

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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www.bachcantatachoir.org

Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679–1745)

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

Jan Dismas Zelenka was born in Louňovice pod Blaníkem in Bohemia, which is now in the Czech Republic but was then in the waning Holy Roman Empire. His father was a cantor and organist, so Zelenka must have received musical education from a young age. He studied formally at an academy known as the Clementinum in Prague. By the time he was a young man he had a reputation as a virtuoso string bass player; whether this instrument was the violone or the contrabass (or both) is uncertain.

In 1696 the Elector of nearby Saxony converted to Catholicism. Dresden was by and large Lutheran so there was no local tradition of Catholic church music to draw on. Musicians were imported from neighboring Catholic lands, and in 1710 or 1711 Zelenka was hired to play bass. There is speculation that he was glad to flee his native land for personal reasons, though it is not clear what these were. He was accepted to the Dresden Hofkapelle, the court orchestra, on the recommendation of his former employer Count Hartig.

In 1712 he requested from Elector Friedrich Augustus a year's leave to go to France and Italy to study 'the good taste of the former and the solid liturgical style of the latter.' Anecdotal evidence suggests that he studied with Antonio Lotti in Venice around 1715 so it is possible he got his wish. In later

travels to Vienna as part of the Elector's retinue he studied with the great pedagogue Johann Joseph Fux, who expressed high praise for this pupil. He was an avid musical librarian, obtaining at his own expense compositions by Palestrina, Frescobaldi, Caldara and Fux in order to build up the liturgical repertoire in Dresden.

One of his duties in Dresden was assisting the ailing Kapellmeister Johann David Heinichen. After doing this for several years he applied for the post upon Heinichen's death in 1733 but was passed over for a more fashionable opera composer, Johann Adolph Hasse. Though his disappointment was great after failing to secure a post which he considered to be rightly his, he redoubled his efforts and was granted the title of 'Compositeur of the Royal Court Capelle.'

According to C.P.E. Bach, Zelenka was once a guest at Sebastian's home, and the Leipzig master thought very highly of Zelenka's work, instructing

his son Wilhelm Friedemann to copy some of Zelenka's music for use at the ThomasKirche.

By his later years Zelenka had professional and personal relationships with a veritable who's who of the high Baroque; in addition to knowing Bach and Fux he taught Quantz and knew Caldara and Telemann. At one concert in Prague in 1717, Zelenka performed in an orchestra conducted by Caldara that included Quantz on oboe, Sylvius Weiss on lute and Tartini on violin! Zelenka died of dropsy in 1745, by all accounts a rather difficult, disappointed, and by his employers at least, a relatively un-respected man.¹



Zelenka on bass

Style and Re-discovery

After his death, Zelenka's friend Georg Pisendel, who had been the director of the Dresden Hofkapelle at the time of Zelenka's death, conspired with another admirer in Telemann to publish some of Zelenka's *Responsorias*. In contrast to its attitude toward the living composer, after his death the Dresden court jealously guarded all his musical output and so the attempt was not successful.

Stylistically his compositions were very wide-ranging. Zelenka's sacred music tended to look back toward an earlier age, while often his instrumental compositions were more experimental and betrayed sentiments of the emerging *galante*.² In terms of theory he was an innovator, unafraid to employ striking, non-standard harmonies. His instrumental works are virtuosic and feature notoriously interesting and difficult bass lines, due no doubt to his own great skill on the instrument.

Like many great baroque composers his works were forgotten for a time, until in this case Smetana modernized some of Zelenka's scores and performed one of his orchestral suites at a festival in Prague in 1863.

In recent decades Zelenka's music has benefited from the passion for historically informed Baroque performance practices and the concomitant interest in previously lesser-known composers of the era. His works are now widely known outside his Czech homeland where they have long been treasured. ♪

¹ Biographical information adapted from Wikipedia and David Charlton's biography at Classical Net.

² The BCC will perform his *Litaniae de Venerabile Sacramento* at the May 22, 2011 concert; choir members have noted that at times this work has the spiritual essence of Gesualdo, and at other times feels as though it pre-figures Mozart's great Requiem Mass.



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
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Final Concert of the 2010-2011 Season

Sunday, May 22, 2011 at 2:00pm
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church
NE 45th Ave & NE Sandy Blvd

Zelenka: *Litaniae de Venerabile
Sacramento*

J.S. Bach: Cantata #42 & Motet #4

Many Thanks!



The Bach Cantata Choir would like to thank you for another year of supporting our efforts to bring you memorable performances of the great choral masterworks of the Baroque and Renaissance eras.

Without your generous donations and enthusiastic attendance our mission would not be possible. The 2010-2011 season ends May 22nd, a not-to-be-missed concert that will feature Bach's Motet #4 *Fürchte dich nicht* (for double choir) as well as the rarely-heard *Litaniae de Venerabile Sacramento* by Zelenka, and much more.

If you haven't already done so, please like us on Facebook and invite your music loving friends and family to our concert Sunday with a simple click of the mouse button! Thanks again for all your support.