

The dictates of fashion were a powerful factor in music, too, over the centuries, exercising a substantial influence on the complex interaction between composers, their patrons and their public. Music went out of date in the space of a few decades – sometimes in the space of a few years. And this meant that many works that delighted the ear when they were first heard were soon forgotten again. Changing fashions consigned them to the recesses of musical archives, with only a handful of scholars and devoted librarians still aware of their existence.

One exception to this rule was sacred music. Since the Reformation at the latest, with the processes of denominational rethinking that it triggered, the Church tended increasingly to preserve what it deemed to be worthwhile, and to keep these values present in people's minds. Thus the strict counterpoint with its deliberate outward plainness that was developed in the 17th century from the legacy of Palestrina and other Late Renaissance masters, and was elevated to the ideal of a time-honoured *stile antico*, remained the central point of reference for many composers of religious music in the 18th century. These composers studied and made use of the 'old style' in some cases in its pure form, in others by adapting it sensitively to suit the taste of their own time.

Jan Dismas Zelenka, Johann Sebastian Bach and Antonio Lotti – all three composers had a good command of the traditional church style and its adaptation for which they were admired by contemporaries. And although they never actually met, their biographies are connected through Zelenka.

Lotti was born in 1676 in Venice and spent most of his life in his native city, where – like so many successful composers of his time – he worked both as a church musician (he was organist at St. Mark's) and as an opera composer. In 1717 he was given leave from his duties in Venice to spend two years at the Dresden court, where he enjoyed huge success. He returned to La Serenissima in 1719, remaining there until his death in 1740. He wrote five operas for Dresden, and also worked in the Hofkirche church together with the Italian musicians who had accompanied him to the city known as "Florence on the Elbe". A substantial number of sacred works by Lotti bear witness to this: some of them he wrote especially for Dresden, others he brought with him from Italy.

When Lotti took up his position, Zelenka had already been playing the double bass in the Dresden court orchestra for a few years. But while Lotti was in Dresden, Zelenka spent most of his time in Vienna in the retinue of Friedrich August, the heir to the Saxon throne. And in the city on the Danube, he took the opportunity to study with the kapellmeister at the Imperial court, Johann Joseph Fux, who was one of the most respected teachers of classical counterpoint. Zelenka also accumulated a collection of manuscript scores of the works of old masters while in Vienna, which he later made use of for his own compositions.

After his return to Dresden, Zelenka was mainly responsible for the Catholic church music at court. In addition to composing works of his own – masses, music for vespers, litanies and compositions for Easter week –, his duties also included obtaining and arranging other composers' works. Among the music that Zelenka arranged for performance in the Dresden church there are also compositions by the erstwhile court kapellmeisters Antonio Lotti, including a mass in G minor / G major that consists only of a Kyrie and a Gloria; to distinguish this from other masses, Zelenka gave this one the name *Missa Sapientiae*. ([First recording available on dhm with Thomas Hengelbrock and the Balthasar-Neumann Choir and Ensemble.](#))

According to Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, Zelenka was one of the composers whom Johann Sebastian Bach knew personally and held in high regard. No documents have come to light so far providing any indication of how the two composers communicated, but Bach obviously had access to

Zelenka's collection of scores, as there was a copy of the latter's arrangement of Lotti's *Missa Sapientiae* in his own music library.

For Easter week 1738, Zelenka made a setting of the penitential psalm *Miserere mei, Deus* as a sequence of strongly contrasting movements. The complete text of the psalm itself appears in the second of the five movements; it is followed by the doxology *Gloria Patri*, which is spread over two movements. The two outer movements are choruses featuring only the opening verse, *Miserere mei, Deus*. Zelenka set this cry for mercy as a vehement plea: over agitated rhythms, first the orchestral parts penetrate one another with much dissonance, then the choir comes in and unfolds a lament of colossal intensity. Unlike many of his fellow composers, such as Lotti or Leonardo Leo, whom a vividly descriptive text inspired to a rich variety of emotions and intonation, Zelenka opted for an approach that is nothing short of archaic. From his collection of music of the old masters – copies of scores that he had accumulated in Vienna – Zelenka picked out a *recercar* by Girolamo Frescobaldi and took the latter's strictly contrapuntal, four-part setting as the basis for his own vocal writing, which adheres pretty closely to the 100-year-old model. Under these circumstances, it is impossible for the music to reflect specific expressive nuances in the text – and indeed, this was clearly not Zelenka's intention. The dignity of the Old Testament text is emphasised by the venerable character of Frescobaldi's austere style. However, the core message of the psalm, a plaintive emotional outcry, does not simply recur like a motto in the contrapuntal writing, but also forms the unusually radical framework of the piece, and this not only as regards the almost shocking extremes in the dynamics. Even in the context of Zelenka's many highly unconventional compositions, *Miserere mei, Deus* is in a class of its own.

Johann Sebastian Bach likewise had frequent recourse to both his own works and those of other composers, not least because, as cantor of St. Thomas's, Leipzig, he had an enormous workload to cope with. He originally wrote the cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, BWV 12, in Weimar back in 1714, and he performed it again ten years later in Leipzig. On this occasion, he changed the original score, transposing it up by a tone. (It is this version that we hear on this CD.) What's more, Bach later used the main part of the opening chorus, a chaconne that develops over a chromatically-led lament in the bass line, in his B minor Mass, where it appears, transposed, structurally enlarged and fitted with a new text, as the "Crucifixus" in the *Credo*.

The combination of chromatic writing and motet style is something that Bach's cantata shares with several settings of the *Crucifixus* by Lotti, which with their radicalisation of classic counterpoint are among his most impressive works. But in some of his complete mass movements, too, Lotti also achieves moments of compelling expressiveness with similar means. Large parts of the *Missa a tre cori*, which he wrote in and for Venice, but also performed in Dresden, are laid out so that a constant alternation of intensely expressive, dense counterpoint with more loosely-woven passages ensures variety. As for the text itself, which is musically reinterpreted time after time as no other text had been since the Middle Ages: Lotti elicits entirely new facets from it. Thus the dance-like blithe spirits of the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is followed by an abrupt change of mood for the ... *et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*, a thought-provoking motet with obbligato orchestra. Contrasts like this occur throughout the work, but Lotti's mastery of his art – recognised by both Zelenka and Bach – is evident not least in the fact that he always manages the balancing act between different styles and expressive worlds.

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