

Tafelmusik

Glorious Bach & Zelenka

PROGRAMME NOTES

Jan Dismas Zelenka was born in 1679 in the Bohemian village of Launowitz, the son of the local choirmaster and organist. He probably received his musical education at one of the Jesuit colleges in Prague, eventually obtaining a post in Prague with the Imperial governor Baron von Hartig. In 1710 he entered the employ of the King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, Friedrich August, in Dresden.

In 1708, much to the alarm of his Protestant subjects, the Catholic elector sought to impress the papal Curia by transforming the former opera house in Dresden into a Catholic church (the *Katholische Hofkirche*). At first the church led a very discreet existence, with a small number of choristers and instrumentalists imported from Bohemia, including Zelenka. From 1715–1717, the prince travelled to Venice and brought back with him both a company of Italian singers and a new Italian-trained, “modern” *Kapellmeister*, Johann David Heinichen. The *Hofkirche* flourished, the Dresden public enamoured with the sound of Italian vocal virtuosity and brilliant concertante instrumental writing.

Heinichen’s variable health did not allow him to carry out his duties singlehandedly. He came to depend more and more on Zelenka for assistance. Recruited originally as a rank-and-file double-bass player, Zelenka had high ambitions as a composer. While the Prince was in Venice, Zelenka undertook a period of intensive study under Fux in Vienna. He was thus able to combine in his works the elaborate counterpoint of the Germans and the Italian influences of the music at Dresden. Add to this his own original and sometimes eccentric use of harmony, and the result is music that is always interesting and often powerful. Upon Heinichen’s death in 1729, Zelenka may well have expected to take over his post, as he had done the job in all but name for several years. However, he was given the title of mere *Kirchen-Compositeur* (Church Composer), the post of *Kapellmeister* being awarded to an outsider, the popular opera composer Johann Adolf Hasse.

Zelenka’s own health presented challenges in the 1730s, leading to a cessation of activities in 1737. Upon recovery two years later he composed the longest of his 20 settings of the Mass text and called it *Missa Votiva*. On the first page Zelenka cited Psalm 116: *Vota mea Domino reddam* (I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people), and on the last page wrote *Missam hanc A:M:D:G: ex voto posuit J:D:Z: post recuperatam Deo Fautore salutem* (J.D.Z. composed this Mass *ad majorem Dei gloriam* to the greater glory of God in fulfillment of a vow, after having recovered his health through God’s favour). It is the final entry in the catalogue of sacred works assembled by Zelenka for the Dresden *Hofkapella* (*Inventarium rerum Musicarum Variorum Authorum Ecclesiae servientium*) between 1726 and 1739, and probably the last piece written specifically for liturgical performance. From 1740 he set about writing a series of summative works for posterity, much as Bach did, including a set of *Missae ultimae*, works which in all likelihood were never performed. Although the Dresden performing parts for the *Missa Votiva* were destroyed in the bombing raid of 1945, a full set of parts has surfaced in a church in Prague. The latter date from the mid-18th century, and attest to at least one additional performance during Zelenka’s lifetime.

The *Missa Votiva* is a so-called “number mass,” *i.e.* each section of the ordinary of the mass is subdivided into movements, including choruses, ensembles and solo arias. Like many of his German colleagues, Zelenka used *stile misto* (mixed style), combining the old and the new, the idiosyncratic with the conventional, the mannered with the well-ordered, the operatic with the sacred, and the galant with the Gregorian. It is a celebratory work, a musical representation of Zelenka’s literal “*joie de vivre*” – exuberant, virtuosic and life-affirming.

Between the *Gloria* and *Credo* of the *Missa Votiva* we have inserted an equally affirming work: **Johann Sebastian Bach’s** motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*. It is unusually composed in the form of an Italian concerto, with three movements alternating fast–slow–fast. It was undoubtedly an occasional work, but for what occasion remains unknown – though the Italianate structure has led some to conjecture that it was written for birthday celebrations of Zelenka’s employer, Friedrich August, in Dresden. Bach visited Dresden several times, and famously submitted portions of what was to become the great Mass in B Minor to the Elector in 1733, earning Bach the honorary title of *Kapellmeister von Haus aus* (external *Kapellmeister*). During these visits Bach came to know Zelenka and praised his works. The motet *Singet dem Herrn* is written in the exuberant style favoured by Zelenka, which may strengthen the conjecture as to the work’s Dresden connection. The motet is written for two four-part choirs. There is evidence that German motets were performed in various guises: *a capella*, with continuo, or with instruments accompanying the voices. With an orchestra at hand, we have opted for the latter for this week’s performances. The texts of the outer movements are drawn from Psalms 149 and 150 respectively, and celebrate the use of music to praise God. The second movement is a dialogue in which the first choir sings an “aria” between phrases of a chorale sung by the second choir. The chorale text is drawn from the third verse of Johann Gramann’s hymn *Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren* (Now praise the Lord, my soul); the author of the text of the interwoven aria is not known. After Bach’s death, his motets remained in the repertoire at St. Thomas’s School in Leipzig. When Mozart visited Leipzig in 1789 he heard the choir perform *Singet dem Herrn* and was greatly impressed. After a few measures he is said to have cried out: “What is this?” and upon completion to have added: “Now there is something one can learn from.”