

Bohemian Baroque Masterworks
by Nalini Ghuman

This evening's program features two masterworks by two eighteenth-century composers who you may never have heard of before, Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745) and Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722).

Johann Kuhnau was born on the Bohemian border and, as a young boy, he was appointed as a singer at the Kreuzkirche in nearby Dresden. He later became Bach's predecessor in Leipzig, and although a first-rate composer of keyboard music and sacred works, and a church musician like Johann Sebastian, he seems to have been overshadowed by his more illustrious successor. More than half of Kuhnau's known vocal compositions, of which there were originally over 100, have been lost, and of those known to be extant only a handful have been published in modern editions. He was, however, greatly esteemed by many of Germany's foremost musicians and was the last of the many-sided Kantors at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, a man who 'displayed an element of medieval universality and mastered music, law, theology, rhetoric, poetry, mathematics and foreign languages' (Schering, 1926). His many cantatas are strikingly beautiful and often dramatic. In them, he created a musical oratory which, according to his own detailed comments regarding cantata texts, was uppermost in his mind in his efforts to write church music that was untainted by the tendency towards the secularism arising from the growing popularity of opera. They show a stability of formal structure previously unknown in German cantatas that strongly anticipates the Leipzig cantatas of Bach.

We perform Kuhnau's largest vocal work, his Magnificat, a wonderfully exuberant setting of the text, for four soloists, five-voice choir, and festival orchestra that was probably intended for use at Christmas (although the work's manuscript bears no date). The Magnificat features fine vocal writing, and elaborately constructed choral movements, which include dramatic shifts between homophonic sections and powerful fugues. Interwoven among these choruses are lyrical, expressive arias and duets, each capturing perfectly the mood of the text.

Zelenka was born in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) and his first teacher was most likely his father, Jiří, who was cantor and organist of the parish church of Louňovice, a village south-east of Prague. Thereafter, Zelenka had a long association with the Saxon Court at Dresden, where he served first as a violone (double bass) player in the famous court orchestra led by Johann David Heinichen (a former pupil of Kuhnau!), then as an assistant to the choirmaster, and finally as an 'in house' composer of church music. Despite his vast output of sacred vocal music composed in the second half of the 1720s, Zelenka was passed over as Kapellmeister in favor of the popular Italianate opera composer Johann Adolf Hasse when Heinichen died. His highly original musical idiom did, however, earn the admiration of his contemporary, Johann Sebastian Bach.

We will be performing the third of Zelenka's four settings of the Requiem mass, the d minor Mass, written c1730-2. It is a large scale work for chorus, orchestra, and soloists, and was composed to mark the anniversary of the death of Joseph I. Indeed, Zelenka's deliberate choice of the Latin "ei" (him) in place of the "eis" (them) throughout the Catholic mass serves to highlight the dedication - "Requiem aeternam dona ei Domine" Grant him eternal rest. Those familiar with Mozart's Requiem, written some 60 years later, will hear some interesting similarities - not least the key of d minor, the often dark-hued scoring with trombones, the opening phrase of the second Kyrie and phrases of the Dies Irae - which suggest how far some of Zelenka's work looks forward in time.

The d minor Requiem displays Zelenka's mastery of harmony and counterpoint, something that Bach, Telemann, and other contemporary connoisseurs prized. Most remarkable in this regard is Zelenka's extensive use of chromaticism, his borrowing from distant keys, and abrupt moves from minor to major mode (or vice versa); he lets suspended notes pile up into pungent dissonance, with resolutions given a hard-won splendor. An extraordinary rhythmic invention permeates the work (elements of which may be derived from Bohemian folk music): listen for asymmetrical groupings of bars, and vocal lines infused with syncopations. We also find Zelenka looking back to the "stile antico" of Palestrina, part of the esoteric spirit that prevailed in Europe in the 18th century; this was a style which every composer was expected to master as part of his training, and it can be heard in particular in the canon between soprano and alto that

weaves throughout the entire Benedictus.

Welsh pianist Nalini Ghuman has performed solo recitals, concerti, and chamber music across England, Wales and the SF Bay Area. She is a professor of Music at Mills College.