

Introduction

Johannes Mathias Sperger is the only double bassist in the world to have both a life-size bronze sculpture and a literary monument erected in his memory.¹ A quarter of a century after his death, the *Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst* still praised him: ‘Sperger, Johann[es], a great double bass virtuoso, on which he also masterfully performed the most difficult concertos of his own composition...’²

Joannes Sperger, the son of a *Küh-Halter* (cow and bull owner), was born on 23 March 1750 in Feldsberg, which was then in Lower Austria and is now the city of Valtice in the Czech Republic. The Feldsberg organist Franz Anton Becker taught Sperger the basics of music. In 1767 Sperger went to Vienna and studied musical theory and composition with Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, who also became Beethoven’s teacher from 1794 to 1796. The double bass virtuoso Friedrich Anton Pischelberger, for whom Mozart wrote the double bass solo part for the bass aria *Per questa bella mano*, KV 612, became his instrumental teacher. Sperger found employment as a double bassist from 1777 until the orchestra was disbanded in 1783, working for Archbishop, Prince Primate and Cardinal Joseph, Count Batthyány in Preßburg (Bratislava), where he met Franz Xaver Hammer, who was the first violoncellist in the orchestra. During this composition-rich period, he wrote eighteen symphonies, numerous concertos for various solo instruments and his first seven double bass concertos. After three years (1783–1786) as a member of the court orchestra of Ludwig, Count of Erdödy in Kohfidisch in what is now Burgenland, Sperger went to Vienna in search of a new position. As a travelling double bass soloist, Sperger performed in Brno, Prague, Dresden, Berlin, Parma, Trieste, Bologna and Mecklenburg. He dedicated numerous works to influential personalities, including the cello and viola da gamba playing Frederick William II, King of Prussia, and the Russian Tsar.

In April 1788, following written recommendations by Johann Friederich Reichardt and Carl Graf von Brühl, Friedrich Franz I, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin invited the double bassist Sperger to an audition in Ludwigslust, which turned out to be to the monarch’s greatest satisfaction. After a short

wait for a double bass vacancy, the art-loving Duke hired Sperger for his court orchestra. In mid-August 1789, after returning from concerts in Parma, Trieste, Venice and Mantua, he arrived in Ludwigslust and on 12 September 1789 he received his appointment as the first double bassist in one of the best orchestras in Germany at the time.

Almost at the same time, the new kapellmeister Antonio Rosetti arrived in Ludwigslust as successor to Carl August Friedrich Westenholtz. The concertmaster of the Hofkapelle was Eligio Celestino, assisted by Leopold August Abel, the brother of Carl Friedrich Abel. The position of first violoncellist was held by Franz Xaver Hammer, who was also renowned as one of the best gambists of his generation.

As a ripieno player, soloist and composer, Sperger gained great recognition both in Ludwigslust and on concert tours, including to Lübeck, Berlin, Leipzig, Stettin, Magdeburg, Dresden, Prague, Vienna and Regensburg. Among the many famous musicians in the court orchestra, Friedrich Franz I valued him as one of his best virtuosos. When Sperger died of typhoid on 13 May 1812 after 23 years of service in Ludwigslust, his employer had Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Requiem performed by the court orchestra in Sperger’s memory. On 24 June 1812, the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* in Leipzig reported Sperger’s death: ‘On 14 [sic] May, the ducal Mecklenburg-Schwerin court musician and first double bassist, Johann Sperger, died in Ludwigslust after 25 [sic] years of service. The orchestra has lost one of its most excellent members, as he had a rare power and determination on his instrument, with which he knew how to give the whole a firm foundation. In addition to the merits of a valiant ripieno player, Sperger also played concertos on the double bass, which he composed himself, just as he also composed a number of symphonies, all of which are written in a pleasing style and without great difficulties for performance, which is why they would be very useful for amateur concerts.’

The organisation and transmission of Sperger’s compositional legacy were – untypical for the 18th century – favoured by good fortune. From 1777, Sperger carefully kept a record of the compositions

¹ In Ludwigslust by the sculptor Andreas Krämer. Patrick Süskind, *Der Kontrabaß* (Zurich 1981).

² Gustav Schilling, *Encyclopädie der gesamten musikalischen Wissenschaften, oder Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst* (Stuttgart 1838), vol. 6, p. 441.