

# The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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## Cantata Singers Paired Bach and Zelenka

by SUDEEP AGARWALA



Zelenka

The Cantata Singers' exploration of Jan Dismas Zelenka continued at Jordan Hall alongside Johann Sebastian Bach. In pairing works of two composers who were friends and admirers of each other's work, Saturday's thoughtful program focused on 1722-1723, when Bach first arrived at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. He wrote BWV 147 and 109 in this period of arrival, while trying to justify his position at the prestigious church. Zelenka's starkly emotive *Hebdomania Responsorica* (ZWV 55), from which the chorus sang his *Tenebrae factae sunt*, came from roughly the same time, a mere day's journey away in the Dresden *Hofkapelle*. The evening also featured the American premiere of Zelenka's A Major *Laetatus Sum*. True to expectation, the Cantata Singers opened its season with an intelligent program and engrossing performances.

Zelenka's 1722 *Tenebrae factae sunt* seemed the evening's the most accessible by far, but also the most emotionally complex. The work starts innocently enough with a simple chorale for four voices doubled by strings. The harmonies begin to wander and the piece quickly crescendos to the climax, *exclamavit Jesus voce magna* (Jesus cried out in a loud voice). A haunting trio of soprano Bonnie Gleason, alto Kim Leeds, and tenor Stephen Williams) answers the chorus: "my God, why have you forsaken me"? As Christ begins to die, the homophony of the first half of the motet becomes fragmented in delicate imitative choral lines that tenderly tug at alien dissonances. A meditative, featuring a silvery string section supported an exquisitely balanced choir, which responded well to Hoose's sensitivity.

Zelenka's A Major *Laetatus Sum* (ZWV 90) is much larger in scope. The six-movement setting of Psalm 122 springs to life in exuberant dance with flaring string lines and boisterous solos and duets for soprano and alto. The anthem takes a pensive twist in the in the middle three movements, but pulls the stops out in an ebullient final movement. As exciting as the music is to hear, it stretches the musicians to extremes. As the printed notes speculated, Zelenka either had a virtuosic ensemble at his command, was writing without regard for human capabilities or, as a lowly violone player, took pleasure in listening stratospheric, boastful voices earn their supper. This American premiere proved that the three are not mutually exclusive.

Undaunted by Hoose's exhilarating tempo, fiery violins opened the anthem, supported by a vigorous string section throwing all caution to the wind. Soloists Karyl Ryczek (soprano) and Emily Marvosh (alto) met the challenges of Zelenka's score with unflagging energy, Ryczek approaching the flamboyant coloratura of the second movement with startling ease; Marvosh's contemplative *Fiat pax in virtute tua*, much more than being elegantly beautiful, was intelligent and moving. In duets throughout the anthem, Marvosh's reserved alto blended well with Ryczek's dramatic soprano both in the treacherous melismas that were exquisitely coordinated, and in the more reserved movements: an exquisitely controlled *messa di voce* at the beginning of the Doxology was the haunting highlight of the thrilling performance.

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Two of Bach's cantatas sandwiched Zelenka's works. *Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben* (BWV 109), the opener, was composed in October 1723, a few months after Bach assumed the position of Thomaskantor in Leipzig. The six-movement work takes its theme from John 4:46-54, which tasks a father's faith to cure his son; the text takes doubt and fear as its core themes. Hoose emphasized clear enunciation and well-balanced choral sounds, subtly supported by a precise and carefully shaped orchestra, leaving the brunt of the drama to the soloists. Tenor William Hite's opening recit declamed and expressively, channeling the evangelists Bach would soon employ in his Matthew and John Passions. Hite reveled in the thorny aria that followed, cleanly negotiating the tortured melismas and massive range with an ease that emphasized the almost-operatic drama. Mezzo-soprano Kim Leeds's offered sweeter fare, fortifying the listener against doubt with the courage afforded by faith. Although her reassuring aria (memorably accompanied by chattering bassoon and oboes by Adrian Morejon, Peggy Pearson, and Jennifer Slowik) was plagued with the occasional mis-step, Leed's pleasing voice lent a pleasing fragility to the aria.

Bach wrote *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* (BWV 147) for Advent during his time in Weimar. It went unperformed, but was expanded and repurposed in 1723 upon his arrival in Leipzig in preparation for the Feast of the Visitation. The text is far more optimistic than BWV 109, looking forward to the birth of Christ. The work is composed in two parts: the first half celebrates the imminent arrival of the Messiah, while the second half reflects on the miracles associated with the arrival. Both end with a harmonization of the famous *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* chorale melody. Performing BWV 147 at the end of the concert shapes the evening in a nice progression from doubt to expectant hope. However, the cantata was also the most difficult of the music performed in the concert, and resulted in a chorus flagging in energy at the end of the evening. While Hoose managed a nice balance between the orchestra and chorus, the opening counterpoint in voices was not as crisp as in BWV 109. Solo arias and recits, however, were consistently strong. After the choral introduction, tenor Eric Perry delivered an oratorical recitative; his welcome return in the second half showcased a sweetly lyrical side to his voice. Bass Mark Andrew Cleveland astonished with the musical fire and brimstone of his opening recitative, his profound baritone deeply satisfying to hear in Jordan Hall. Cleveland returned later in jubilant duet with a resounding trumpet played by Terry Everson. Alto Lynn Torgove was reserved in her uplifting aria and eloquent in her awestruck recitative. Lisa Lynch's charming soprano paired well with Danielle Maddon's florid violin. After theology and drama from the soloists, the final chorale arrived as a much-needed salve. The simple interplay of a hymn-like choral part gently underscored by the nodding, pastoral orchestra felt strangely satisfying after the evening's emotional trials.

**Sudeep Agarwala has performed with the Cantata Singers and other choruses.**

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