

## Jan Dismas Zelenka – Gesu al Calvario (ZWV 62) [2001]



Michelangelo Boccardi - lyricist CD1 1. *Introduction* 00:03:19 2. *Recitative: O figlie di Sione (Maria Vergine)* 00:01:04 3. *Coro: Misera Madre (Soprano, Alto, Chorus)* 00:05:54 4. *Recitative: Fiero dolor (San Giovanni)* 00:01:41 5. *Aria: Se in te fosse (San Giovanni)* 00:08:17 6. *Recitative: Madre! Figlio! (Gesù, Maria Vergine)* 00:02:00 7. *Aria: Ah! se tu costì (Maria Vergine)* 00:10:32 8. *Recitative: tanto amor che ti giova (San Giovanni, Gesù, Maria Vergine)* 00:03:31 9. *Aria: A che riserbano i cieli (San Giovanni)* 00:06:41 10. *Recitative: Ed io, Signor (Maria Maddalena, Maria Cleofe)* 00:00:50 11. *Aria: Sì la morte (Maria Cleofe)* 00:08:16 12. *Recitative: Smanie di dolci affetti (Gesù)* 00:00:49 13. *Aria: S'una sol lagrima (Gesù)* 00:10:47 14. *Coro di Giudei: Sì crocifigga il Nazareno (Chorus)* 00:02:57

### CD2

1. *Recitative: Spasimi del cor mio (Maria Vergine, San Giovanni, Maria Maddalena, Maria Cleofe)* 00:02:43 2. *Aria: Se ingrato e ribelle (Maria Maddalena)* 00:07:17 3. *Recitative: Alzate pur il gran trofeo (Gesù, Maria Vergine, Maria Maddalena, Maria Cleofe, San Giovanni)* 00:03:44 4. *Duet: Santo amor, che tanto peni (Maria Maddalena, Maria Cleofe)* 00:08:08 5. *Recitative: Vinto da tanto amor (Gesù, Maria Vergine, Maria Maddalena, Maria Cleofe, San Giovanni)* 00:04:52 6. *Aria: Che fiero martire (Maria Vergine)* 00:12:57 7. *Recitative: Ma di tragica scena (San Giovanni)* 00:02:09 8. *Chorus: Questo è il monte salutare (Chorus)* 00:02:02

Sopran (Maria Vergine): Ingrid Schmithüsen Sopran (Maria Maria Maddalena): Larissa Malikowa Kontratenor (Gesù): David Corier Kontratenor (San Giovanni): Kai Wessel Alt (Maria Cleofe): Lena Susanne Norin Rheinische Kantorei Das Kleine Konzert Hermann Max – director

Jan Dismas Zelenka is one of the most interesting composers of the baroque era. He developed a style of his own, which brought him the admiration of, among others, Johann Sebastian Bach. His biography doesn't reflect this admiration, though - he never held a major position, and "his" instrument, the double bass, didn't provide him with the best starting point anyway. One of the features of his life is the fact that he was overlooked. Born near Prague he went to Dresden, and became a member of the court orchestra. Together with others he got the opportunity to visit Italy in 1715. Next year he was a pupil of Johann Josef Fux in Vienna. When he went back

to Dresden he worked under Heinichen, and for his activities as composer and performer he was awarded the title of deputy Kapellmeister, which didn't increase his financial position, though. When Heinichen died in 1729 Zelenka didn't succeed him. Instead Johann Adolf Hasse was appointed as Heinichen's successor. Although a petition to the king brought him a little additional salary, he didn't have any official duties anymore, and he decided to devote himself to composing. It is not inconceivable that - for today's audiences - this was a blessing in disguise. If he had held an important position he would have been much more limited in his possibilities to compose as he liked. He would have taken the taste of his time much more into account.

For the Dresden court Zelenka composed a number of masses. From the last period of his life date two important oratorios for Holy Week: *Gesu al Calvario* (1735) and *I penitenti al Sepolchro del redentore* (1736). They belong to the genre of the passion oratorio, which doesn't tell the story of the suffering and death of Jesus itself, but contains a story about the passion of Jesus. In Zelenka's *Gesu al Calvario* even that isn't the case: there is hardly any action. As the title suggests it tells Jesus' suffering at the cross and the way the people around him experience it: his mother (Maria Vergine), Maria Maddalena and Maria Cleofe, and his disciple and personal friend St John (San Giovanni). And Jesus himself is playing a role as well, explaining why he had to suffer, and why the guilty are set free and the innocent has to die. Because that's what the story concentrates upon: the women and San Giovanni are resisting the idea of Jesus suffering, although innocent, while the people who want to crucify him, get away with it unpunished. It is put very strongly by St John. After Jesus has told him: "This is the law: the guilty shall be saved, the innocent shall die", he replies: "This law, O Lord, is too hard: the innocent should be saved, and the world should be destroyed." Although the scene around the cross finds its origin in the fantasy of the librettist, Michelangelo Boccardi, this dialogue is accurately describing what the Bible tells us: the disciples resisted Jesus' passion and didn't understand his will to die, and only after Jesus' resurrection they started to understand what the suffering and death of Jesus were all about.

The orchestration of this oratorio is as colourful as one expects from Zelenka. Apart from the strings the orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons and one chalumeau, an instrument Zelenka had already used in the *Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetiae*. The orchestra vividly illustrates the content of arias and choruses, for example in the chorus of the Jews: "Si crocifigga il Nazareno" (the Nazarener should be crucified). Unison passages are used to underline important moments.

The way the characters are portrayed in the libretto is closely reflected in the music. The most emotional part is without any doubt that of Maria Vergine, the mother of Jesus. Maria Maddalena and Maria Cleofe are especially worried about the fact that Jesus has to suffer because of their sins, and in a beautiful duet, in which the chalumeau is used to great effect, they promise never to commit sins again. San Giovanni strongly resists Jesus' suffering for the

guilty, even for those who rejected him and wanted to crucify him. That is reflected in his arias, in particular in "A che riserbano": "Why do the heavens hold back their lightnings, why aren't they fired off at the wickedness?" This is an aria like the "rage arias" in baroque operas.

The performance is almost ideal. First of all the choice of singers is excellent. Ingrid Schmithüsen portrays the suffering Maria Vergine very impressively. I only wonder whether she should sustain some notes as long as she does, or should have used the 'exclamatio' more often in stead. The loving and repentent Maria Maddalena and Maria Cleofe are convincingly interpreted by Larissa Malikowa and Lena Susanne Norin respectively, whose voices blend very well in their duet. Interesting - and spot on - is the casting of the two male altos. David Cordier is a great choice for the role of Jesus: the soft edge of his voice exactly matches the character of Jesus: loving, caring and merciful. San Giovanni, on the other hand, is resistent and would like to see the wicked world destroyed. Kai Wessel depicts that character brilliantly. He uses his chest register in the "rage aria" very effectively.

The choir - which has a relatively small part - is good as always, and so is the orchestra. In some arias I would have liked a little more aggressive approach from the orchestra, but on the whole the playing is colourful and lively.

The notes in the booklet are very informative. I cant't understand, though, why it contains only a German, and no English translation of the text. To sum up: this is a highly recommendable recording of a great work, which shows again that Zelenka is not a "minor" composer, but one of the greatest masters of the baroque. ---Johan van Veen, musica-dei-donum.org

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