

BMC 50 - Baroque Eclectica

Enrico Albicastro (c.1670-1738)

A well-to-do and talented violinist and composer, Heinrich Weissenburg von Biswang was born in Switzerland. Translating his family name into Italian (Weissenburg = White Fortress = Albiastro) he set out on a career in the Low Countries as one of the itinerant *oltremontani* who fed the busy Amsterdam presses of Roger and Witvogel in between a Concert schedule relatively as demanding as those known to virtuosi of our own time.

On leaving his ancestral home in the Simmental, Albicastro studied for a while at the University of Leyden, the registers showing both forms of his name as well as indicating his two major interests at that time - music and the military. He is known to have served as a cavalry officer in the Wars of the Spanish Succession; and although (like Albinoni) he styled himself a *dilettante* on the title pages of some of his works, there is no evidence that musical composition was a mere pastime.

Indeed the seriousness of his studies emerges with insistent clarity in his chamber music, which comprised books of Solo Sonatas and of Trio Sonatas, as well as in his solitary orchestral work, the Concertos of Op. 7.

As a performer, he must have possessed an unusually good technique, for the Sonatas for Violin and Continuo make abundant use of multiple-stopping, arpeggio passages, and complex bowings, while the Concertos contain numerous examples of exceptionally tricky and brilliant figurations for the first violins. As a contrapuntalist, his allegiance leans more toward the German than to the classical Italian school of Corelli and Torelli, and it is significant that Quantz greatly prized his music (together with that of Biber and Walther) in the early and formative part of his career.

Albicastro's harmony has been compared for its unusual richness and bold progressions to the Organ Fantasias of Bach, and it is possible that the keyboard played as important a part as the violin in the early shaping of these Concertos, which were published in the customary set of twelve by Roger of Amsterdam about the year 1703. They are not Concerti Grossi, but rather Orchestral Concertos in which dynamic and other contrasts are achieved by means of controlled tone and tempo instead of the deliberate inequality of concertino and tutti.

Their basic four-movement plan is characterized by a composite opening movement designed to introduce or alternate powerful and self-contained musical ideas. Thus the Concerto in B flat twice juxtaposes a series of solemn chords and a brief but dashing *Allegro* before finally moving on to a majestic *Grave* in triple time, full of striking harmonic colors and aggressive bass trills. The corresponding movement of the b-minor Concerto begins with a splendidly rhetorical rising phrase in the basses, but soon relaxes into a chromatic vein which is echoed (after a short *Allegro*) in the closing *Spiritoso* section.

William Boyce (1710-1779)

Although Boyce's most enduring monument was his historical collection of *Cathedral Music*, which began publication in 1760 and profoundly influenced 'choirs and places where they sing' for the next century and a half, he deserves to be remembered also for his excellent instrumental music. His published sets of Voluntaries and Trio Sonatas were great favorites of their time, and recent revivals of his Eight Symphonies (mostly overtures to sacred or secular works of various kinds) and Twelve Overtures (derived from Court odes) demonstrate his instinctive feeling for orchestral color in addition to nobility of contrapuntal thought.

The early stages of Boyce's career were not unlike those of Purcell, Greene, and Handel, where the slender rewards of an Organ appointment were helped out by fees from the Theatre and the Pleasure Gardens. Much of Boyce's Orchestral Music was performed at Drury Lane Theatre, as well as in the Pleasure-Garden settings of Vauxhall and Ranelagh. Whenever a complete band was lacking, a group of four musicians would play his Trio Sonatas, whose tuneful elegance endeared them to musicians of every class.

There is however one category of his Instrumental Music that has so far gone largely unnoticed - his Concerti Grossi for String Orchestra. These were never published in the composer's lifetime and in fact remained in manuscript until quite recently. The circumstances of their composition cannot be ascertained; but since it was not unusual in the Eighteenth century to perform a Concerto Grosso during the intermissions of an Oratorio or Cantata, these works may have come into being as Interludes for Boyce's *Solomon* or for his setting of *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan*. Vincent Novello, who owned the score of his b-minor Concerto, presented it to the British Museum in

August, 1849, with a note to the effect that his gift was made "as a tribute of respect to the memory of Dr Boyce, who in my estimation, for purity of melody, solidity of harmony, and skillful refinement in the construction of his sterling counterpoint, was one of the very best composers of the genuine English school."

Robert Woodcock (1690-1728), English musician and recorder player, was a clerk in the Admiralty with a keen interest in ships, of which he produced some fine paintings, for Woodcock was by the age of 30 quite accomplished as a painter in oils of naval scenes. He admired the Dutch naval painter Van de Velde and made a number of copies of his works, and later met him in England when Willem van de Velde, father and son, came to England in 1672-73. The Concerto presented here was the last of the 8 Concertos for Wind & Strings in eight parts published by Walsh & Hare in 1727, which were subsequently made popular by players such as John Baston, being played during intervals in the London Theatres.

Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745)

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.

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.

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)

Born in Magdeburg in 1681, Telemann belonged to a family that had long been connected with the Lutheran Church, his father being a clergyman, and his mother the daughter of a clergyman. As a child he showed considerable musical talent, mastering the violin, flute, zither and keyboard by the age of ten and composing an opera (*Sigismundus*) two years later to the consternation of his family (particularly his mother's side), who disapproved of music. After preparatory studies at the Hildesheim Gymnasium, he matriculated in Law (at his mother's insistence) at Leipzig University in 1701. It was while he was a student at Leipzig University that a career in music became inevitable. At first it was intended that he should study language and science, but he was already so capable a musician that within a year of his arrival he founded the student *Collegium Musicum* with which he gave public concerts (and which Bach was later to direct), wrote operatic works for the Leipzig Theater; in 1703 he became musical director of the Leipzig Opera, and was appointed Organist at the Neue Kirche in 1704. Telemann did not stay long in Leipzig. In 1706 he accepted an appointment at Eisenach as Court Konzertmeister in charge of singers, with Pantaleon Hebenstreit as Leader of the Orchestra. His appointment there just overlapped with the presence of Bach, who left in 1708 to take up posts at the Weimar Court.

In 1721, the coveted position of Cantor of the Hamburg Johanneum, a post that traditionally carried with it teaching responsibilities and the directorship of Hamburg's five principal churches, became vacant, and Telemann was invited to succeed Joachim Gerstenbüttel. Here, at last, was a prestigious post that would provide him with seemingly unlimited opportunities to compose and perform. After accepting the Post as Cantor he was stretched as never before: he was required to compose two Cantatas a week, a new Passion annually, as well as providing occasional works for church and civil ceremonies. Indeed such was his vitality and creative impetus that, in spite of heavy responsibilities, he apparently eagerly sought and fulfilled additional commissions from home and abroad.

Telemann remained in Hamburg until his death in 1767, being succeeded in that position by his godson, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, son of **Johann Sebastian Bach**, whose **Fantasy & Fugue in a minor, BWV 904** for Harpsichord, here orchestrated, concludes our disc.