gambist and cornettist, whom Johann Mattheson considered "one of the best masters in the Holy Roman Empire."<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Schütz (1633–1710) had spent more than six years in Lübeck, studying the English style of gamba playing with Nicolaus Bleyer, who had himself studied with William Brade and Thomas Simpson. In 1655, Gabriel Schütz had left Hamburg for further music study in Italy, but got no further than Nuremberg, and stayed there for nearly fifty years as a member of the Nuremberg town musicians. Schütz became a renowned gamba teacher and was an important link between North Germany, which was dominated by the English, and the southern German states. His students included Johann Philipp Krieger, born in Nuremberg in 1649.

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehrenpforte* (Hamburg, 1740).

Conrad Höffler received his first appointment as musician to the Bayreuth court, where Johann Philipp Krieger was serving as Chamber Organist and later also as Kapellmeister. Margrave Christian Ernst of Brandenburg-Bayreuth, from the beginning of his rule over the Frankish principality of Kulmbach-Bayreuth (October 1661), had sought fame as a general. His massive military investments led to a financial crisis at the court in 1672. As a loyal subject of Kaiser Leopold I, Margrave Christian Ernst was the first imperial sovereign to take the field against France in the summer of 1672. Both Krieger and Höffler recognized the signs of the times: Krieger offered his resignation (which was refused) and started off on an educational tour of Italy; Höffler was hired by Johann Wolfgang Franck, Hofkapellmeister in Ansbach, and entered into a new position as court musician and gambist in the court of Margrave Johann Friedrich of Brandenburg-Ansbach on August 29, 1673. Franck's lord had sent him to Bayreuth on a recruiting trip, and Franck's written account of his personal conversations there reveals some fascinating details: he was instructed not to hire just any musician from the Bayreuth court, but specifically charged with negotiating an exchange of Conrad Höffler and another unnamed musician with the Ansbach court. During his discussions, Franck learned that Höffler and the other Bayreuth court musician received salaries of 182 and 152 Reichsthalers (it is unclear who received which sum), and with unusual emphasis, stressed that "after a great deal of persuasion" both finally accepted under the following conditions: 100 florins wages, 52 florins for expenses, the *privilegium exemptionis* (exemption from the excise tax), and equality with the other court musicians, chancery clerks, and trumpeters. Apparently Franck had to haggle with Höffler and his colleague, and ended up having to augment the sum of his original offer to cover the costs of relocation. To his employer, Franck attempted to justify his compliance in the negotiations by portraying his concessions as utterly submissive requests on the part of the musicians, and by understating the quantity of their household goods, mentioning in addition that the Bayreuth

court had also covered the moving expenses upon their entry into service.<sup>2</sup>

Since Höffler found himself continuously misled by Franck in Ansbach regarding the fulfillment of the agreements, in the third year of his service to the Margrave he submitted a petition of resignation. In it he complained that the court musicians were badly treated by both court and city officials—"the lowest of them as well as the highest consider the musicians as unbearable thorns in their side"—and that he was constantly and capriciously both insulted and threatened. The arbitrary infringements described in the letter must have reached the ears of the Margrave, for accusations of abuse of office against the musicians seem to have been an everyday occurrence throughout his domain: their rations of firewood were completely withdrawn, their alcohol allowance was reduced, the allotment of wine for the ducal communion and other occasions was halved, and "the stipulated *privilegium exemptionis* (in regard to the wine tax) in reality rescinded." The wine tax was a fee on retail wine, and Franck had specifically promised Höffler an exemption from this tax.

Höffler points out that he had been promised equal treatment to that of his service in Bayreuth, but despite lower wages in Ansbach he was serving in church and court and also in the theater; the latter had not been required of him in Bayreuth. He complains that spiteful officials relentlessly maligned the court musicians with slanders and false accusations ("falsa narrata") to the Margrave, and with the exception of the Margrave, the musicians had "not one single patron or benefactor, to whom we could protest the improprieties and seek redress," and therefore, through no fault of their own, had fallen into disgrace. In the last section of his resignation petition, Höffler openly declares that Franck had enticed him with empty promises to leave a good position for a worse one, and that not once in Ansbach had he experienced the respect and esteem customary at even the smallest and least important of courts. While Höffler, in the language of the time, "humbly begs his lord's most gracious dismissal," he openly assumes that the request will result in his dismissal. Höffler's petition of resignation, as far as

<sup>2</sup> Curt Sachs, "Die Ansbacher Hofkapelle unter Markgraf Johann Friedrich (1672–1686)," *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 11, no. 1 (Oct.–Dec. 1909), 105–37.

can be determined, is the only extant evidence of his personal life, and is of surprising candor. The Margrave granted the demand and released Höffler from the Brandenburg-Ansbach service on March 28, 1676.

Within a few short months, Höffler had taken a position as musician in the ducal ensemble in the court of Duke August of Saxe-Weissenfels in Halle an der Saale, and his name is mentioned for the first time in a list dated August 8, 1676. On November 2, 1677 his boyhood friend Johann Philipp Krieger followed him and became court organist and assistant Kapellmeister. The court was located in a four-wing complex of buildings on the Domplatz, built in Italian Renaissance style in 1531 by Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg; Duke August named it the *Neue Residenz* (New Residence) in 1644. From here, August of Saxe-Weissenfels (born 1614), son of the Saxon Elector Johann Georg I, governed as both the Protestant administrator of the archdiocese of Magdeburg and, from 1657, the newly established secundogeniture Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. The music- and art-loving Duke cultivated a brilliant cultural life at court and established a vibrant opera theater in the New Residence. Members of his musical establishment included Philipp Stolle, David and Samuel Pohle, Christian Ritter, and Johann Beer, in addition to Höffler and Krieger. Beer joined the court as an alto on October 8, 1676, only a few weeks after Höffler had begun his service. His autobiography<sup>3</sup> in the form of a chronicle, begun in 1679 and continuing until his death in 1700, provides a unique collection of data on the court chapels of Halle and Weissenfels.

Höffler found the working conditions as a member of the court ensemble at Halle the best he had yet experienced, musically and artistically, as well as in regard to the standard of living. However, in the fourth year of his service this idyll was shattered: on June 4, 1680, Duke August died at the age of fifty-six. With his death, the 1648 Peace Treaty of Westphalia, involving the archdiocese of Magdeburg's cession of territory, came into effect; from then on, Halle was under the control of the Electorate of Brandenburg. The duke's son, Johann Adolph I, had to move his court to Weissenfels, some twenty-five miles farther south, and Halle lost

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<sup>3</sup> Johann Beer, *Sein Leben von ihm selbst erzählt* (Göttingen, 1965).

both the *Residenz* with its opera, and the court artists. The removal of the court unfortunately coincided with a sudden and widespread outbreak of the plague. At the end of July 1680, “many died in and around Dresden, and then it began by degrees in Leipzig; consequently sentinels were guarding all the routes,” wrote Johann Beer, who was proceeding on a journey to Halle through Zeitz and Weissenfels on August 7, 1680. “At that time the contagion in Leipzig gained the upper hand, and dread grew increasingly from day to day in the surrounding cities.” Considering the geographical proximity of those cities to Leipzig, the terror of their citizens is comprehensible, given the much larger distance that the plague had quickly covered in moving from Dresden to Leipzig.

“On the 17th of this month [August, 1680] Duke Johann Adolph moved his court from Halle to Weissenfels. God speed him and his servants on their journey! Our chapel is thus scattered far and wide. Only six of us are left in Weissenfels. The others are gone, some to Lower Saxony, others even to Sweden.” In fact, after the dissolution of the duke’s ensemble in Halle we find former members in Gotha, Dresden, Zittau, Jüterbog, Berlin, Sweden and Italy. The personnel remaining in the court ensemble on arrival in Weissenfels were Johann Philipp Krieger (“Capellmeister”), Daniel Döbricht (Debricht, “Discantist”), Johann Flemming (“Discantist”), Johann Beer (“Altist”), Samuel Grosse (“Tenorist, Theorbist”), Donat Rössler (“Bassist”), Johann Hoffmann (“Violinist”), and Conrad Höffler (“Violdigambist”).<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Beer’s account, we find evidence in 1680 of eight former ensemble members of Halle still in the Duke’s service. Flemming had just entered the Halle chapel in 1680, shortly before the move; Beer possibly neglected to count him. Döbricht’s salary “begins [in Weissenfels] from Easter 1681.”

From the Feast of St. Michael (September 29) 1680, Höffler’s name is found on the employment list of the Weissenfels court, as are most of the ensemble members. Beer was himself a later arrival, as he recounted: “On December 6th of this year 1680, I moved from Halle to Weissenfels with my wife and child, my brother and a housemaid during an unbelievably bitter cold spell.

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<sup>4</sup> Eva-Maria Ranft, “Zum Personalbestand der Weißenfelser Hofkapelle,” *Beiträge zur Bach-Forschung* 6 (Leipzig, 1988).

It took us from 10 o'clock in the morning until 12 at night to cover the 4-league distance; then we could not enter the gate and had to spend the night in the so-called House of the Eleven Thousand Virgins in front of the Saale gate." This was not an inn, but in fact the chapel of a sanctuary. We can only imagine the hardships of such trips, and Beer's images become more vivid when we read his account of another journey begun on December 17 to Schloss Rammelburg in Lower Harz [approximately 52 miles from Weissenfels], with additional cold, snow, wolves, and the appearance of the Great Comet<sup>5</sup> in the skies.

When Höffler took his position in Weissenfels in late summer 1680, his new workplace was still under construction, as the rebuilding of the palace was only half finished. Schloss Neu Augustusburg (New Augustusburg Palace)<sup>6</sup>—named after the first duke of Saxe-Weissenfels—had been reduced to its foundations by the Swedish army during the Thirty Years War, and the restoration of the building was only finished in 1694 with the paving of the courtyard. The appearance of the city of Weissenfels was also changing: this included the improvement of roads, the paving of streets and squares, the building of stately homes, the installation of a system of pipes supplying water to the palace complex, and the expansion of the old palace gardens to comprise an important pleasure garden. A new, stricter fire ordinance prohibited barns and thatched roofs within the city walls, and required all citizens to take part in the fire brigade, in order to protect the growing commercial prosperity of the city.

"On December 23 in the year 1680 ... Johann Philipp Krieger, as *Capell-Meister à part* and Conradt Höffler, as *Cammer- und Instrumental-Musicus ... ex anno et supra* Christian Keyserling" were installed in Weissenfels. The art-loving Duke Johann Adolph, like his father before him, had made a fortunate choice by putting the direction of his ensemble into competent hands. During his forty-five years in service in Weissenfels, Krieger took the court chapel to a high musical level, and the ensemble enjoyed considerable renown far beyond the borders of the dukedom.

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<sup>5</sup> Kirch's Comet C/1680 V1 [also known as Newton's Comet, it was the first comet to be observed by telescope].

<sup>6</sup> Because there was already a Schloss Augustusburg in the Electorate of Saxony, it was necessary to differentiate the two names.

Höffler wrote proudly, "...I live in a chapel second to none in Europe in its excellence and musical knowledge (I speak without a hint of objectionable boasting)..." The court opera, which from 1685 was located in the newly built theatrical hall (*Comödien-Saal*), also experienced a new period of growth.

Attempts to reconstruct Höffler's personal life have remained incomplete. The evidence consists almost entirely of the records of baptisms, marriages, and funerals in Weissenfels. Höffler was married twice. His first wife Maria was buried on November 15, 1689; she died after giving birth to Georg Gottlieb, who was "baptized in urgency" on October 21, 1689 and buried ten days later. (Georg Caspar Wecker was one of the godfathers.) We do not yet know when the marriage had taken place. Maria is mentioned in the Weissenfels baptismal records for the first time as a godmother on February 8, 1685, as "EheLiebste" (wife) of Conrad Höffler. However, Johann Conradt, the first son born to Maria and Conrad Höffler in Weissenfels, had already been born on December 19, 1683. (Johann Conradt's godparents included among others Johann Philipp Krieger and Johann Beer.) Because there is no entry in the Weissenfels marriage register, it must be assumed that the wedding took place outside of Weissenfels, either in the hometown of the bride or before the August 1680 move to Weissenfels. Conrad and Maria had five children in Weissenfels between 1683 and 1689 (Johann Conradt, Helena Elisabeth, Johann Christian, Johann Christoph, Georg Gottlieb); the second and fifth were buried as newborns. Among the godparents of Johann Christian Höffler was Margaretha Justina Händel, the wife of Georg Friedrich Händel's elder half-brother Car(e)l.

Just over a year after Maria's death, Höffler remarried. The marriage entry is in the church registry in Taucha (near Hohenmölsen), a village only five miles from Weissenfels: "1691 / On Tuesday, January 27, after the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, were joined together Herr Conrad Höffler, Duke of Saxony's highly placed chamber musician, widower of Weissenfels and my second daughter, Anna Magdalena. *Deus bened. sicut illis ex alto.*