

A portrait of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is dark blue with a pattern of concentric white circles in the bottom right corner.

Sacred Music for the Royal Chapel of Dresden

(Jan Dismas Zelenka)

Max Emanuel Cencic |
Ensemble Desmarest |
Ronan Khalil

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Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745) - Bohemian composer!

A well-known name to the avid music lover... However it is surprisingly rare to see an entire recital dedicated to his work alone. Zelenka is known for his use of harmonic structures that were seen as quite audacious for his time and he composed often extremely demanding pieces, both technically and musically, ranging from unrelenting virtuosity (*Barbara dira effera*) to the most delicate and diaphanous of melodies (*Agnus Dei*).

The Czech composer, who lived in exile in Dresden until his death, was highly respected by the great Johann Sebastian Bach and was even called 'The Czech Bach' by some. Like 'The Cantor of Leipzig', Zelenka did not compose any operas - however his 8 Italian Concert Arias ZWV 176 and the serenade *Il Diamante* ZWV 177 contain many characteristics inherent to the genre. It could be said that he was one of the most "operatic" composers of sacred music as his work sometimes seems much more theatrical than ecclesiastical. One must simply look at the writing style of his oratorios and most developed motets: the first part of the aria "A ché riserbano i cieli" from *Gesù al calvario* ZWV 62 (Jesus at Calvary) pulls the orchestra into a seemingly never-ending gallop, while the contrasting middle section demands a stark purity from the alto voice to describe Saint John's

call to God asking Him to relieve Mary's suffering. The aria "Vicina morte" from *Il serpente di bronzo* ZWV 61 calls specifically for the woodwinds (oboe and bassoon) - a combination of timbres that Zelenka was very fond of. As for the nativity motet "O magnum mysterium ZWV 171", we find a much more contemplative atmosphere.

Theatricality is ever-present within the composer's most treasured works. The four Italian arias programmed in this recital, as well as the electrifying motet *Barbara dira effera* ZWV 164, showcase Zelenka's later period and were almost all written for the castrato Domenico Annibali (1705-1779). They represent a shift in the musical ideas at the Dresden court to a much more Italian style provoked by the arrival of Johann Adolf Hasse and the engagement of several Italian singers. The composer is forced to modify his style - probably with a certain reluctance - to arrive at simpler harmonic structures and more singable melodies in order to keep up with the changing musical trends.

This last motet shows an explosive Zelenka making use of the full range of his orchestral and vocal arsenal. Max Emanuel Cencic's infinitely expressive and nuanced voice will take us on a gripping journey led by the scintillating music from our 'enfant de Bohême'.

Yannis François

Dates

10 June 2017	Froville
18 July 2017	Uzes
3 December 2017	Vienna
24 March 2018	Lyon

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