

Tafelmusik

Baroque Orchestra
Jeanne Lamon, Music Director

Baroque Splendour: The Golden Age of Dresden

Programme Notes

By Christopher Verrette

The Staatskapelle Dresden is the rare modern symphony orchestra that can claim a 463-year history and cite both Heinrich Schütz and Richard Wagner as former conductors. The orchestra that once entertained the Saxon Electors still actually exists, though necessarily changed by four centuries of political, religious, economic and artistic events. Paradoxically perhaps, someone wanting to hear today what the highest standard of performance may have sounded like when the two-keyed oboe represented cutting-edge technology and a Vivaldi concerto was avant-garde music needs to turn to much “younger” orchestras like Tafelmusik, whose musicians inevitably look to the Dresden Court Orchestra of the early 18th century for inspiration and information on playing such instruments and repertoire.

Friedrich Augustus became Elector of Saxony unexpectedly in 1694, when his older brother, Johann IV, died without legitimate offspring to succeed him. A man famous for his feats of physical strength, earning him the nickname “the Strong,” he was nonetheless fond of the pleasures brought by great art and music; he had toured Europe extensively and had developed a particular love for French theatre. (He was also fond of more carnal pleasures and was said to have had over 300 illegitimate children.) The monument to absolutism that Louis XIV had created around himself at Versailles must also have made a lasting impression, and Augustus proceeded to make his capital city of Dresden into a similarly magnificent celebration of his own power.

In his efforts to expand his power beyond Saxony, in 1697 Augustus made the surprise move of becoming a Roman Catholic in order to be eligible for the throne of Poland. Further contrary to expectation, he chose not to impose his new religious preference on others, and the state of Saxony remained Lutheran, as did the Electress and the Crown Prince. The interior of the Hoftheater was eventually converted into a church as a gesture to Rome that the Elector was serious about being a Catholic, but was not visibly a church to the Lutheran populace. On the other hand, the large collection of art masterpieces the Elector was amassing was displayed in galleries where it could be admired by everyone, and the court music could often be heard by anyone who was at least suitably dressed.

What this all meant for musicians was plenty of work for those who could provide French style dance and theatre music in the tradition of Lully and for those who could create Catholic liturgical music where there had been none before. A number of important appointments were made around the second decade of the 18th century. Jean-Baptiste Volumier was engaged in 1709, initially as ballet master, but soon after as concertmaster of the court orchestra. He had thorough first-hand knowledge of the French style, having been raised at Versailles, immersed in the culture of Lully and Les 24 Violons du Roi. He led the orchestra for nearly 20 years, bringing to the Dresden string section the disciplined, carefully coordinated bowing that had been cultivated at the French court to serve the needs of its extravagant ballets. New French-style wind instruments such as oboes, transverse flutes and bassoons were added during this time, supplanting the time-honoured cornets and trombones. A policy change was made around this time that no doubt contributed to a

higher playing standard: musicians were now expected to specialize on a single instrument and only rarely asked to “double” on instruments not needed most of the time. J. S. Bach would later mention this in a memorandum to his employers as one of the many advantages the Dresden players enjoyed that he wished he could institute in Leipzig.

For the creation of the Catholic church music, there were some musicians at court who were up to this challenge, especially those with Italianate training, but others were recruited for the purpose, including several from Bohemia. One of these was **Jan Dismas Zelenka**. His position was as violone player in the Hofkapelle, but within a year he was already contributing compositions to the Catholic worship as well. Wishing to improve his skills as a composer, he was allowed to go to Vienna in 1717 to study with the legendary Johann Joseph Fux, whose *Gradus ad Parnassus* is still in use today as a counterpoint text. Zelenka assisted *Kapellmeister* Johann David Heinichen with the Dresden church music for years, but was not chosen to succeed him in that position upon his death in 1729. Under Friedrich Augustus II, however, he was later given the new position of Church Composer, as was J. S. Bach.

Johann Georg Pisendel joined the Dresden orchestra in 1712 as a violinist. While a chorister in Ansbach, he had been fortunate enough to study with the Italian violinist, Giuseppe Torelli, an important contributor to the development of the solo violin concerto. He studied further in Leipzig, where he made a sensation performing a Torelli concerto at the Collegium Musicum. He would be an advocate for Italian music in Dresden, eventually succeeding Volumier as concertmaster, and would be Zelenka’s life-long friend.

Pisendel and Zelenka were among the musicians sometimes asked to accompany the Elector or the Crown Prince on their travels, and leaves were sometimes granted for study abroad. This would have the mutual effect of further polishing the skills of the musicians and bringing them into contact with other styles, while transmitting to the rest of Europe the high quality of the Dresden music, thus glorifying the Elector.

Zelenka was one of many musicians invited to Prague to perform at the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI as King of Bohemia in 1723. The centrepiece of the entertainments, an opera composed by Fux and conducted by his colleague from Vienna, Antonio Caldara, was performed at a special open-air theatre by a large ensemble of the best musicians in Europe. Zelenka had retained a close association with the Jesuit fathers in Prague, who may have been responsible for his early education, and was asked to compose and direct their main contribution to the festivities, a dramatization of the life of Wenceslas, patron saint of Prague. Four instrumental works by Zelenka survive from this period. Although the exact circumstances of their composition and performance (if any) are unknown, in a city inundated with great musicians and luminaries there must have been ample opportunity for private performances and much demand for new pieces. Zelenka’s indication on one of the scores “written in a hurry” might give us some idea of the general atmosphere.

One of these works bears the unusual title “*Hipochondrie*.” To a person of Zelenka’s time, hypochondria would probably have been virtually synonymous with the condition known as melancholy, then considered to be an imbalance of the “four bodily humours” that governed health in the theory of classical medicine. The one-movement work is set in the ostensibly cheery key of A major, but is laced with elements that subvert it: for example, the opening phrase in the major mode is immediately answered by one in the minor, then a descending minor scale is followed by an ascending major one. There is further play on major and minor in the fast middle section, where slurred “weeping” figures and insistent repeated notes are at odds with the general high spirits. A total emotional crash unmistakably arrives at the final slow section in the form of wrenching harmonies and a chromatically descending bass line.

Pisendel was one of a small entourage of Dresden musicians to be invited to accompany the Crown Prince to Venice. On this trip, he befriended and studied with **Antonio Vivaldi**, who held him in high enough esteem

to dedicate sonatas and concertos to him. Through Pisendel, an avid collector of music, Vivaldi's music would become an important part of the repertoire of the Dresden orchestra, and Vivaldi would even write music with that orchestra specifically in mind, although he only knew it by reputation and through those members that he met when they travelled to Venice.

Among the Vivaldi manuscripts preserved at Dresden are three violin concertos that were also published in 1725 as part of his Opus 8, *Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione*. This collection is best known for the first four concertos, the "Four Seasons." The concertos numbered 9 and 12 also exist as concertos for the oboe. Vivaldi sometimes reworked violin or bassoon concertos for the oboe. The **C-Major Concerto** requires little or no adjustment to the solo part, having no double stops or passages outside of the range of the oboe. The outer movements display Vivaldi's characteristic energy, with bold leaps and unisons interspersed with more lyrical material. The intimate, C-Minor middle movement is scored like a sonata, with just the solo instrument and continuo.

The combination of Volumier's Francophile expertise, Pisendel's Italianate training and connections, and a highly skilled ensemble at their disposal made Dresden the ideal place for the cultivation of one of the most important trends in 18th-century musical composition, and one that was of special interest to German composers: "*les goûts réunis*" or the "mixed" style. Although heated debates over the relative merits of French vs. Italian music continued in print throughout the 18th century, composers by and large took interest in each others' work, and sought to meld the best elements of the national styles. Johann Joseph Quantz, a longtime member of the Dresden orchestra and flute tutor to Frederick the Great of Prussia, remembered Pisendel as embodying the perfect mixture in his playing. Early in his career, **Georg Phillip Telemann** recognized the Overture-Suite as a valuable idiom to master. The so-called French overture with which these works always begin provides within its structure an opportunity to mix styles: the slow opening section is clearly French, with its processional gait and plethora of dotted rhythms, but the faster middle section allows for the incorporation of elements of the Italian concerto. The numerous dances and character pieces that follow can be in any number of styles, from the most courtly of dances, to the rustic, humorous, or flashy.

Johann Friederich Fasch was among the many composers of this era to cut his teeth as a performer in the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig while a student at the St. Thomasschule. By his own admission, he modeled his own Overture-Suites on those of his colleague Telemann. He travelled around Germany for some time, hoping to get to Italy but never arriving there. In 1722 he obtained a post at the court of Zerbst, birthplace of the future Catherine the Great of Russia, for whom Fasch would write a serenata. Zerbst had a surprisingly large musical establishment for a court of its size, and Fasch proved to be a highly productive composer, remaining there for the rest of his career. His employer funded a sabbatical to Dresden from 1726 to 27, and music was shared between the musicians of both courts. Fasch made extensive use of wind instruments in his orchestral music. The **Ouverture in G Minor** is scored with three oboes, allowing for three-part writing similar to the combination of two violins and viola in the strings. The bassoon is given a lot of solo material, rather than functioning solely as the bass instrument for the oboes. This suite contains one of several movements Fasch titled "*Jardiniers*" (Gardeners). It is a bit of a mystery exactly what this meant to him, but seems to be related to the comic way these characters were portrayed in the theatre.

Pisendel became concertmaster upon the death of Volumier in 1728. By this time, the prevailing taste in Dresden was leaning strongly in the direction of Italian music, particularly opera. In 1719, the Crown Prince had been married to Maria Josepha of Austria, the niece of the Emperor Charles VI in Vienna. He had by now converted to Catholicism, which facilitated this union and of course qualified him to succeed his father as King of Poland. The celebrations in Dresden following the wedding were of great splendour and international interest (as fans of Tafelmusik's *Galileo Project* will remember.) A new opera house was built for the occasion, and Augustus the younger had been recruiting opera singers on his forays to Italy. One of the

reasons Handel came to Dresden that year was to look for Italian singers for his own company in London, further testimony to the reputation of what had been assembled in Dresden. Telemann was also there, bearing a new concerto dedicated to Pisendel.

Pisendel's own compositions are almost entirely in the form of violin sonatas and concertos. He also wrote one unaccompanied sonata, part of which was published by Telemann, and he may have played those of Bach: there are references to him playing fugues in four voices in church, but his own sonata has no fugue. He made frequent use of wind instruments in his violin concertos, sometimes even adding them to Vivaldi concertos that he played. The **Concerto in D Major** features a trio of two oboes and bassoon. This concerto has been pointed to as a worthy precursor of Mozart's, both for its general quality and for one particular compositional detail: in the first movement, the violin makes its solo entrance in a slow, cantabile section that briefly interrupts the prevailing *Vivace* tempo. This is similar to what Mozart does in his A-Major Concerto. Pisendel was admired both for his highly expressive playing of adagios and for his mastery of difficult passagework in the high register of the instrument, both of which are displayed in this concerto.

Telemann was never a resident musician in Dresden, but his music always had a strong presence there. He spent most of his career in the northern city of Hamburg as director of music for its five principal churches, but had connections with courts all over Germany. Handel's quip that "he could write a church piece in eight parts with the same expedition another would write a letter" could not be too far from the truth: he was among the most prolific of composers ever and was involved in nearly every aspect of the music profession, as well as enjoying horticulture, finding time to write poetry and, yes, lots of letters. The **Bb-Major Overture** demonstrates a wide range of styles: after the mandatory French overture, the courtly minuet and bourée are mixed with the less refined hornpipe and non-dance movements, including a *Plainte*, featuring an oboe solo with an uncharacteristically active accompaniment, and *Combattants*, throughout which vigorous, Vivaldi-style furor in the strings is contrasted with more restrained French poise in the oboes.

When Zelenka died just before Christmas, 1745, Frederick the Great's armies were occupying the city; the Prussian king also managed to attend the opera while he was there. A few years earlier he had made Quantz an offer he could not refuse and brought him permanently to the Berlin court to attend his flute-playing needs. Pisendel later enlisted the help of Telemann to try to publish some choice examples of Zelenka's work, which would otherwise be locked up in the court vaults. In 1755, Fasch brought his son, also a composer, to Dresden to visit Pisendel, who died later that year. Telemann (who would outlive them all) eulogized him in a poem as he had J. S. Bach five years before. The music collections of Zelenka and Pisendel were acquired by Electress Maria Josepha after their deaths and became part of the Saxon State Library. Some of this music was lost in the bombing of Dresden in 1945, but fortunately much survived, and today is widely available to anyone with an internet connection.