

PROGRAM NOTES

Jan Lukáš Ignatius Dismas Zelenka was baptized on 16 October 1679 in the parish church of Louňovice, a village southeast of Prague. He received his earliest music lessons from his father Jiřík, cantor and organist of the same church. Jan's excellent early musical education was unremarkable in 17th- and 18th-century Bohemia, where thorough early childhood education in music was a tradition in small parishes, so much so that in those years Bohemian musicians came to hold a disproportionate number of Kapellmeister positions throughout continental Europe. Although the information about Zelenka's early years is spotty, it appears that after leaving Louňovice, he pursued higher education at the Clementinum, the greatest of the four Jesuit colleges in Prague. In 1709, Zelenka was attached to the household of the arts patron Jan Hubert Hartig, to whom the composer later dedicated two of his sacred works.

In 1710 or 1711, Zelenka moved to Dresden, where he was retained as a violone (double bass) player in the *Hofkapelle*, the court orchestra of Augustus the Strong (Friedrich August I, Elector of Saxony and—after his conversion to Catholicism—King of Poland). In 1714, Zelenka received a substantial raise in his salary after the performance of his *Missa Sanctae Caeciliae*, written for the new Catholic *Hofkirche*. In 1716, Zelenka received permission to travel, with Vienna the ultimate destination, for composition study with Johann Joseph Fux. During his last year and a half in Vienna, Zelenka also served in the court of the electoral prince. Zelenka returned to Dresden by Carnival in 1719. In the carnival season of 1720, the court opera was closed after two Italian singers were fired for insulting the composer Johann David Heinichen (George Frideric Handel soon recruited the two singers—along with a third—for the opera in London). As a result of the closure—under the guiding hand of Princess Maria Josepha—additional resources were devoted to music in the Catholic royal chapel. The *Kapellmeister* Heinichen, the composer Giovanni Alberto Ristori, and Zelenka were called upon to compose, collect, arrange, and direct liturgical music for a large number of feast days and royal occasions. The mid to late 1720s—during which three of the works on tonight's program originated—were Zelenka's most prolific years. Yet despite his output of liturgical compositions, he continued to receive the modest salary of an instrumentalist. With the death of Heinichen in 1729, Zelenka took on all responsibility for music in the royal chapel and quite reasonably expected to be appointed *Kapellmeister*. But the pendulum of court opinion was swinging back toward opera, signaled by the hiring of the opera composer Johann Adolph Hasse. Even though Zelenka provided all the music for the 1733 funeral rites for Friedrich August I, it was Hasse who was made *Kapellmeister* later that year.

Under Friedrich August II, frequent and prolonged residences of the royal family at the Polish court led to the decline of support for music at the royal chapel in Dresden. In 1735 Zelenka received the title "*Kirchen Compositeur*," and in 1736 he successfully petitioned for a doubling of his salary. But his output declined, in part because of decreasing demand for liturgical music in Dresden. After Zelenka died in December 1745, Princess Maria Josepha, of Austria purchased his manuscripts, thereby saving the majority of his music for posterity, as none of his works—apart from a canon in Georg Philipp Telemann's *Der getreue Music-Meister*—had been published during Zelenka's lifetime. Scribal copies of his works continued to circulate during the later 18th century, two of which were found in the estate of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who in 1775 had told Johann Nicolaus Forkel that his father Johann Sebastian knew Zelenka personally and highly esteemed the Czech composer's music.

In her article on Zelenka for the *New Grove Dictionary*, Janet Stockigt wrote that

His musical idiom is highly original, and his liturgical works show a concern for the rich musical expression of texts. This, combined with contrapuntal mastery, elicited the admiration of Zelenka's contemporaries (Bach, Telemann, Pisendel, Mattheson and Mizler), and later commentators (Gerbert, Rochlitz and Fürstenau).

In Dresden, demand was high for litany settings, and Zelenka composed eight of them from 1718 to 1729. The *Litaniae de Venerabili Sacramento* in C was completed on 1 June 1727 for the Corpus Christi procession on 12 June. The litany unfolds as a series of eleven brief, highly differentiated movements, several of which feature masterful counterpoint, occasionally energized by the harmonic surprises for which Zelenka is so well known.

Jan Dismas Zelenka's father Jiřík died on 8 February 1724. His son received permission from Baron von Mordaxt, the Elector's Counsellor, to hold a funeral ceremony for his father in the royal chapel on 1 March 1724. For this occasion Zelenka composed a Requiem Mass and the *De profundis* in D minor; only the *De profundis* has survived to this day. Thomas Kohlhase, the editor of the 1980 edition of this work, has written that

The three-part bass choir in the imposing opening section is unique in this scoring, as are the trombones that—unlike traditional use prior to Mozart's church music—are not only used to play along with the lower vocal parts, but also as a specific color effect and an independent instrumental group. The low tonal registers are employed as musical metaphors for the despair and lamentation of "de profundis" ("From the depths I call to thee, Lord").

After this opening number, choruses with trombones frame the central arioso ("Sustinuit anima mea") in a chromatically inflected A minor.

Of the *Regina coeli* in F major (1726 or 1727), Peter Wollny has written that it

...is remarkable for its unusual scoring for three high voices: they mark out the cantus firmus plainchant over a walking instrumental bass line before, prompted by the harmonies of the upper strings and oboes, they join in close harmony. A triple-meter passage for voices and continuo provides a brief middle section, but swiftly the instruments return to the opening material for a final, joyful Alleluia.

While Zelenka composed the majority of his liturgical music in response to the requirements of the royal chapel, in 1740 he began a project entirely at his own behest: to write six masses as a labor of love, signifying his reverence for God. With a keen sense of his own mortality, Zelenka referred to the planned group of masses as *Missae ultimae*. On 21 September 1740, he completed the first of the masses, *Missa Dei Patris*, whose manuscript bears this title:

FIRST OF THE FINAL MASSES named the MASS OF GOD THE FATHER, DEDICATED TO GOD THE GREAT CREATOR of all things, best and supreme Father, in deepest humility and humblest veneration, in most profound adoration, with a contrite and humbled heart (which He does not despise), by his lowest, most obedient, and most unworthy creature, Jan Dismas Zelenka.

Next, Zelenka composed *Missa Dei Filii* (*Missa ultimarum secunda*: "Mass of the Son of God") between late 1740 and early February 1741. This mass contains only a Kyrie and a Gloria, but since Zelenka composed another complete mass (*Missa Omnium Sanctorum*, described as the sixth mass) after the second one, we may assume that *Missa Dei Filii* was not incomplete, but was rather intended as an abbreviated mass. The third, fourth, and fifth masses were probably never composed. In her book *Jan Dismas Zelenka* (2000), Janice Stockigt wrote

By the time Zelenka came to compose the late Masses ..., the stylistic struggles he experienced during the first half of the 1730s are no longer evident. These settings affirm that elucidation of the text was the principal force guiding his compositional decisions; they contribute to a repertoire in which spiritual dimensions transcend musical language and styles.

In a complete performance of the *Missa Dei Filii*, the relative brevity of the Kyrie would not prepare us for the heavenly lengths of the Gloria. Wolfram Steude has written that this Gloria is "one of the most powerful mass movements of the mid-18th century." While noting that overall Zelenka's music has a different character than that of Johann Sebastian Bach, Prof. Steude asserts that

the Gloria, however, with its enthusiastic, seemingly endless music crosses into the indescribable and sweeps away musicians and listeners alike. It justifies comparison with larger passages of the Gloria and Sanctus of Bach's B-minor Mass. Both composers musically described what the illusionist frescos in numerous baroque churches present the visitor: a gaze into an open heaven where everything floats upwards.

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