

Tafelmusik – March 2009

In Praise of St. Cecilia

PROGRAMME NOTES

A saint of the early Christian church, Cecilia has been honoured as the patron saint of music since the 15th century, inspired by the legend that she sang to God as she suffered her martyrdom. Italian renaissance painters depicted her as a musician, most often seated at the organ. The first known music festival celebrating her feast day (November 22) took place in Normandy in 1570, and included performances as well as a composition competition (the 1575 competition was won by Lassus).

In Catholic countries it became common to offer a musical setting of the Mass in St. Cecilia's honour on her feast day: annual celebrations took place in Vienna, Paris and Rome throughout much of the 18th and 19th centuries. Jan Dismas Zelenka composed his *St. Cecilia Mass* in 1712, two years after arriving at the Dresden court from his native Bohemia as double bass player. It was Zelenka's first Mass setting, and was written to accompany a petition to the Saxon Elector Friedrich August I for leave to study the composition of sacred music with the leading exponents of the art in Italy and France. In fact, Zelenka does not appear to have left Dresden until 1716, but at that point undertook an extended period of study with Fux in Vienna. Returning to Dresden in 1719, much of his time was spent in the composition and compilation of church music. The Crown Prince and his Austrian consort Maria Josepha encouraged a particular focus on Catholic liturgical music at the court.

As to Zelenka's *St. Cecilia Mass*, Zelenka attributed his first salary raise to the premiere of the work. A later copy of the manuscript attests to a repeat performance, possibly after his return from Vienna. This early work offers a taste of what Zelenka was to explore in his more familiar later works. The *St. Cecilia Mass* is on a smaller scale, but already hints at Zelenka's predilection for unusual twists of harmony and a keen interest in counterpoint. As is appropriate for a Mass honouring the patron saint of music, Zelenka gives solo roles to various instruments in the orchestra: the bass soloist is accompanied by solo oboe, viola and cello; the alto by solo violin; and the tenor by solo viola and bassoon. The inclusion of viola among the solo instruments is particularly unusual. Also unusual is the juxtaposition within the choruses of passages for solo vocal quartet and full choir, as was to become common in classical Viennese Masses. Among the four vocal soloists, Zelenka undoubtedly had a particular bass singer

in mind from among the many fine singers employed at Dresden: the bass soloist is given two very demanding arias, full of difficult passage work and encompassing a range of over two octaves. That Zelenka's works are not as well known as many of his baroque contemporaries is due in part to the fact that the Saxon Electors forbade the copying and circulation of Zelenka's sacred works, with the intent to give their church music an air of secrecy. As a result, many of his works were lost. We are grateful to the Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Dresden for providing copies of the autograph manuscripts of the *St. Cecilia Mass* (Mus. 2358-D-7a/8).

The tradition of celebrating the feast day of the patron saint of music in London was established in 1683, when the first of several annual performances took place at Stationers' Hall, organized by the "Gentlemen Lovers of Musick" and the "Professors and Masters" of the art. They met, according to the editor of *The Gentleman's Journal*, Pierre Motteux, "not through a principle of Superstition, but to propagate the advancement of that divine Science. A splendid entertainment is provided, and before it is always a performance of Music by the best voices and hands in Town ... This Feast is one of the genteelist in the world." The music normally included an ode addressed to St. Cecilia and taking as its theme the power of music to move the human soul. As Motteux suggests, the organizers of the festivities were able to secure the services of the leading composers and poets of the day. Purcell contributed odes in 1683 and 1692. John Dryden was asked to provide the text for the festivities of 1687, and the resulting *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day* was first set to music by G.B. Draghi, an Italian composer resident in London. Dryden wrote a second ode for the 1703 celebrations, this time set to music by Jeremiah Clarke and entitled *Alexander's Feast; or The Power of Musique*. Some 30 years later Newburgh Hamilton, an enthusiast of Handel's music and sometime poet, drew Handel's attention to the Dryden odes. Handel responded with settings of both texts, completing *Alexander's Feast* in 1736 and *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* in 1739. Both enjoyed considerable popularity and several revivals.

The texts of Cecilian odes present a special challenge to the composer: to depict in music an ideal of music itself. The Dryden text begins with the creation of the universe out of chaos through the harmony of the spheres and ends at the final hour, when the last trumpet sounds and music "untunes the sky." Like Zelenka, Handel features numerous instruments in solo roles, inspired by images in the text. A solo cello is Jubal's "corded shell," raising and quelling the passions. Trumpets and drums excite us to arms. The "soft complaining flute" and "warbling lute" express the "woes of hopeless lovers," while "sharp violins" express jealousy and indignation. But nothing can reach the sacred organ's praise: Orpheus can "lead the savage race" and unroot trees with the power of

his lyre, but St. Cecilia is able to convince an angel that her organ is the voice of heaven itself. In true 18th-century fashion, each solo instrumentalist is given the opportunity to improvise cadenzas, demonstrating his or her artistry at a festival celebrating music and musicians.

The London St. Cecilia celebrations were occasional until 1905, from which point annual concerts in aid of the Musicians Benevolent Fund have continued to this day. We have taken the liberty to honour St. Cecilia this week, rather than on her November 22 feast day, presuming that music is worth celebrating any day of the year.