



(LEMS 8079)

Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber (1644-1704)

The Sacred Mysteries

The Rosary Sonatas for violin & continuo

Leah Gale Nelson, violin

Daniel Swenberg, theorbo

Dongsok Shin, organ

Motomi Igarashi, violone (XII, The Ascension)

Violins: Sebastian Klotz, Mittenwald, Germany, 1737

Perry Daniels, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1986 (VII, VIII, IX, & XII)

Bows: Rainer Ullreich, Vienna, Austria, 1998 and 2008

Theorbo: Michael Schreiner, Toronto, Ontario, 2001, after Schelle, 1727

Chamber organ: Gerrit Klop, Garderen, The Netherlands, 1986

Violone: Anonymous Bow: H.F. Grabenstein, Wilston, Vermont, 2007

Liner Notes by Leah Gale Nelson

“...my four-stringed lyre, re-tuned in 15 different ways...”

“The Rosary Sonatas,” also known as “The Mystery Sonatas,” are not only among the earliest examples of virtuosic violin writing, but they also present us with the most extensive use of *scordatura*, the *re-tuning* of strings, in violin repertoire. In *scordatura*, the standard violin tuning in fifths, (g d¹ a¹ e¹¹), is changed to combinations of fifths, fourths, thirds, and octaves for 14 of the 16 pieces in the collection. This allows the violinist to create resonances and harmonies that would be (more) awkward or impossible using normal tuning. Biber uses this technique in some of his later works, but takes the practice to an extreme in “The Mystery Sonatas,” and not merely as a clever trick for *fiddling*, but also to enhance the character, tension, and emotions of each piece.

Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber von Bibern (1644–1704) was one of the earliest violin virtuosos and is considered a leader of the early-German school of violin playing. Born and raised in northern Bohemia, Biber was employed at Kroměříž chapel in Moravia before coming to Salzburg in 1670 as a court composer, eventually becoming dean of the choir school, and finally Kapellmeister at the Salzburg Cathedral in 1684. He wrote numerous chamber works and mass settings, many of which were published during his lifetime. In recognition of his talents as composer, Biber was knighted in 1690 by Austrian Emperor Leopold I.

Today, audiences are most familiar with Biber’s chamber music, especially his works for violin. Preceding Johann Sebastian Bach by a generation, Biber’s writing is striking in its complexity and virtuosic demands, stretching the limits of the instrument and instrumentalist. The pieces typically demand speed, endurance, dynamics, and unusual bowing and fingering techniques, that challenge the violinist to coax a variety of unusual sounds and effects from the instrument. In addition to climbing into the sixth and seventh fingering positions, quite high for early Baroque repertoire, the writing incorporates double, triple, and quadruple stops, (*i.e.*, the playing of chords), and creates multiple voices on this typically monodic instrument. Jakob Stainer, a beloved and respected violin maker of the period, described Biber as a “formidable virtuoso.”

Not much is known about Biber’s early life or musical training, but he was already honing his skills in musical imagery and rhetoric while working at the Kroměříž chapel with the encouragement of his patron, Prince-Bishop Karl Liechtenstein-Kastelkorn, a music enthusiast who enjoyed the use of special instrumental effects. The young virtuoso learned to use the violin in curious ways, incorporating unusual tunings, and musical gestures to imitate a wide range of extra-musical sounds, from birdsongs to battles.

In addition to his mastery of the violin and viola da gamba, it is clear that Biber was also greatly influenced by the Jesuits, especially when one considers “The Rosary Sonatas.” Jesuit traditions encourage use of the imagination and personal involvement in prayer, including the praying of the Rosary. Just as we find rhetorical elements in religious text, painting, and sculpture of the period, this music is filled with musical rhetorical elements meant to evoke aspects of joy, sorrow, and glory.

“The Rosary Sonatas” were rediscovered in the late 19th century, housed in the Bavarian State Library in Munich. The collection dates from the 1670’s, soon after Biber’s arrival in Salzburg. This only known copy of the manuscript appears to have been a gift to his new patron, the Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph von Khuenburg, who was a member of a Confraternity of the Rosary, which gathered regularly to pray. The collection comprises fifteen pieces for violin and basso continuo, plus a Passacaglia for unaccompanied violin. There are no individual titles or numbers in the manuscript, but a copper engraving accompanies each piece, each illustrating one of the 15 Mysteries of the Rosary. These icons represent a specific purpose to Catholics praying the Rosary, hence, this beautifully prepared document is directly analogous to a Marian Psalter of the time, a musical Psalter if you will.

The title page is missing from the manuscript, but the colorful dedication to Archbishop Maximilian Gandolph survives, where, as in the music, we find rhetorical gesture and imagination, with plays on words and double meanings:

To thee, O highest and most reverend Lord Prince,

I humbly dedicate these harmonies, consecrated to the Sun of Righteousness and the Spotless Moon; to thee, O most clement Lord, who art the third light, deriving divine radiance from them. For as a son shining with sacred dignity, thou defendest as a virgin the honour of the Virgin Mother, and therefore art mercifully fed with heavenly manna by Christ the Son, and freely nursed by His Mother Mary, who, taking the first letter of her most blessed Name, hath placed it at the head of your own name most high, so hath Mary adorned Maximilian. Thou wilt find here my four-stringed lyre, re-tuned in 15 different ways, for sonatas, preludes, allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, airs, chaconnes, variations, etc., with basso continuo, elaborated with diligent care and as much artifice as possible. The reason for these labours is this: I have consecrated all this to the 15 Sacred Mysteries, which thou dost so fervently advance.

*To thee, your highness, I dedicate this on bended knee, your humble servant,
Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber*

This dedication is our only link to the purpose or use of these pieces since, at present, no other evidence of the collection is known. However, in 2008 a discovery in the Archive of the Salzburg Diocese revealed a large broadsheet honoring the benefactor and patron of Biber's collection, Archbishop Gandolph, and carrying the date 1678. This poster was used to promote the expansion of the Rosary-Brotherhood throughout the archdiocese, listing "The General Rules for the Brothers and Sisters of this Holy Rosary Brethren," and decorated with the same copper engravings of the Mysteries of the Rosary found in Biber's manuscript. This new discovery gives added credence to the traditional dating of Biber's "Mysteries," as well as evidence of Gandolph's fervency regarding the advancement of Rosary devotion.

"...I have consecrated all this to the 15 Sacred Mysteries..."

The Rosary is a series of repetitive Roman Catholic prayers, recited daily or weekly, privately or as part of devotional gatherings. These prayers are meditations on scenes from the lives of Jesus and Mary. At its core, the Rosary is the recitation of the *Ave Maria (Hail Mary)* 150 times, divided into fifteen *decades*, each prefaced by a scene for meditation: the 15 Mysteries of the Rosary. Marian Psalters, prayer guides with printed images of each Mystery's scene, along with a biblical verse regarding each Mystery, aid in prayer. These *Sacred Mysteries* are divided into three sets of five: the Joyful Mysteries, scenes from the childhood of Jesus; the Sorrowful Mysteries, depicting the Passion story; and the Glorious Mysteries, scenes from the Resurrection of Jesus and the Beatification of Mary.

The Rosary was intended to encourage Catholics to actively participate in prayer, joining sacred with secular, bringing personal prayer into daily life. Similarly, in "The Rosary Sonatas," Biber combines typical sacred music forms, such as free unmeasured preludes and hymn-like sonatas and fugues, with structured arias and dances such as the gigue or sarabande with accompanying variations or doubles, familiar in secular settings. This is not the only dichotomy Biber manages to bridge in the collection; he also depicts both the joy and the sorrow present in each scene. As one especially austere example, in *The Nativity (No. III)*, Biber invokes the gravity of the Passion story, while in the Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries Biber offers liveliness and joy along with the pain and sadness that are inherent in contemplations of death and resurrection.

The Joyful Mysteries

In **The Annunciation**, while there is excitement in the swirling lines that open the piece, and joy in the Aria and its lively variations, we also hear Mary's struggle to understand the meaning of the news being delivered by the angel. **The Visitation** offers a bright opening with a quick fugue followed by a cheerful Allamande, and punctuated by an exalting

Presto. **The Nativity** opens and closes peacefully, but with such melancholy that it may be difficult to detect the joy of birth. Indeed, early in the closing Adagio of this piece we hear a gesture that also appears in the *The Crucifixion*. **The Presentation in the Temple** is in the dance-song form of a Chaconne. The melody is introduced over a ground bass, followed by a building drama of variations, which become more and more animated before finally returning to the original melody. **The Finding in the Temple** opens with a trumpet-like fanfare, as though a king has arrived, followed by several dances including a lovely closing Sarabande with a somewhat capricious double.

The Sorrowful Mysteries

The Agony in the Garden, with its dark resonance, sets the scene with a Lament, wandering and anxious, followed by a peaceful yet interrupted chaconne-like Aria and its weighted conclusion. A pastoral Adagio follows ending with a curious echo effect. **The Scourging at the Pillar**, with its tense, constricted tuning (primarily in thirds), is simply two dance movements with variations. There are no fleet passages or sectional diversions, and only hints of scourging, until the bittersweet Sarabande surrenders to its aggressive and disturbing variations. With the violin tuned yet another step higher, **The Crowning with Thorns** opens with a hymn-like Sonata and an agitated Presto. A Gigue follows with two doubles, again juxtaposing opposites: a bright and joyful dance on a tightly tuned and resistant instrument. **The Carrying of the Cross** brings the top strings back to normal tuning, leaving only the two lower strings higher than usual. A heavily burdened opening yields to the kind of fast passagework that appears frequently in the Joyful and Glorious Mysteries. A Courante accompanied by two doubles, one labored, one fleet, is followed by a Finale, free and provocative over a bass pedal until the pointed and abrupt end. **The Crucifixion** uses normal tuning with the exception of the top string. The “hammering” of the opening Prelude is followed by an Aria and variations: calm, then anxious, then contemplative, ending with an aggression that some scholars suggest represents the moment of Christ’s death, and the darkness and earthquake that immediately followed.

The Glorious Mysteries

In **The Resurrection**, the middle strings of the violin are physically crossed over each other thereby creating two sets of octaves. The haunting opening Sonata is followed by the Easter hymn tune, “Surrexit Christus hodie.” **The Ascension** opens with another royal fanfare, this time on a grand scale with the *Aria Tubicinum* – a “choir of trumpets” written for one violin and an accompanying solo violone serving sonically as ceremonial kettledrums. **The Descent of the Holy Spirit** is the only piece in the Glorious Mysteries to pointedly evoke anything dark. The calm but unsettling opening passage gives way to what

could be considered a depiction of the violent wind that accompanied the Pentecost. This is followed by three delightful dances. In **The Assumption of Mary**, we hear the swirling lines of heaven opening for assumption. The dancing Aria and variations frolic into a Gigue, and the violin drifts away leaving the continuo behind. Finally, in **The Coronation of Mary**, after a peaceful Sonata, the Aria and its elaborate variations are followed by a Canzona based on the same distinctive theme. The last movement is a Sarabande with a tricky though enchanting double.

The Guardian Angel, also known as the Passacaglia, is an extensive *finale* to Biber's Sacred Mysteries. It is a set of variations on a simple ground bass, and is arguably the most complex example of solo violin writing before J.S. Bach's famous Chaconne. Again, without a formal title, the piece is preceded by an image – a drawing of the Guardian Angel leading a child by the hand.

Leah Gale Nelson ©2010

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ARTISTS:

Violinist **Leah Gale Nelson** specializes in the historical performance practices of the 17th and 18th centuries. Based in New York City, she has performed as a chamber musician and soloist throughout North America and in Europe. Her expert and polished artistic interpretations of baroque and classical music have put her in demand as concertmaster throughout the United States. She has led performances of landmark literature for some of the finest choirs in New York, including Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*, J.S. Bach's passions, cantatas, and *Mass in B Minor*, numerous mass settings of Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert, and the New York premiere of Telemann's *St. Matthew Passion* (1746). Ms. Nelson has served as concertmaster with Chicago Opera Theater and conductor Jane Glover in critically acclaimed productions of Monteverdi's operas in Chicago and New York; as guest director for Lyra Baroque Orchestra in Minneapolis; and has led Handel's *Messiah* in countless performances throughout the country. She frequently collaborates with dancers, filmmakers, and stage and choral directors, joining early music and historical practice with modern performance. With BALAM Dance Theatre she created *Fandango Fantasie*, performing her solo violin arrangement of Boccherini's "Fandango" Quintet, and her rendition of Biber's *Passacaglia* is in the repertoire of the dance company Isabel Gotzkowsky and Friends. In 2007, Ms. Nelson began a traversal of Biber's *Sacred Mysteries* in concerts at the Church of St. Luke in the Fields in New York and in Minneapolis at the Basilica of Saint Mary, a journey that inspired this recording. She spent her early days in early music primarily along the Northeast Corridor, playing with most of the early music ensembles from the Boston Camerata to the Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra, including the American Classical Orchestra, Clarion Music Society, Concert

Royal, and Dublin's Opera Theatre Company (at the Brooklyn Academy of Music). Born in Texas and raised in Minnesota, Ms. Nelson holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Chicago Musical College and a Master of Music degree from Mannes College of Music in New York, where she studied violin with David Nadien and baroque violin with Nancy Wilson.

Daniel Swenberg specializes in historical plucked strings: Renaissance and Baroque lutes, theorbos, baroque and 19th-century guitars, and baroque mandolino. He performs regularly throughout North America and internationally with ensembles including ARTEK, REBEL, The Metropolitan Opera, Mr. Jones & the Engines of Destruction, Ensemble Viscera, New York City Opera, Opera Atelier/Tafelmusik, Catacoustic Ensemble, Orchestra of St Luke's, Apollo's Fire, with soprano Nell Snaidas, and with Lizzy & the Theorboys. He has accompanied Renée Fleming and Kathleen Battle at Carnegie Hall. Daniel received awards from the Belgian American Educational Foundation (2000) for a study of 18th century chamber music for the lute, and a Fulbright Scholarship (1997) to study in Bremen, Germany at the Hochschule für Künste. He studied previously with Patrick O'Brien at Mannes College of Music, receiving a Master's degree in Historical Performance (Lute).

Dongsok Shin was born in Boston and played the piano from the age of four. Since the early 1980s he has specialized exclusively in early keyboard instruments. Much in demand as a soloist and continuo player, Mr. Shin has performed with ARTEK, Concert Royal, Early Music New York, Carmel Bach Festival, Clarion Music Society, Mark Morris Dance Group, New York Collegium, New York Philharmonic, Orchestra of St. Luke's, and Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. He has toured throughout North America, Europe, and Mexico, has been heard on numerous radio broadcasts, and has recorded for Lyrichord, Newport Classic, Helicon, ATMA Classique, Hänssler Classic, Dorian Recordings, and Bridge Records. A member of the internationally renowned baroque ensemble REBEL since 1997, Mr. Shin was a founding member of the Mannes Camerata, receiving critical acclaim as music director for their productions of early-Baroque operas. He has been guest director as well as a member of NYS Baroque in Ithaca, NY. In his spare time, he tunes and maintains harpsichords in the New York area (he is the harpsichord technician for the Metropolitan Opera), and is known as a recording engineer, producer, and editor of numerous early music recordings.

TRACKS FOR TWO CD SET

Tracks: CD 1

The Joyful Mysteries

I. The Annunciation (d minor)

01 Præludium. 2:27

02 Aria. Variatio. Finale. 3:38

II. The Visitation (A major; tuning: a e¹ a¹ e¹¹)

03 Sonata. 1:37

04 Allamanda. 2:24

05 Presto. 0:55

III. The Nativity (b minor; tuning: b f^{#1} b¹ d¹¹)

06 Sonata. 1:21

07 Courente. Double. 2:54

08 Adagio. 2:09

IV. The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (d minor; tuning: a d¹ a¹ d¹¹)

09 Ciacona. 7:45

V. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple (A major; tuning: a e¹ a¹ c^{#11})

10 Præludium. 1:09

11 Allamanda. 1:34

12 Guiguè. 1:22

13 Sarabanda. Double. 3:28

The Sorrowful Mysteries

VI. The Agony in the Garden (c minor; tuning: a-flat e-flat¹ g¹ d¹¹)

14 Lamento. 3:19

15 [Aria] 2:13

16 Adagio. 1:49

VII. The Scouring at the Pillar (F major; tuning: c¹ f¹ a¹ c¹¹)

17 Allamanda. Variatio. 3:38

18 Sarabanda. Variatio. 4:47

VIII. The Crowning with Thorns (B-flat major; tuning: d¹ f¹ b-flat¹ d¹¹)

19 Sonata. 2:22

20 Guiguè. Double. Double 2. 4:31

IX. The Carrying of the Cross (a minor; tuning: c¹ e¹ a¹ e¹¹)

21 Sonata. 2:12

22 Courente. Double. [Double 2] 3:26

23 Finale. 1:45

X. The Crucifixion (g minor; tuning: g d¹ a¹ d¹¹)

24 Præludium. 1:21

25 Aria. Variatio. 8:36

Tracks: CD 2

The Glorious Mysteries

XI. The Resurrection (G major; tuning: g¹ d¹ d¹¹)

01 Sonata. 2:31

02 Surexit Christus hodie. 3:42

03 Adagio. 1:21

XII. The Ascension (C major; tuning: c¹ e¹ g¹ c¹¹)

04 Intrada. 0:40

05 Aria Tubicinum. 1:38

06 Allamanda. 2:09

07 Courente. Double. 2:57

XIII. The Descent of the Holy Spirit (d minor; tuning: a e¹ c^{#11} e¹¹)

08 Sonata. 3:03

09 Gavott. 1:20

10 Guiguè. 1:47

11 Sarabanda. 1:31

XIV. The Assumption of Mary (D major; tuning: a e¹ a¹ d¹¹)

12 [Præludium] 2:23

13 Aria. Guiguè. 7:09

XV. The Coronation of Mary, Queen of Heaven (C Major; tuning: g c¹ g¹ d¹¹)

14 Sonata. 1:43

15 Aria. [Variatio] 6:03

16 Canzona. 1:53

17 Sarabanda. [Double] 2:45

The Guardian Angel (g minor)

18 Passaglia. 7:54

CREDITS:

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Recording Engineers: Michael P. Hesse, Dongsok Shin

Recording Producers: Charles Weaver, Grant Herreid

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*Left to Right: Daniel Swenberg, Leah Gale Nelson and Dongsok Shin
in front of St. Peter's Church-Chelsea, NYC*



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