

## DARKNESS, LIGHT AND MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, 22 January 2017, being the occasion of the orchestral performance of *Missa Paschalis* (1726) by Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745)**

Shortly after 5.00pm on 22 February 1943, three young students were executed by guillotine in Stadelheim Prison, Munich, having been found guilty of high treason against the Third Reich. Sophie Scholl, her older brother, Hans, and their friend, Christoph Probst, had committed their treason by forming an organisation called the White Rose that wrote and distributed anti-government leaflets. Both Sophie and Hans Scholl were devout Lutherans associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church. Probst was received into the Catholic Church hours before he died.

In the winter of 1941-1942, Sophie had taken time, while doing compulsory service in a town near the Swiss border, to play the organ in a small local chapel. She wrote to a friend:

Isn't it a riddle . . . and awe-inspiring, that everything is so beautiful? Despite the horror. Lately I've noticed something grand and mysterious peering through my sheer joy in all that is beautiful, a sense of its creator . . . Only man can be truly ugly, because he has the free will to estrange himself from this song of praise.

It often seems that he'll manage to drown out this hymn with his cannon thunder, curses and blasphemy. But during this past spring it has dawned upon me that he won't be able to do this. And so I want to try and throw myself on the side of the victor.<sup>2</sup>

In the second half of 1942, Hans had been a medical orderly on the Eastern Front. His response had been the opposite. He wrote:

I have no music in me anymore. Now all I hear are groans and screams of people in torment.<sup>3</sup>

From the midst of their turmoil, the Scholl siblings have alerted us to a fundamental tension in our lives. Using the analogy of music, they contrast the beauty of nature with the ugliness of human life. It is not that their analogy was in any way new. Since the times of Pythagoras, the unity and beauty of the created order had been described as the "music of the spheres". What impresses us about the Scholl siblings is their authenticity and the way in which their understanding of the creation influenced the way in which they acted. That understanding encouraged them to seek the renewal of a disfigured humanity. That they used the analogy of music points to their deep German culture established in the chorales of the Lutheran Church and its reliance on the music of J S Bach.

*Missa Paschalis* was composed in 1726 by Jan Dismas Zelenka<sup>4</sup>, a contemporary of both Bach and Handel. Its first performance was in the Dresden Catholic Court Chapel on Easter Monday that year. Dresden was the capital of the Principality of Saxony and its Prince-Elector, Friedrich August, was also King of Poland. Saxony was the birthplace of

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-25

<sup>2</sup> Annette Dumbach & Jud Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose*, Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2011, p.19. They were amongst 1,035 persons beheaded in that prison and amongst 16,500 beheaded by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. They wrote and distributed six leaflets before they, and others, were arrested. A seventh leaflet had been drafted.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1979, p. 179

<sup>4</sup> My discussion of Zelenka and his music is informed by Janice B Stockigt, *Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745): A Bohemian at the Court of Dresden*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006 and by personal communications with Dr Stockigt and Mr Andrew Frampton of Merton College, Oxford, the editor of the critical edition of this Mass that is being used this morning. A liturgical presentation of this Mass in St Paul's Church, Antwerp, on Easter Day, 5 April 2015, can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6YHBCO0zfl>

Lutheranism and, since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, both Prince and people had been committed Lutherans.

Only a Catholic could be King of Poland, so in 1697, the current prince's father had converted, creating a religious divide that was managed, in a fashion, by keeping the court chapel to itself and by avoiding ostentatious external display. That did not prevent, for example, riots following a provocative sermon by a visiting Jesuit, who described Luther as "that crazy and perjurious monk".<sup>5</sup> Neither did it prevent magnificent events within the confines of the palace and its chapel and this morning's mass is testimony to how that principle worked out and, in practice, attracted many music-loving Lutherans.<sup>6</sup>

The religious division did not extend to the musicians. Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach wrote that his father, J S Bach, knew and admired Zelenka. Recent research shows that Zelenka provided Bach with scores that he reworked for Lutheran worship in Leipzig.

Religious and dynastic wars created great turmoil in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Zelenka arrived in Dresden from Prague in 1710 in the middle of the Great Northern War, which involved Saxony, Poland, Sweden and Russia in the years from 1700 to 1720.<sup>7</sup> Yet to come, in 1733, was the War of the Polish Succession, which began with the death of Friedrich August in that year.<sup>8</sup> So, despite the endemic turmoil, Zelenka's mass was written in a period of relative calm.

For us, this morning, the critical question revolves around the contrast between the devastating comments of the Scholl siblings and the magnificence of the music that we are hearing in Zelenka's mass. Writing of the music of J S Bach, Jeremy Begbie puts the contrast in this way:

[The question] is the interplay between two types of beauty: on the one hand, the beauty that is in some sense already "there" in the nature of things (the beauty of "truthful" harmonies), and on the other, the beauty human beings make ... . Put more theologically, there is the beauty directly given to the world by God, and that which we are invited to fashion as God's creatures.<sup>9</sup>

Begbie identifies the main components of beauty as proportion, brightness, integrity and the affording of pleasure upon contemplation. The absence of these features silenced music for the Scholl siblings but inspired their search to rediscover both the given and the made beauty. Brightness, integrity and pleasure enliven us today as they did in Dresden in 1726. Janice Stockigt describes the scene there:

In Dresden's royal chapel Holy Week usually concluded on Holy Saturday at 8 pm (sometimes at 9 pm). As expected, the music heard during the following triduum changed in mood and in instrumental colour. These were days of great aural splendour when the ceremonies of Holy Week gave way to the delights of the joyful Resurrection. According to the *Historia* of 1725 the altar of the royal chapel was elegantly covered by a pure silk cloth and lit by numerous large candles of virgin wax. A procession accompanied by the sound of trumpets and timpani, and 'the charming harmonies of exquisite music' concluded Holy Week. Glorious mass settings made brilliant with trumpets and timpani, joyful compositions of the Marian antiphon *Regina coeli* (which began to be sung from the time when the

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<sup>5</sup> Stockigt, pp. 280-281

<sup>6</sup> Stockigt, pp. 23-27

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Northern\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Northern_War)

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_of\\_the\\_Polish\\_Succession](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_of_the_Polish_Succession)

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy S Begbie, "Created Beauty: The Witness of J. S. Bach" in Jeremy S Begbie and Steven R Guthrie (eds), *Resonant witness: Conversations Between Music and Theology*, Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011, Chapter 4

Resurrection was celebrated until after Pentecost Sunday), and Te Deum performances, again with trumpets and timpani, enlivened Eastertide.<sup>10</sup>

As if to emphasise their importance, today's readings from both Isaiah and Matthew contain these words:

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them has light shined.<sup>11</sup>

When, as the Scholl siblings remind us, nobody responds to the light, the darkness only deepens. It will take courage to proclaim its presence, to recover the beauty of the eternal music and to encourage a continuation of the human music.

Daniel Chua comments:

If music is an integral part of what it is to be human, then it ought to reflect something of the image of God in which we are made. If part of the *imago Dei* is the relationship of love that lies at the heart of the Trinity, then perhaps music can open up a way of thinking about how we relate to the world and to God in a manner where love rather than reason dominates. After all, music is inherently relational, both internally in the way its notes are put together and externally in the way in which it is used to communicate in everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

We live in troubled times. We must not allow the eternal music to be obscured. To do that, we must continue to make our human music.

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!  
The heavens are not too high,  
His praise may thither fly,  
The earth is not too low,  
His praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!  
The church with psalms must shout,  
No door can keep them out;  
But, above all, the heart  
Must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Janice B Stockigt, 'Music for Holy Week, Resurrection, and Eastertide in the Catholic Court Church of Dresden during the Reign of August II "The Strong"', Notes in the program for a performance of Zelenka's *Missa Paschalis*, in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, Newman College, University of Melbourne, 21 April 2013. [http://www.historyofemotions.org.au/media/64841/resurrexit\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.historyofemotions.org.au/media/64841/resurrexit_pdf.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 9:2, Matthew 5:16

<sup>12</sup> Daniel K L Chua, "Music as the Mouthpiece of Theology", in Begbie and Guthrie, Chapter 6

<sup>13</sup> George Herbert (1593-1632), *New English Hymnal*, No. 394