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JAN DISMAS ZELENKA (1679–1745)

MISSA VOTIVA

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Stuttgart, Barockorchester Stuttgart / Frieder Bernius
Carus 83.223, 2010; one disc, 69 minutes

Jan Dismas Zelenka's *Missa votiva*, zwv18, is among a handful of sacred works composed late in the life of this Bohemian violone-playing member of the celebrated Dresden court orchestra of two kings of Poland and electors of Saxony: August II (Elector Friedrich August I) and his son August III (Elector Friedrich August II). Throughout the 1720s, and whilst still employed as a performing musician, Zelenka constantly composed and arranged music for the recently established Catholic court church in Dresden. After the death of the Dresden court Kapellmeister Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729) Zelenka became responsible for the musical direction in this royal chapel, a task at which he worked untiringly with neither suitable title nor remuneration appropriate to the position. In the official published *Calendar* of the Dresden court for 1732, however, he was listed as 'Contra-Basso & Compositeur'. By 1733 he was entered as a 'Compositeur', a title altered to 'Kirchen-Compositeur' in the edition of 1735.

This mass draws attention to the health of a composer who had experienced at least two major bouts of illness during the 1730s. In 1739 a period of severe ill-health led Zelenka to make a vow that he would compose a mass upon recovery. The *Missa votiva* was the result. The autograph inscription on the cover of the score reads '*Vota mea Domino reddam. Psal: 115. Versu 5. . .*': '*Vota mea Domino reddam coram omni populo ejus*' (I will pay my vows to the Lord, before all his people). A Latin note at the conclusion of the score confirms that this work was composed in fulfilment of his pledge: '*Missam hanc A[d]: M[aiorem]: D[ei]: G[loriam]: ex voto posuit J: D: Z[elenka]: post recuperatam Deo Fautore Salutem*' (J. D. Zelenka offered this votive mass to the greater glory of God after recovering his health with the help of God).

It is possible that the *Missa votiva* was performed in the Dresden Catholic court church on 2 July 1739 (the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin), when, according to recently recovered sections of the *Diarium Missionis* of the Dresden Jesuits, a new mass by Zelenka was heard ('*Sacrum novum produxit D. Zelenka*'). More than one hour is needed to perform the *Missa votiva*, making it one of Zelenka's most expansive settings. The autograph score held in the Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (Dresden) was once accompanied by twenty-three performance parts that have been missing for more than fifty years. (These are probably among numerous items from Dresden now held in the Russian State Library in Moscow.) On the other hand, the fourteen eighteenth-century parts kept today in Prague in the collection of the Order of Knights of the Cross with the Red Star not only indicate musical exchanges between Zelenka and the music directors of Bohemian churches and monasteries, but they also demonstrate that, through the omission of the Crucifixus fugue (No. 14) and the addition of the text of the Crucifixus within the previous movement (No. 13, 'Et incarnatus est'), the Credo of the *Missa votiva* had been shortened – possibly for Dresden and certainly for at least one performance in Prague. The present recording apparently follows the original score, which has been edited by Reinhold Kubik and published in volume 108 of the monumental series *Das Erbe deutscher Musik*, under the general editorial direction of Thomas Kohlhase (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1997).

The *Missa votiva* is a large-scale composition in the style of a Neapolitan mass or 'number' setting in which the five parts of the Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei) were further subdivided into movements (or numbers) of contrasting musical style and scoring. Using a variety of musical styles (known as 'the mixed church style', as Thomas Kohlhase notes in the excellent commentary to accompany this recording), Zelenka composed the *Missa votiva* in twenty movements. Large-scale choruses, some with brief



introductory choral movements, and concerted movements are juxtaposed with galant solo arias and choral fugues that hark back to the much-revered *stile antico*. The heart of this mass is embedded in the sixth movement, where Zelenka sets a series of choral repetitions of the text 'Gratias agimus tibi' (We give Thee thanks) against a pulsating orchestral accompaniment, expressing his gratitude upon recovery. These reiterations interrupt the remaining text of the movement ('Domine Deus ... Filius Patris'). The structural model for this powerful movement was almost certainly a mass by Domenico Sarro (1679–1744), a work which at an unknown time (but probably in the early 1730s) was revised and named *Missa Adjuvatorium nostra in nomine Domini* by Zelenka for use in Dresden.

Although it is still not clear how many singers and players read from the twenty-three original performance parts, the profound musical expression of the *Missa votiva* is carried by four solo voices (SATB), choir (SATB), and a modest orchestra of strings, oboes and basso continuo. Zelenka would have had singers of the Dresden *Hofkapelle* in mind for the solo vocal parts (castratos would have sung the soprano and alto solos), and they would have joined the vocal ripienists of the chorus – as rare surviving sets of Dresden parts demonstrate. Frieder Bernius balances his highly disciplined chorus of thirty singers and four vocal soloists with the equally disciplined Barockorchester Stuttgart of twenty players. The choral work is exemplary, especially in taxing choruses such as the Crucifixus fugue, and Zelenka's moments of aural rapture are effectively realized (especially in No. 5, the Gloria).

The fine performances given by the soprano and alto soloists – particularly the beautiful rendering by Daniel Taylor in the aria 'Et incarnatus est' – reflect the vocal qualities of the Italian-trained castratos who first sang this work. Three wonderful arias for a solo soprano (Christe eleison, 'Qui tollis peccata' and Benedictus) were probably composed for Giovanni Bindi – the male soprano of the Dresden court, who had a range of d¹ to g². The robust aria for solo bass, 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus', with its magnificent vocal hyperbole (including an eccentric octave descent on the word 'Altissimus'), is sung with great vigour by Thomas E. Bauer. Apart from insignificant solo passages in concerted choruses, Zelenka's allocation of solos for tenor is relatively miserly – a feature of his vocal works following the arrival in Dresden in 1730 of the group of Venetian-trained castratos. This is a disappointment, because Johannes Kaleschke makes impressive contributions to the solo vocal ensemble passages in certain of Zelenka's choruses.

The orchestra employed by Zelenka for his late works composed for the original Catholic court church of Dresden usually included violins 1 and 2, violas, at least two oboes, and a continuo section comprising violoncellos, string basses (probably an 8-foot violone and 16-foot contrabass), bassoon(s), organ and – if available – a theorbo. This ensemble was organized according to solo/ripieno principles. The well-recognized phenomenon seen in Zelenka's scores whereby he switches from a tutti ripieno accompaniment for ritornellos and choral passages to a concertante accompaniment without woodwinds and without contrabass for solo vocal passages is meticulously observed in Reinhold Kubik's edition. Unless my ears deceive me, these directions are not followed by Bernius, who uses a discreet 16-foot string bass in the accompaniment throughout these solo passages for the singers. Since these matters are the responsibility of the director, however, and especially since the playing of the Barockorchester Stuttgart is excellent, this is a minor objection.

Rather more concerning are the tempos at which certain movements are taken. For example: Zelenka's instruction for the opening Kyrie eleison I is *Vivace*, which, in the eighteenth century, often indicated a slower tempo than it later came to mean. Instead of the listener experiencing a measured but lively opening to the *Missa votiva*, a somewhat frantic account is given of this movement, which returns in truncated form as Kyrie III. Yet almost the same tempo is used by Bernius for the Gloria (No. 5), which Zelenka marked *Allegro*. While it is acknowledged that in 1752 Johann Joachim Quantz advised his readers that more liveliness was permitted in the church music of the Catholics than in that of the Protestants (*Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu Spielen* (Berlin, 1752); English translation with introduction by Edward Reilly as *On Playing the Flute* (London: Faber, 1966), 305), the musical poise demanded by the opening Kyrie eleison of the *Missa votiva* is missing from this recording. These matters of tempo come as a surprise,



especially since I have always considered Bernius's accounts of Zelenka's *Missa Dei Filii* (zwv20) and *Litanie Lauretaniae 'Salus infirmorum'* (zwv152) (Deutsche Harmonia mundi 77922, 1990) with Tafelmusik and the Kammerchor Stuttgart to be near perfect. Nevertheless, this new version of the *Missa votiva* will be an important addition to the ever-expanding collection of recorded accounts of Zelenka's late mass compositions.

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