

BMC 27 - BAROQUE IN PRAGUE

One may be forgiven for regarding Prague as being “outside” the normal range of Baroque musical centres, for its few composers are little known. The Czech region of Bohemia however was “just across the mountains” from southern Germany and so close that Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, among his other travels, twice visited the Bohemian Spa town of Carlsbad, which had a reputation as the meeting place of the European aristocracy. Bach and some of the Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding-harpsichord) accompanied him – a stimulating experience indeed for the young Bach. It is highly likely that it was on one of these visits that Bach met Bohemian Count Frantisek von Sporck for whom he would many years later, put together the Four Shorter Masses.

The 1700s was a period of tremendous artistic activity in Bohemia and its capital, Prague. The wealth and power of ecclesiastical and aristocratic circles gave rise to the construction of magnificent seats of residence for religious orders, churches, palaces and castles for the nobility, with the accompanying need for statues, paintings, florid ornamentation and various products of artistic craftsmanship. The wide scale on which artistic projects were undertaken during a relatively short time-scale produced a homogeneous style in art and architecture. In the sphere of music, Černohorsky's school of counterpoint in Prague, which flourished in the busy atmosphere of the church choirs (1721-1731), set the tone for Czech composition in the latter 1700s.

One noteworthy feature of 18th C. Bohemian music is that its development falls some twenty years behind Italy and Germany in terms of “musical fashion”. Thus composers whose dates would lead one to expect the style of Mozart and Haydn, surprise with their more traditional Baroque compositions. Brixi forms a bridge between Baroque and Rococo, as can be heard in his Organ Concerto on this disc.

We begin our program with two introductory organ works by noted Bohemian composers, moving then to Brixi's Organ Concerto. The second part of our disc is mainly devoted to the organ and choral works of Černohorsky.

Jan Zach is one of the first and most important representatives of Černohorsky's school. He was born in 1699, becoming Organist at the Church of St. Martin's-in-the-Wall in Prague when Simon Brixi, father of Frantisek Xaver Brixi, was Choirmaster there. From 1745 to 1756 he was conductor of the Archbishop's Orchestra for the Elector of Mainz. He died in Bruchsal in Baden in 1773. He composed a number of symphonies, a few instrumental concertos, and above all, sacred compositions and organ works. In the latter he seems to have let his imagination take wing from depths of feelings which were repressed by the rigidity of contrapuntal rules. His Prelude and Fugue in c-minor in which he makes fascinating use of the chromatic, vividly reflects the spiritual world of this deeply reflective artist with tendencies towards Romanticism.

Josef Seger was the leading spirit of the Czech school of counterpoint after Černohorsky, his Master, and the greatest Czech organist, composer and teacher of music in the Eighteenth Century. Born in 1716, he studied in Prague where he obtained a degree of Master of Philosophy. He devoted himself wholly to music, and for close on forty years he held the post of Organist at the Tyn Church in Prague. He became renowned for the composition of Masses, Litanies and Organ Music. His fame soon spread beyond the borders of Bohemia, and the Emperor Joseph II planned to acquire his services as Court Organist in Vienna. This was not to be however, as Seger died in Prague on April 22, 1782.

František Xaver Brixi was member of the noted family of Czech musicians and related to the famous Bendas. He was born in Prague in 1732, son of Simon Brixi, 1693-1735, Choirmaster and church composer, and cousin of Jiri Antonin Benda. He studied philosophy and music at the Kosmonosy Monastic College. After completing his philosophical studies he was recommended to an organist's post in Prague by Jan Zach, and became Choirmaster at St Vitus' Cathedral in Prague in 1759 at the age of 27 where he would remain until his death. Along with Černohorsky, he became one of the most important Bohemian composers, though he died prematurely in 1771 at the age of 39.

The volume of his compositions is unusually large and testifies to his tremendous capacity for work and extraordinary giftedness. They number over four hundred, predominantly sacred music, and include more than two hundred and fifty Offertories, over one hundred Masses, about fifty Litanies and Vespers, five Requiems, Oratorios and Cantatas, Works for Harpsichord, five Organ (or Harpsichord) Concertos, and many Organ pieces. His five Organ Concertos (in F, D, G, and two in C) were most probably written on the order of the Benedictine Convent at St George's Church in Prague. His Toccata & Fugue in a minor shows his roots in the Baroque, while his lively and tuneful Concerto in C moves into the borderlands between Baroque and Rococo. The orchestral scoring, besides strings, includes two Clarinets or French Horns, adding brilliance to the texture.

Bohuslav Matěj Černohorsky, 1684-1742, has been called the “*Bohemian Bach*”, a reflection of his stature and place in the development of Czech Music. An organist, teacher and composer, he spent much of his life in Italy, at Assisi from 1710 to 1715, then Padua (1715-1720). He would later return to Padua (1731-1741), but between these two periods he worked in Prague, where his School of Counterpoint was to influence not only future Czech composers, but also other non-Czech pupils, such as Tartini and Gluck. Well traveled throughout Europe, he died 1742 in Graz, Austria.

His magnificent Choral Fugue, “*Laudeatur Jesus Christus*”, is indisputable evidence of a musician of tremendous creative vitality with an absolute mastery of counterpoint. In contrast, his Motet in honour of St. Stephen who was stoned by the Jews as he prayed to Christ, “*Quem lapidaverunt Judiae Orantem*” is an exceptional piece of descriptive music in which the almost brutal fugal treatment dramatically conveys the reigning down of stones upon the martyr. His choral writing, while uniquely Bohemian, resembles that of Vivaldi’s Choral Works such as the Gloria RV 589 (BMC 19). Černohorsky would certainly have been aware of Vivaldi’s work; the two may even have been acquainted. From 1717-19 Vivaldi was in Mantua, just 50 miles from Černohorsky in Padua; in 1730-31 both were in Prague, with Vivaldi’s Operas being performed at the theater of Count von Sporck.

One of Vivaldi’s pupils was another Czech-born musician **Jan Dismas Zelenka** (1679-1714), who had also studied with Fux in Vienna and later worked in Dresden where he most certainly met J.S. Bach, as during his later years Bach often visited Dresden for “some light entertainment”! We end our disc with the splendid *Amen* from Zelenka’s *Magnificat* composed for the Dresden Catholic Court in 1725. The work is a masterly double fugue – J.S. Bach heard it and instructed his son Wilhelm Friedemann to copy the work for use by the St. Thomas Choir at Leipzig.

We have a whole CD of Zelenka’s fascinating and unusual music, with full biographical detail, on BMC 31.

Cernohorsky’s Organ Works were recorded on the early Baroque instrument in the Tyn Church, Prague, constructed in 1670-73 by Hans Heinrich Mundt of Köln, and the 3-manual Organ of 1745-6 by Tomas Schwartz in the Church of St Nicholas, also in Prague.