



the province of the Saxon Court's music director, Johann

Adolf Hasse, or his counterpart at the Polish Royal Court (the Saxon Prince Elector then being also King of Poland), Giovanni Alberto Ristori. Yet, Jan Dismas Zelenka, principally a composer of liturgical music, was entrusted with writing a *serenata* for the politically important wedding on February 28th, 1737 of Prince Georg Ignatius Lubomirski, scion of a Polish noble family holding important posts in Dresden, and Baroness Joanna Stein, the sister-in-law of the Saxon Prime Minister, Alexander Joseph Sulkowsky. Although the authors of the booklet notes, Jóhannes Ágústsson and Václav Kapsa, see in this a contradiction of the traditional image of an under-appreciated Zelenka, the reality may be that Hasse and Ristori were too busy with other more important tasks, the former's opera *Senocrita* being performed the day before the wedding and the latter producing the first opera of Dresden's carnival season that year. The official Saxon state calendar records that Hasse and Ristori also jointly directed a 'superb Concert' by the whole Royal Chapel and the Italian [opera] Virtuosi immediately after the marriage ceremony.

The wedding day diary and the *Serenata's* printed libretto recently found in the Saxon State Archives by Ágústsson reveal not only the work's title *Il Diamante* but also that it was performed as a kind of *Tafelmusik* during the wedding banquet. It may have been a surprise for the bridal couple from Sulkowsky, the Prince Elector or the latter's wife, the Habsburg Archduchess Maria Josepha, who had earlier given the bride a valuable jewel and was a supporter of Zelenka. This may explain the *serenata's* theme of a diamond given by Terra (Earth personified) to the goddess Juno, who has Hymen, the god of wedlock, pass it to the Prince as a pledge for his marriage. (The title is also a flattering reference to the bride's surname. As Cupid declaims, '... not by chance does she bear the name Stone ... What gem can boast a light equal to that of her fair eyes?')

This première recording of *Il Diamante* is very enjoyable. The combined period-instrument Ensemble Inégál and Prague Baroque Soloists under their director Adam Viktora are superb in the exciting opening Sinfonia scored for strings and pairs of flutes, oboes (doubled here to four), bassoons and blaring French horns, which breaks off after a few minutes for a delicate 'adagio' for two flutes and continuo before launching into a rollicking final

'minuetto'. Successfully achieving the seemingly paradoxical combination of his established intensely contrapuntal, rhythmically complex and harmonically tangy style with the new *galant* and melodious operatic style Hasse had brought with him on his arrival in Dresden in 1733, Zelenka wrote dense, roiling orchestral accompaniments full of incident to the more Neapolitan-style vocal soloists' parts. The orchestra's taut, highly disciplined and richly nuanced playing in the arias is an important reason for the recording's success.

The singers, with one exception, are also outstanding. Each character, save for Venus, has two arias, all of which are lengthy and extremely demanding. Even the slower, lyrical passages are full of coloratura and extraordinary leaps. The current superstar of the Czech Early Music scene, the brilliant-toned soprano Hana Blažíková, sings the role of Terra, whose arias require even more athleticism and soar higher than the rest, with exceptional control and unerring faithfulness to the Baroque idiom. The agile Italian soprano Roberta Mameli has the only marginally more sedate part of Juno, which her slightly darker, softer-edged tone suits very well, while the German countertenor Kai Wessel, the only male singer, is on exceptional form as the ebullient, almost hyperactive Hymen. Only the soprano Marie Fajtová as Cupid (or Amore) is relatively disappointing. While she is an outstanding vocal acrobat, negotiating the punishing coloratura of her arias with considerable accuracy and seemingly little effort, her voice dissolves into a constant heavy vibrato in the less florid passages. Her diction is also quite poor.

As for Venus, she appears unexpectedly after what seems at first to be the work's finale: a choral reprise of the opening Sinfonia's 'minuetto', sung here with polished enthusiasm by the 15-strong choir led by Mameli and Blažíková. She bursts in with recitative beginning 'Am I, perhaps, forgotten ...?' and then sings a long, tender aria garlanded with delicate coloratura to the caressing accompaniment of strings and flutes. Venus's role was probably added as an afterthought and, as an additional surprise for the wedding couple, may have been sung by none other than Hasse's wife, Faustina Bordoni, the Dresden Court's famous prima donna. Fittingly, on this recording Venus is Viktora's wife, the impeccably stylish and sweet-voiced soprano Gabriela Eibenová. The effect of her refined rendition of the aria, coming after the persistent 'Zelenkian' restlessness and excitement of the preceding hour and a quarter of music, is overwhelming.

Despite the shortcomings of one singer, this recording represents historically informed performance of Baroque theatrical music of the highest order and fully deserves an 'IRR Outstanding' rating. *Christopher Price*

Zelenka

New

Il Diamante, ZWV177.

Roberta Mameli (soprano) *Giunone*; **Marie Fajtová** (soprano) *Amore*; **Gabriela Eibenová** (soprano) *Venere*; **Hana Blažíková** (soprano) *Terra*; **Kai Wessel** (countertenor) *Imeneo*; **Ensemble Inégál**; **Prague Baroque Soloists**/**Adam Viktora**.

Nibiru 0152232 (full price, two discs, 1 hour 37 minutes). Italian libretto and English/German/Czech/French translations included. *Webside* www.nibiru-publishers.com. *Producer* Petr Rezníček. *Engineer* Aleš Dvořák. *Dates* September 9th-13th, 2009.

Composing music for important events, both religious and secular, in Dresden was usually