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Counterpoint from B to Z

by [VIRGINIA NEWES](#)

The high art of counterpoint appeared to have reached the summit of its glory in Western polyphony of the late 16th century, only to trigger a reaction around 1600 in favor of expressive song. Yet exercises in setting one voice against another, *stile antico*, in fugal exposition, and in such arcane techniques as crab (backwards) and inverted (upside down) canon continued to figure in instruction manuals of the Baroque era, most famously in the *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Steps to Parnassus, 1725), by the Habsburg court composer, Johann Joseph Fux. The five woodwind and continuo players of the *Kleine Kammermusik*, all of whom collaborate regularly with other American period instrument ensembles, juxtaposed works by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and his close contemporary Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745) in “The Art of Counterpoint: From Bach to Zelenka” that matched instrumental with compositional virtuosity. Cambridge Society for Early Music’s “Chamber Music by Candlelight” ran in in Carlisle, Weston, Salem, Ipswich, and Cambridge. This reviewer heard it in Christ Church Cambridge on October 23rd.

Born in Prague, Zelenka worked in Dresden at the court of the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland Friedrich August I, composing large amounts of religious music; exposure to Italian musical fashions in the works of Vivaldi, Lotti, and others strongly influenced his instrumental works. His six trio sonatas for two oboes and continuo from around 1720 were only discovered in the 1960s. In the first movement of the first of the set, *Adagio ma non troppo*, Baroque oboists Geoffrey Burgess and Meg Owens played long and sinuous lines in free counterpoint with utmost breath control and refined articulation over a walking bass line in the cello (Rebecca Humphrey) and bassoon (Stephanie Corwin); Leon Schelhase was the continuo harpsichordist. In the *Allegro* that followed, cello and bassoon integrated thematically with astonishingly virtuosic passage work in the oboes.

After a chromatically shaded *Larghetto* in minor, the *Finale, Allegro assai*, was a rollicking dance that included staccato accents in cello and bassoon along with echo effects in the oboes.

In Zelenka's crab canon "Vide Domine et considera / laborum meum" (Look, Lord, and consider / my work), published by Telemann in his *Der Getreue Music-Meister*, 1728, with suggestions for 14 different realizations, the two upper parts each consist of two short phrases, the second of them a backwards version of the first, while the two lower voices proceed in free counterpoint. In this instrumental version, Meg Owens exchanged her oboe for an oboe da caccia, an instrument in the tenor range bent to an angle like the "English" horn. Harpsichordist Leon Schelhase responded eloquently to Zelenka's punning musical metaphor with Bach's haunting *Canon at the Fifth*, the 15th of the *Goldberg Variations*. Here the comes (companion) follows the dux (leader) but begins a fifth higher and inverts its descents to ascents (and vice versa) throughout. The four-voice *Contrapunctus I* that opens Bach's *Art of Fugue* rang out with exemplary clarity in an arrangement for oboe, oboe da caccia, bassoon, and cello. A lithe and sprightly rendering of the *G Minor Fugue* for organ (BWV 542) by the same four players closed the first half of the program.



Kleine Kammermusik (Tatiana Daubeck photo)

Bach composed his celebratory cantata, "Schleicht, spielende Wellen" (Glide, playful waves) for King Augustus III: the librettist's conceit has the four rivers that water his kingdom vying in praise of the monarch. Representing the Danube, the aria "Reis von Habsburgs hohem Stamme" (Scion of Habsburgs lofty line) is sung by an alto to the accompaniment of a pair of oboe d'amore (soft-toned oboes pitched a minor third lower than the standard instrument) and continuo. Here the voice part was played on the bassoon by Stephanie Corwin, a somewhat neutral-sounding arrangement that shifted the focus toward the ravishing tone of the two oboes. Another interesting stylistic juxtaposition was offered in the first Prelude and Fugue from Bach's Well-Tempered

Clavier, Book I. On the harpsichord, Leon Schelhase brought out the implicit melodic lines in the broken-chord figuration of the Prelude, an enrichment only possible on the keyboard, while the performance of the fugue by the four-voice ensemble of oboe, oboe da caccia, bassoon, and cello offered its own clarification. In the Three-Part Ricercar from The Musical Offering Schelhase did full justice to the improvisatory and even galant episodes that the aging Bach had inserted in tribute to the Prussian king. Finally, Zelenka's Sonata IV for two oboes, bassoon, and continuo expanded the trio-sonata texture with its increasingly independent bassoon part. In the second movement, Allegro, the bassoon engaged in lively motivic exchange with the oboes in bouncy staccato and, in the Adagio, counterposed rocking broken chords against sustained notes in the oboes. The Finale, Allegro ma non troppo, displayed the virtuosity of all four players in complex fugal counterpoint. All thanks to the musicians of Kleine Kammermusik for a skillfully-chosen program, expertly played. Please come again, and bring us more Zelenka.

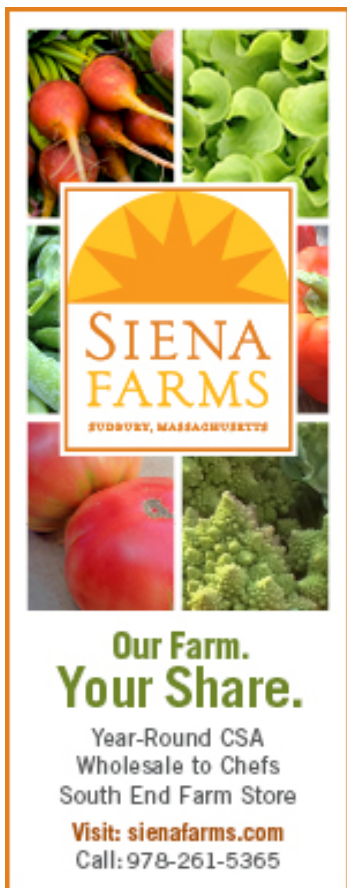
Virginia Newes, who lives in Cambridge, was Associate Professor of Music History and Musicology at the Eastman School of Music.

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