

Vocal

whilst at the same time drawing attention to the choir's incredible skills. It takes over three minutes for this piece, whereas the Latvians, obviously fewer in number and clearer in texture, lop fully half a minute off that timing. The result is no less devotional, though Sigvards Klava begins the crescendo sooner than Chernushenko, making it more progressive and less dramatic.

On BIS, the Netherlands Radio Choir is conducted by Kaspars Putniņš, coincidentally also a conductor of the Latvian Radio Choir. He lingers even less than Klava in this passage, though the crescendo is longer and more progressive. The choral numbers are similar, but fine though the basses are, they do not have the solid weight of their Latvian counterparts, and neither choir can boast quite such round voices, maternally in the best possible sense, as the alto section of the St Petersburg ensemble, though with the Latvians it's a close-run thing. The Key Ensemble, from Finland, are 30 in number for this performance. Their performance of this seventh section is the briskest of all, knocking more than a minute off the St Petersburg timing. Their *pianissimo* cries of 'Sláva' are sung slightly detached, an attractive effect, and the crescendo is well managed, leaving something in reserve for the final, held chords.

Listening to the whole performance by the Netherlands Radio Choir one is struck by the extreme clarity of texture, wherein each and every vocal line can be distinctly heard. This is a fleet-footed performance: Putniņš takes not quite 52 minutes over the work, the shortest I have heard, and a full 10 minutes shorter than his compatriot conducting the Latvian Radio Choir. This is frequently an advantage. In the third piece, 'Blessed is the Man', the *pianissimo* 'Hallelujahs' make more sense at this tempo, and in the ninth, 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord', the chanting is courageously rapid, though sounding just right in context. At others times, though, something is undoubtedly lost. The Latvians are incomparable in the second piece, 'Praise the Lord, O my Soul'. They take six and a half minutes over it, whereas the Dutch group dispatches the piece in a mere four minutes. Timing is never everything, but this is a huge difference, and one which robs the performance of the very stillness the Latvians achieve. Putniņš is more faithful to the score, however, in that he uses solo voices where indicated, whereas Klava uses the full section, or a part of it, throughout.

My preference here is irrelevant, so I'll simply say that the Netherlands soloists, presumably choir members, acquit themselves very well. The overall effect of the performance is to lighten the work, leaving less of a feeling of a piece dominated by slow-moving music. Highly critical listening reveals that the choir does not possess the Latvians' astonishing accuracy of tuning and attack, but when you simply sit back and

enjoy the singing you notice nothing in the way of technical weakness. The work makes huge demands of the choir, but with the basses a celebrated exception, the extremes of the voices are rarely explored. The tenors have just one high B flat, for example, *pianissimo*, in the penultimate piece: it is so beautifully sung here that special mention of it is more than justified.

The BIS issue uniquely offers a coupling. Rachmaninov was 20 when he composed *The Theotokos*, a hymn to the Virgin. The choral writing lacks the sumptuous richness of the later work, and it is understandably less assured overall. The music is now austere, now exultant. The work, interesting in itself, is also a fascinating step on the way to later masterworks and it is most useful to have it as a supplement. The studio recording is well up to the standards of the house, and Andrew Huth contributes an excellent booklet note. The sung texts are given in Cyrillic script alongside an English translation.

The Fuga issue features the Key Ensemble, described in the booklet as 'a semi-professional choir'. This might cover a multitude of sins, but there's no doubt that this is a very fine choir indeed, even if direct comparison once again reveals the Latvian group's technical superiority. Where the BIS performance was recorded in a studio, this one took place in a church, though one that is a good deal more reverberant than the near-ideal acoustic of St John's Church in Riga. This is a mixed blessing, then: a church acoustic undoubtedly helps create the right atmosphere, but the beginning of the final piece is the most dramatic example of the echo obscuring the vocal lines. The producers' regrettable decision to fade out the ambient noise between each movement of the piece and the next also breaks the mood, reminding us that we are listening to a recording and not experiencing a living performance. The booklet again gives full sung texts which you can follow in English plus two other languages, as well as an amiable booklet essay from the conductor.

The performance adds just three minutes to the Netherlands timing, and similarly avoids the portentous or lugubrious. Indeed, one or two passages are quite surprising in their rapidity. Conductor Teemu Honkanen allows himself a fair amount of expressive freedom, as in the final piece of all, where he initially sets a pleasingly lively tempo before suddenly slamming on the brakes for the final page, an event without justification in the score, though not an ineffective one. A further surprising feature is the presence of a bass soloist in the list of performers. There is no bass solo in the *All-Night Vigil*, so I can only suppose that Reino Kotavilta is named because he is the source of the extra, unmarked low bass notes that occur here and there throughout, including at one point, if I am not mistaken, a G a full octave below the bass clef. The two 'legitimate' soloists, tenor

Mats Lillhannus and mezzo Kristina Raudanen, have busy professional careers as well as being members of the Key Ensemble. Their singing is particularly ardent and most moving, an important plus point for this already distinguished performance. Only in two movements did I find the team's approach disappointing. It is less successful at establishing the required serene and pensive atmosphere in the thirteenth piece, 'Today Salvation has come', and much of the following piece is simply too loud, rather missing the point. Both rival choirs are more successful in these two movements, and the Dutch choir is supreme.

To summarize, the Latvian Radio Choir's performance is the most beautiful to have come my way for a long time. These two new performances, however, might well lead you to think that the Latvians have smoothed off some of the work's rougher corners with a bit too much enthusiasm. The later choirs employ solo voices too, which might well be a deciding factor. Neither choir is quite the technical equal of the Latvians, but there's not much in it, and very close direct comparison is needed in order to notice this. The Netherlands Radio Choir creates a powerful atmosphere despite a studio acoustic. There is nothing of the marmoreal in its Rachmaninov, and many will prefer it that way. The Finnish choir sings in a turbulent acoustic that helps create atmosphere but does it few favours otherwise. Its soloists are sublime, and the conductor's rather personal way with the work should convince all but the most intransigent listener. *William Hedley*

Zelenka

New

Missa Paschalis, ZWV7. Litaniae Omnium Sanctorum, ZWV153^a.

Gabriela Eibenová (soprano); Terry Wey (countertenor); Cyril Auvity (tenor);

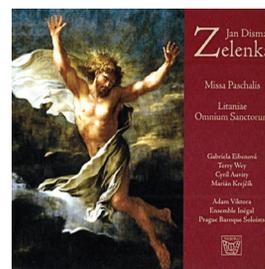
Marián Krejčík (bass); Prague Baroque

Soloists; Ensemble Inégal/Adam Viktor.

Nibiru 01582231 (full price, 1 hour 8 minutes).

^aCzech/English/French/German texts included. Website www.nibiru-publishers.com. Producer Petr Rezníček.

Engineer Aleš Dvořák. Dates June 24th-27th, 2013.



Very soon after Jan Dismas Zelenka arrived in Dresden in 1710 or 1711, a mere bass player in the

Saxon court's growing and increasingly renowned orchestra, he started seeking attention by composing for the court's Catholic church services. By the mid-1720s, he was being called on more and more to take on the direction of music for the liturgy

in place of the Court Chapel Master, Johann David Heinichen, who eventually died of tuberculosis in 1729. By the beginning of 1726, he had already written six richly imaginative Mass settings for Dresden, as well as a number of smaller sacred works. The Zelenka scholar Janice Stockigt, who provides the informative notes for this disc's programme, believes that it was probably in that year, when he produced the *Missa Paschalis* and also started keeping a list of his compositions, that Zelenka started seriously seeking an official appointment to replace the now largely incapacitated Heinichen.

The *Missa Paschalis* is a comparatively economical (for Zelenka) solemn setting of the Mass: it lasts only 37 minutes and only one movement (and what a glorious one, about which more later) is longer than three minutes. Four trumpets and timpani impart an especially festive mood to this brilliant display of Dresden's liturgical splendour. Pre-dating the splashy arrival from Italy in 1731 of the fashionable young opera composer Johann Adolf Hasse, who returned two years later as Church Music Director, it is not yet marked by Zelenka's studiously acquired command of the Italian (more specifically Neapolitan) style that quickly came to dominate Dresden. It does display, however, the enduring mannerisms that marked Zelenka's style, the so-called 'zelenkisms', including angular vocal and orchestral lines, quirky rhythms and surprising harmonic twists.

Nine years later, when Zelenka wrote his *Litaniae Omnium Sanctorum* for the court's prayers for the successful delivery of the Saxon Elector's once again pregnant Habsburg wife, Maria Josepha, his musical style had bloomed. Dr Stockigt refers to the prominent new Italian *galant* features such as triple metres, varied articulations, extreme dynamic shifts and more florid ornamentation of vocal and instrumental lines. Even more remarkable is the amalgamation of these elements with some of Zelenka's densest and showiest counterpoint. The opening 'Kyrie eleison' features a massive double fugue, which is repeated in the concluding 'Agnus Dei'. Elaborate counterpoint also enriches several of the six sections in between. Most remarkable of all, however, is the fact that Zelenka created so interesting a work out of so unpromising a text as a litany (the longest part comprising several lists of saint's names – 47 individuals and several groups – followed by 'pray for us').

A high point of the disc is the tender 'Benedictus', the longest movement of the Mass, which is for solo soprano and strings. Castrato sopranos were included in the troupe of Italian singers hired in 1730 to revive the Dresden opera and they sang in the church on most important feasts. Before this, while Zelenka would have resorted to the countertenors of the Hofkapelle for his altos, it is unclear who would have sung this glorious soprano solo. Possibly, since it is not

unduly acrobatic, it was an exceptional boy singer from the Dresden Jesuits' Kapellknaben ensemble. On this recording, Adam Viktora's wife, the partly English-trained Czech soprano Gabriela Eibenová, is stunning in this movement. So too is her accompaniment of sinuously fluid violins with *colla parte* transverse flutes over a soft organ, cello and violone continuo.

Eibenová's grace and sweetness shine throughout the Mass and *Litaniae*. Her contributions are almost enough by themselves to earn this disc an IRR Outstanding award. Happily, her fellow soloists are also outstanding, including another Ensemble Inégal stalwart, the bass Marián Krejčík. As customary in Viktora's Zelenka recordings, leading singers from outside the Czech Republic are included among the soloists. The Swiss-American countertenor (and former Vienna choirboy) Terry Wey is an exceptionally gifted artist with a beautiful voice (listen to his captivating 'Christe eleison' in the Mass). So too is the French tenor Cyril Auvity, whose big solo is a bustling aria in the *Litaniae* (a dry list of perils, sufferings and brief invocations for divine assistance). All four singers flawlessly match the period-instrument orchestra's rigorous adherence to eighteenth-century performance practices, an all-too-rare occurrence in Baroque music recordings.

They also match the orchestra's playing, which is nimble, flexible, tightly disciplined and enthusiastic. The 18-strong choir is similarly technically and artistically accomplished, singing Zelenka's demanding music with confidence and majesty.

Thus, we have yet another superb performance by Viktora and his choir and orchestra of music of superior quality and beauty. So what else can be said? Well, there is one complaint. The disc is packaged in an attractive bi-fold cover inside which sit the disc on one side and the booklet on the other. Unfortunately, the weight of the booklet's generous 46 pages causes it to tear out of its cover, which is glued in place by its back, unless handled with extreme care.

Still, this can hardly dim the success of this outstanding recording. **Christopher Price**

A French Baroque Diva New
Delalande Cantate Domino – Viderunt omnes termini terrae. Exurgat Deus – Regna terrae. Te Deum laudamus – excerpts. **Fiocco** Laudate pueri – excerpts. **Lacoste** Philomèle – Ah! quand reviendront nos beaux jours?. **Mondonville** Daphnis et Alcimadure – Gasouillats auzelétés. Venite, exultemus – Venite, adoremus; Hodie si vocem. **Rameau** Castor et Pollux – Un tendre intérêt vous appelle ... Tristes apprêts. Les surprises de l'amour – La lyre enchantée. **Platée** – Amour, lance tes traits. **Rousseau** Salve regina.

Carolyn Sampson (soprano); **Ex Cathedra/ Jeffrey Skidmore**.

Hyperion CDA68035 (full price, 1 hour 3 minutes).

French/Latin texts and English/French/German translations included. *Website* www.hyperion-records.co.uk. *Producer* Adrian Peacock. *Engineer* David Hinitt. *Dates* June 3rd-5th, 2013.



Carolyn Sampson

Marco Borggreve

Celebrating the work of a singer described by Voltaire as an 'adorable nightingale' is a terrific idea for a recording, especially when it has been prepared with such care and performed so stylishly. Marie Fel was one of Rameau's favourite singers and this disc explores her repertoire at the Académie Royal (the Paris Opéra) and the Concert Spirituel from 1734 to 1769.

The first track is from the work in which she made her operatic debut: Louis Lacoste's *Philomèle*. From the start, it's clear that Carolyn Sampson is an ideal exponent, stylishly supported by Ex Cathedra and its period-instrument orchestra. The Sinfonia from Delalande's *Te Deum laudamus* with its stirring trumpets and drums is followed by Sampson singing the 'Tu rex gloriae': her way with French decoration and ornaments sounds very natural – not at all contrived – and her bright, clean tone and expressive delivery certainly suggests the kind of sound that Fel was reported to have had ('pure, charming, silvery', according to La Borde, a pupil of Rameau).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's activities as a composer are usually remembered through his operas, particularly *Le devin du village*, in which Fel took a starring role. He is represented here by *Salve regina*, composed in 1752, the same year as *Le devin du village* as a token of Rousseau's admiration for her singing in his opera. Fel was particularly noted for her performances in the operas by Jean-Philippe Rameau, the greatest French composer of the age. Her appearance in *Platée* (1745) was an important step in her career and Sampson sings an ariette from it on this disc ('Amour, lance tes traits') that is wholly delightful. Later, Fel appeared in a revival of *Castor et Pollux* and 'Un tendre intérêt vous appelle' is most affectingly sung (supported

