

BMC 31 - Jan Dismas ZELEŃKA: Instrumental Music

The Dresden Court attracted many foreign musicians under Heinrich Schütz, who developed a chapel of international repute during his long term of office as Court *Capellmeister* from 1617 to 1672. In the early 1700s, composers, impresarios, famous singers, and instrumental virtuosos came from all over Europe, including the Eastern countries, and Dresden's display of splendor as the *Florence on the Elbe*, the predominant center of music and the arts in 17th- and 18th-century Germany, reached its zenith during the reign of Augustus the Strong (1670-1733) as Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.

Born in Loudovice, Bohemia in 1679 and son of an organist, Jan Dismas Zelenka was educated at the Prague Jesuit College, with which he continued to remain in contact. In 1710, he moved to Dresden, where he became principal double-bass player of the Dresden Court Orchestra. Apart from specific journeys to Italy, Vienna and periodic returns to Prague, Zelenka would remain in Dresden for the rest of his life.

In 1697, the King-Elector Augustus the Strong of Saxony had assumed the Polish Crown, a step that obliged him to adopt the Roman Catholic faith although Saxony was predominantly Lutheran. Thus the Royal Court at Dresden maintained two religious "faces", on the one hand honoring strictly Lutheran Bach with the title of *Royal Court Composer*, and on the other hand bestowing on Zelenka the title of *Court Composer of Church Music* for his numerous sacred works composed for the Dresden Catholic Church. So we find in Zelenka's surviving compositions numerous sacred works, some 30 Masses, Psalms, and three Oratorios with biblical subjects, totaling in all some 150 works, side by side with secular instrumental compositions reflecting his role in the Court Orchestra, of which he became Conductor for five seasons.

From 1716 to 1719 Zelenka traveled to Italy, where he may have encountered Antonio Lotti and Alessandro Scarlatti. He also spent time in Vienna where he studied counterpoint with Johann Josef Fux, most probably composing his Capriccios there. During these years, he gathered a sizable study collection of works written in strict contrapuntal style, which still survives in the Saxon State Library. In 1719 Zelenka returned to Dresden, taking up once more his position in the Court Orchestra and resuming his sacred compositions.

1723 was a particularly significant year for Zelenka. In this year the coronation took place in Prague of the Emperor Charles VI, for which occasion the Jesuits had commissioned Zelenka to compose suitably festive music. Monarchs and Princes from all the surrounding territories converged on Prague for the occasion, bringing their retinues and orchestras with them. Zelenka conducted his own composition, the solo parts being sung by Czech noblemen. It was a glittering occasion, perhaps the high point of Zelenka's career.

Thereafter his life in Dresden continued uneventfully, with further sacred compositions, some commissions from Bohemian noblemen, and no doubt though undocumented, occasional visits to Prague. It was during the 1730s that he received his royal title of Church Music Composer, and he was well paid at Court. Bach too, based in nearby Leipzig and a frequent visitor to Dresden, was also awarded a Court Title at this time. A well-known and greatly respected visitor to Dresden, Bach was undoubtedly on familiar terms with all the musicians and musical personalities of Dresden, including Zelenka. Bach would often take his son Wilhelm Friedemann with him on his visits to Dresden; Bach in fact instructed his son to copy one of Zelenka's works – the *Amen* from his *Magnificat* – for use in Leipzig at St Thomas's.

Zelenka's music is always fresh and creative. His instrumental works often surprise the listener with sudden turns of harmony, and performers are often challenged by demanding instrumentation. His choral works bear no relationship with those of Bach – indeed the two composers were writing for different religious traditions and idioms. Zelenka's Choral Works are difficult to place in time; in his eclectic mix of drama, counterpoint and depth of feeling one could almost be listening to a Schubert Mass. Here again as in his instrumental works, listeners should expect the unexpected!

Zelenka died in Dresden on December 23rd, 1745. Though some of his work has been lost over the years, and much was destroyed in Dresden during the last years of WWII, many copies were fortunately preserved in Prague. It was only during the last decades of the 1900s that Zelenka was truly "discovered", and unlike many "

undiscovered treasures of the Baroque" which might better have been left undiscovered, Zelenka's music undoubtedly rewards further exploration. In summary one might justifiably say of his compositional output, both instrumental and sacred, that it puts a fresh face on Baroque music.

In his instrumental works, both Orchestral and Chamber Trio Sonatas, Zelenka took the same approach as Bach in giving wider prominence to all players, including the bassline normally relegated to the role of "continuo" which as Thurston Dart once commented, should be felt rather than heard. In the Trio Sonatas, of which we offer here an example, the bassoon is given an active contrapuntal role along with the violin and oboe. The six Trio Sonatas were probably early works composed during or shortly after his journeys to Italy and Vienna.

The titles of his Orchestral Works which can be heard on this disc all bear the designation *concertanti* – as for example the *Ouverture a 7 Concertanti*, or overture for seven concerted instruments, or yet again, for seven soloists. These are not contests or even conversations between soloists and tutti as in the classic concerto; rather they are compositions in which all participants have an equal role. Both the *Ouverture* and the *Sinfonia* are in effect suites of movements. The *Sinfonia* to the *Ouverture* is itself a three-movement piece in the form *Grave – Allegro – Grave*.

The much shorter *Hypocondria* has in its very name provided speculation among musicians and historians; does it, as many have speculated, reflect the composer's mood of rejection in later years resulting from the appointment of the more operatically-inclined Johann Adolf Hasse to the job of *Capellmeister* which should properly have gone to Zelenka? Much is made of this issue, perhaps too much. In the case of the *Hypocondria* however, its composition dates from 1723, the year in which Zelenka's career reached a high point. A more plausible explanation lies in the fact that the works of Molière, including the *Malade Imaginaire* were regularly performed at the Dresden Court, Zelenka's *Hypocondria* being more likely a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment to the world of French comedy.

It is interesting to compare the works of Zelenka with those of his friend and contemporary, J.S. Bach. Their sacred music may be expected to differ; Zelenka wrote for the Catholic Church, Bach for the Lutheran, each with its own completely different musical themes and forms. In the instrumental sphere however, where similarity might be expected, Bach's Suites and Trio Sonatas are strictly Baroque, while Zelenka looks forward in time, and one might say, inward to his own sense of musical exploration and adventure.