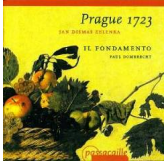


Zelenka - Prague 1723 (2000)

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Overture à 7 concertanti in F major, ZWV 188 1. *(Grave) - Allegro – (Grave)* 2. *Aria* 3. *Menuetto I & II* 4. *(Siciliano)* 5. *Folia*
Hipocondrie à 7 concertanti in A major, ZWV 187
6. *(Lentement) – Allegro – Lentement*
Concerto a 8 in G major, ZWV 186
7. *(Allegro)* 8. *Largo cantabile* 9. *Allegro*
Sinfonia in A major, ZWV 189
10. *Allegro* 11. *Andante* 12. *Capriccio*
Tempo di gavotte
13. *Aria da capriccio*
Andante – Allegro - Andante – Allegro
14. *(Menuetto I & II)*
Il Fondamento (Ensemble) Paul Dombrecht - conductor

Despite being elevated by some to near-cult status, Jan Dismas Zelenka remains an enigmatic figure. Little more than the bare outlines are known of a career marked by the ultimate disappointment of being passed over for the post of Kapellmeister in Dresden in favor of Johann Hasse, 20 years his junior. Of his personality we know next to nothing, leaving us puzzled by a man whose music can be variously termed idiosyncratic, highly individual, or just plain eccentric according to taste. Was Zelenka therefore a great original genius of the High Baroque, plowing his own lonely furrow, or simply a composer of bizarre curiosities? Paul Dombrecht has recently been involved with a selection of both the sacred and secular works of Zelenka, so he seemed a good man to approach for an opinion. "He is certainly a very individual composer," Dombrecht told me, "and difficult to categorize or place within any particular school. In Dresden he worked alongside people like Heinichen, Pisendel, and later Hasse, and he has a much more personal style than any of them. It could be that for this reason he was not really successful." "Yes, I've often wondered to what extent his unusual style played a part in the decision to appoint Hasse Kapellmeister in Dresden after the death of Heinichen. After all, he had been for some years." "It could be that, or it might have been his personality. We just don't know."

No better example of the originality of Zelenka's style could be found than the Miserere in C Minor recorded by Dombrecht, a work that, as he points out, consists of an amalgam of several styles. "In the Miserere Zelenka is mixing styles in quite strange and sudden ways. You have this very dramatic opening, then a fugal section in which he gets through a long section of text very quickly, often overlapping it. The next section [the first part of the Gloria, a florid soprano solo] is again in a completely different style. It could be taken from an opera." Indeed it could, the style that springs to mind being that of Hasse, the man who blocked Zelenka's progress in Dresden. That fugal section strikes me, like some of Zelenka's other contrapuntal sections, to be the kind of passage that arouses doubts about Zelenka, writing in which the odd melodic angularity seems awkward. I asked Dombrecht if he agreed. "Yes, that's one of the reasons why he is not always appreciated. It's the same with the trio sonatas—they look very complex, and there are those who say the music is not well constructed." Yet there are, of course, others to whom the composer's compelling originality overrides such doubts, and it is always worth recalling that C. P. E. Bach claimed that his father held Zelenka's music in high esteem. For evidence that the Bohemian was a highly accomplished contrapuntist, one need turn no further than the "Tu suscipe" section of the C-Minor Requiem, an a cappella setting in the *stile antico*. As Dombrecht pointed out, such accomplishment doubtless dates from the period Zelenka spent in Vienna as a pupil of the great contrapuntist J. J. Fux, this, remarkably, when the former was already in his mid-thirties. "For me," Dombrecht concluded, "it is the obvious sincerity of the manner in which Zelenka uses such devices that makes him so interesting."

The seven works recorded by Dombrecht provide a representative cross-section of Zelenka's sacred and orchestral works spanning a period from 1723 to 1738. The earliest are the four orchestral works, all of which are dated 1723, the year in which Zelenka traveled to Prague with a group of Dresden musicians for the coronation of Charles VI. In addition to ceremonial vocal works by Zelenka himself and Fux, it is known that the former composed six orchestral works that no doubt played their part in the festivities. The four chosen by Dombrecht graphically illustrate not only Zelenka's originality but the diversity of style to be found throughout the composer's works. The Overture in F is cast in suite form, with an opening French overture full of grandeur, the mixture of dotted chordal writing interposed with a melodic motif that characteristically refuses to go in quite the expected direction. The Aria that follows is equally notable, its graceful surface disconcertingly disrupted by minor inflections and surprising harmonic progressions. Here, as in some of the other dance movements, there are moments that suggest the composer has taken a distorting mirror to a world of the courtly and elegant.

The G-Major Concerto inhabits another world, that of the concerto con molti stromenti, imported from Venice via Vivaldi, and enthusiastically adopted by Zelenka's Dresden colleagues, Heinichen and Pisendel. Yet if the strong opening unison reminds us of the Venetian master, the folklike melody that follows is archetypal Zelenka, as is the plaintive oboe and bassoon dialog that forms the heart of the succeeding *Largo cantabile*. The oddly named *Hipocondrie* is

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a single-movement work, a broad, melodic *Lentement* framing a central *Allegro* much concerned with antiphonal imitative effects and contrasts of instrumental color. The considerably truncated return of the slow opening brings yet another Zelenka surprise, the unexpected turn to the minor, with stabbing bass chords bringing the work to a somber close. In some ways the *Simphonie* is the most conventional work here, but there is nothing ordinary about the burst of exuberant abandon with which the composer launches into the opening *Allegro*. In this, arguably the most appealing of these orchestral works, the succeeding movements introduce much felicitous concertante writing, often for pairs of instruments. Especially memorable is the *Andante*'s conversation between violin and oboe conducted over a bubbling bassoon figuration. *Il Fondamento*'s performances of all these works are impeccable, the many solo concertino passage played with stylish confidence and unflinching technical expertise, while Dombrecht captures the spirit of Zelenka impressively, allowing full rein to the phrasing of his often oddly shaped melodies, and directing the more boisterous movements with energetic verve.

The disc of sacred music is equally outstanding, the instrumental forces of *Il Fondamento* here complemented by a small (16 voices) but accomplished, eagerly responsive chorus, and a fine lineup of soloists among whom the vastly experienced and ever-dependable Peter Kooij particularly stands out. The earliest of these works is the *De profundis*, composed as a commemorative work around 1724. The work reflects not only the solemnity of the occasion but also the opening words of the Psalm (130): "Out of the deep. . . ." A dark-hued orchestral introduction leads to a setting of the opening lines for three solo basses, music of painful beauty set over an inexorable walking bass. The gravity of the music is further underlined by the three trombones that punctuate the chorus's succeeding "Si iniquitates," while the central section is given to the tenor and alto soloists, the expansive melismatic lines counterpoised by an obbligato oboe. After Zelenka was appointed court chapel conductor in 1732 his output of church compositions increased, one of the first results being the *C-Minor Requiem*, believed to date from that year. This too was composed for a commemoration, an annual ritual held in Dresden in memory of the death of Emperor Joseph I. Rather surprisingly for a work that had to be fitted into a complete framework lasting no more than an hour, Zelenka set the whole of the *Requiem* text. With the exception of the "Liber scriptus" (a lovely setting for solo tenor and bass) and the *Benedictus*, each of the 22 sections is very short, even further concision being achieved by telescoping the text in the long *Sequence*. Despite some striking moments, the effect of a succession of movements lasting an average of barely two minutes is less than totally satisfactory. But as ever with Zelenka there is some striking orchestration, not least for the *chaloneau*, which appears in several sections of the *Sequence*.

Composed in 1738, the *Miserere* in C Minor is the latest and in some ways most impressive of these works, despite the caveat mentioned in the introduction to this review. The pounding bass introduction over which dissonance is piled on dissonance exerts an extraordinarily powerful impression on the listener, the kind of writing that immediately grabs the attention and makes one think: Yes, this is the work of a true original who has something startling and dramatic to

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say. While they cannot solve the Zelenka enigma, hearing these two discs in conjunction does provide an unusual opportunity to move just that little closer to this hugely talented, mysterious figure. Sadly, the presentation fails match the outstanding quality of the performances and engineering, the note accompanying the disc of sacred works being inadequate and confused, while both sets of notes have been poorly proofread. ---Brian Robins, Fanfare, arkivmusic.com

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