

## **Festive Cantatas: Bach and Zelenka**

Father Franz Nonhardt, the Jesuit chaplain in charge of Dresden's court chapel, reported to Rome in 1730 that Christmas Eve celebrations in the Saxon capital had been a brilliant success: "This rare and precious music attracts non-Catholic listeners throughout the whole year, especially for the major feasts." The excellent musical ensemble maintained by the Saxon Elector had recently been augmented with choice virtuosi from Italy, part of the cultural efflorescence that would lead to Dresden being called *Elbflorenz*, the Florence of the Elbe. Some seventy miles to the west in Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach (with traces of envy) held up the musical establishment at Dresden as a model of good management and extraordinary talent: "the musicians are relieved of all concern for their living, free from the chagrin and obliged each to master but a single instrument; it must be something choice and excellent to hear."

The presence of this Catholic court in an otherwise strongly Lutheran Saxony was owing to a recent twist in central European politics. In 1697, the Saxon Elector Friedrich August I converted to Catholicism in order to be eligible for election to the throne of Poland. Friedrich August (King August II of Poland, called "the Strong") established a Catholic court chapel in Dresden in 1708, repurposing a disused theatre attached to his castle residence. August's musical staff, reorganized after his conversion, faced the task of building a tradition of Catholic liturgical music from the ground up.

The royal chapel in Dresden was administered by the Jesuit Province of Bohemia, which helps to explain the presence of Bohemian musicians in the Saxon capital, from the young *Kapellknaben* who provided everyday church music to top composers in the chapel hierarchy. One of these latter was Jan Dismas Zelenka, who entered the Dresden chapel as a bass player around 1711 and came to play a leading role in assembling a high-quality repertory of sacred music. The son of an organist-cantor in a village southeast of Prague, Zelenka likely received a Jesuit education in Prague and was given further opportunities to perfect his craft as a composer after coming to Dresden; he was sent to Italy and to Vienna, where he polished his skills in the ancient art of counterpoint with Johann Joseph Fux, whose treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum* would make his name synonymous with learned compositional technique for decades to come. In his travels, Zelenka also began to amass a personal music library that would form an important part of Dresden's famous music collections; conspicuous among the works copied by Zelenka were compositions by older composers such as Palestrina and Frescobaldi.

During the 1720s, while Zelenka was serving at the right hand of aging Kapellmeister Johann David Heinichen, he regularly composed Masses for the use of the royal chapel, and he continued to contribute sacred music after being passed up for the position of Kapellmeister in favour of the star opera-writer Johann Adolf Hasse. The Dresden church music was strongly influenced by Italian tastes: the five parts of the Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei) were divided into smaller sections cast as impressive choruses and expressive operatic arias. This allowed composers like Zelenka—and Bach, who turned to the genre late in life with his B minor Mass—a great deal of freedom with the way they projected the ancient texts of the Mass emotionally. The *Missa Nativitatis Domini* (ZWV 8) has appropriately festive scoring, with two trumpets prone to soar over the rest of the orchestra in glorious chains of suspensions. Zelenka abbreviates the Kyrie by combining the "Kyrie eleison" and "Christe eleison" texts into one movement powered by an energetic string motor, virtuoso trumpet writing and powerful

choral counterpoint. (He may have been motivated by an early directive from August II that sung Mass in the royal chapel was not to exceed forty-five minutes.)

The Gloria and Credo are the longest and most colourful of the Ordinary texts and the most given to sectional treatment. Zelenka guides us through sudden changes of feeling: from an opening “Gloria in excelsis Deo” that brings to mind Vivaldi’s famous Gloria in D major to the mysterious “et in terra pax” introduced by the solo bass voice with a large melodic drop suggestive of heavenly peace descending to earth. Zelenka favours dramatic choral declamation with intense chromatic harmonies for especially solemn phrases such as the Credo’s “Et incarnatus,” which contrast with delicate arias and duets showing hints of the *galant* style. The Credo’s “Crucifixus” is an interesting example of the latter. Whereas Bach repurposed some of the saddest and most painful music he had ever written to create the tortured “Crucifixus” of the B minor Mass, Zelenka sets the same text as a tender high-voice love duet with a pair of oboes; the Christmas emphasis is on divine love that suffuses and transcends earthly suffering.

Zelenka was remembered as a devout and reserved man by those who met him, but his music also gives the impression of a strong personality and an almost eccentric sense of humour, expressed in surprising harmonic turns and quirky syncopated rhythms. He did not shy away from hammering away at a musical pun that rendered “unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam” (“one holy, catholic and apostolic Church”) with a single repeated note to drive home the idea of unity. The large choral–orchestral fugues with which Zelenka liked to end a movement make impressive monuments of compositional craft out of that good-natured cheekiness.

After August the Strong, Zelenka’s employer, died in 1733, Bach composed a short *Missa* (consisting of Kyrie and Gloria) in preparation for a visit of the Elector’s successor to Leipzig. Bach himself travelled to Dresden later that year with a set of parts for the *Missa* in hand to present to Friedrich August II (King August III of Poland). This music was to become (in the late 1740s) the core of Bach’s B minor Mass, his great contribution to the ancient polyphonic Mass tradition. Before Bach turned to compiling a complete Mass Ordinary, however, he mined his 1733 *Missa* for the music of his curious “Gloria in excelsis Deo” (BWV 191). It is likely that Bach prepared this unusual Latin-texted work in 1745 for a Christmas Day service at the Leipzig university church held in thanksgiving for the Treaty of Dresden, which ended the Second Silesian War. The second part of the angels’ song from Luke 2:14—“on earth peace to men of good will”—must have had special resonance among such frequent outbreaks of war. Bach’s two-movement setting of the lesser doxology apparently followed an oration (perhaps celebrating the recent peace); “Gloria Patri,” with its smiling flute obbligato and tip-toeing upper strings, was adapted from the “Domine Deus” of the 1733 *Missa*. If Bach is still prompting us to imagine Luke’s heavenly hosts, this movement adds to the picture teasing, baby-faced cherubs or putti rather than awe-inspiring angelic messengers.

For both Bach and Zelenka, writing these festive Christmas works predominantly in the key of D major was no arbitrary choice. D major was the preferred key for baroque trumpets and lent itself to rich resonance on the violin, so it was associated in the minds of composers with everything bright and joyful. The *Orchestral Suite* in D major (BWV 1068), like Bach’s other three orchestral suites, comes down to us by way of performing parts dating from Bach’s time in Leipzig, where between 1729 and 1741 he directed the local music society (*collegium musicum*), which met for regular concerts at Gottfried Zimmermann’s coffeehouse. The

surviving Leipzig version of BWV 1068 is richly scored, with the addition of trumpets and timpani to string orchestra and oboes—excepting the famous "Air," whose wistful beauty remains better suited to just strings. The original suite, probably from Bach's years in Cöthen or Weimar, was most likely written for just strings and continuo throughout, but the key meant that that a joyous infusion of brass would always be a latent possibility. Perhaps Bach exploited this possibility for some holiday gathering at Zimmermann's during the 1730s: a dose of trumpets and hot coffee to stave off the Saxon winter.

*Notes by Connor Page*