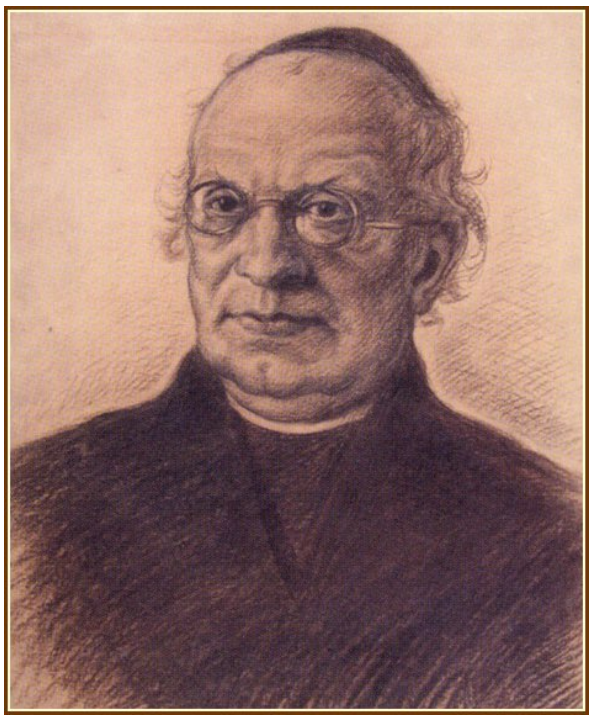
The choral and organ music of Bohuslav Matěj Černohorský (1684-1742)

By John Riley

N.B. In order to gain a full impression of this composer, readers are recommended to use the online links to recordings, (underlined). There is a sparsity of modern recordings, many of these examples via Spotify, dating from the 1960s onwards and with performance practices rather different to what would be expected from period ensembles today….but very interesting to hear, nevertheless! Even if you don't have Spotify installed on your device, the programme should still open via the underlined links. Alternatively, most examples will be obtainable on this YouTube link.



In investigating some of the lesser-known highways and byways of music, that of the transitional period from Baroque to Classical is of particular interest, not least in relation to the near contemporaries of J.S. Bach. Whilst clearly not of the same stature, this is not to say that their music is merely a pale shadow of Bach's music without individuality of style. Nor should our access to so much music of the period and a long perspective of music history lead us to assume that the such works all radiated out of the great figures such as Bach. Composers throughout Europe worked in much greater isolation than in later times, Bohemia being particularly insular. Indeed, there is no evidence that Černohorský had any knowledge of the works of Bach. Even in Bach's part of Germany he was regarded as old fashioned at the time; it was figures some of whose names are lesser-known today, particularly in Italy, that were much more influential in setting stylistic trends.

Černohorský studied philosophy at Prague University from 1700 to 1702 and around 1704, became a member of the Conventual Franciscan order, partly at least due to the attraction of the music at the Order's Church of Our Lady before Týn. Later, in 1708 he was ordained as a priest. Nevertheless, in 1710 he left for Assisi in the Papal States to study music and acquaint himself further with Italian styles some knowledge of which he had already gained in Prague. Because he left without consent of his superiors he was expelled from Bohemian lands for ten years. From 1710 to 1715 he worked as an organist in the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi where he gained a fine reputation as organist and teacher and counted Giuseppe Tartini among his students. He subsequently moved to a post in Padua and had opportunity to acquaint himself with Italian opera and the works of Vivaldi among others. The rather fine and distinctly tuneful aria ***Regina Coeli*** in which operatic influences are very evident date from this time.

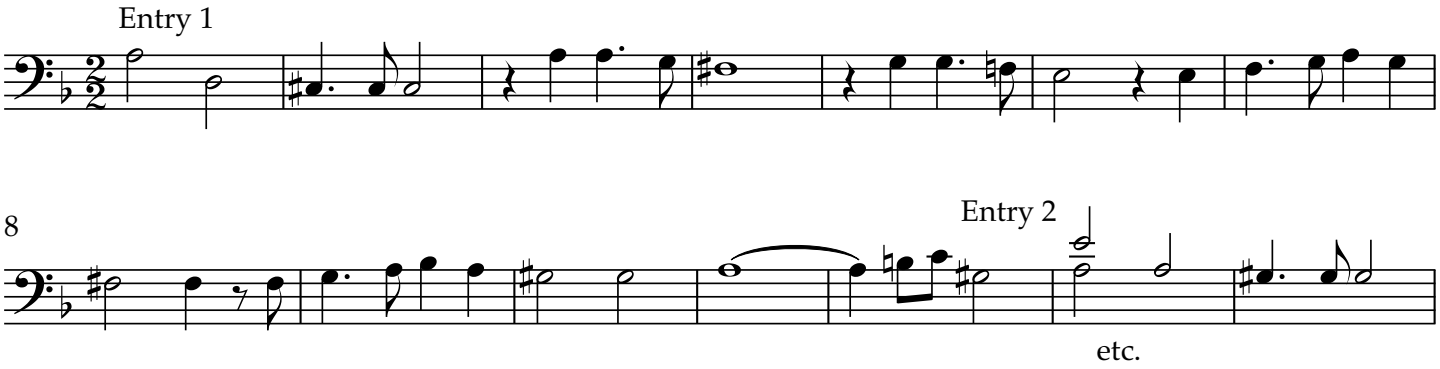
After the expiration of his punishment, he came back to Prague, where he devoted himself to teaching. Among his important pupils are Christoph Willibald Gluck, Josef Seger, František Tůma and others.

However, despite being at the height of his reputation and creativity, Černohorský's once more came up against the Order's authorities. His stubborn and independent nature and no doubt periodic criticisms may have played a part, as he was officially ostracized for three years (1727–30). He was sent to the covent in Horažďovice to be 'tormented by fasting' and stripped of his titles as bachelor and master for, 'among other things', denying the convent (seemingly under some financial pressure at the time) his family inheritance. In the event however, this was to prove one of the most peaceful and productive periods in his career.
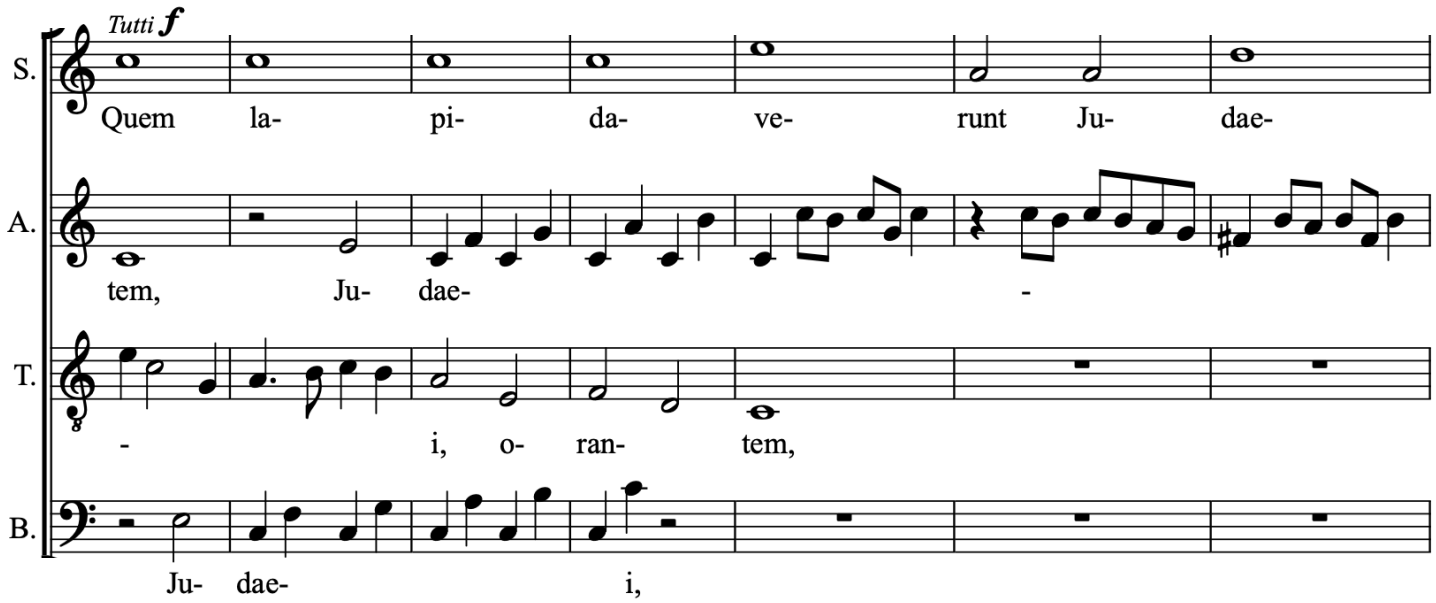
Upon his return to Prague, he was fully rehabilitated by the general of the Order and within a year was, as Černohorský had requested, allowed to return to Padua. In 1741, for reasons that are not entirely clear, he decided to return to Prague, already suffering from ill health, but never reached there. The Austrian war of succession was raging in Bohemia and quite possibly this led to a diversion on the long journey to the Minorite monastery in Graz, Austria where he remained for several months but subsequently died. News of his death did not reach Prague until some months later.

Despite his fame and influence, however, relatively little of Černohorský's output survives as most of his manuscripts and those of other composers were destroyed in a fire at the Minorite convent in Prague in 1753. Because he was a master improviser who rarely published prints of his music, the vast majority of his life's work existed only in handwritten copies stored at the monastery. The sources of the keyboard music (q.v.) in particular are reliant on much later collections rather than the original manuscripts. In recent years many have been deemed as spurious and in some cases been attributed to definite figures such as Froberger, Muffat and Seger. On matters of authenticity, the various sources consulted are not always in agreement, so attributions stated here may not be absolutely correct.

Authenticity however is easier to establish for his surviving choral works and on which Černohorský should be judged. These displays considerable mastery of counterpoint for which he was famed. His fugal subjects though tend to be long and at times rather 'tuneful' as were many in post Baroque periods. One of his best-known choral works is ***Quare domino irasceris****;* various transitional elements towards the classical style are evident, as indeed in so much music of that period. The quasi-fugal subject is distinctly memorable and does stick in the mind! (EX.1). It is somewhat four-square and perhaps a little forced though its various motifs are skillfully and exhaustively worked out in the successive counterpoint.
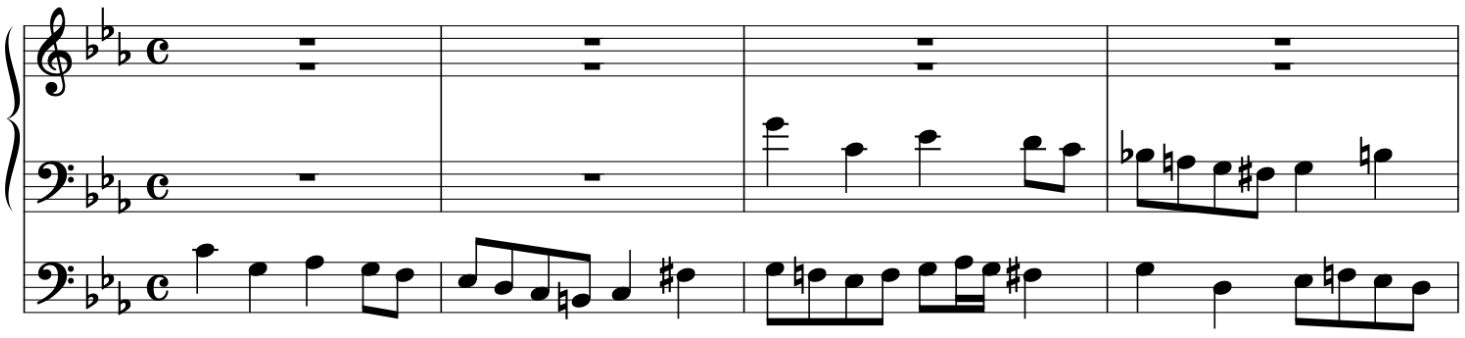


Also of interest as music – and this performance(!) is ***Quem lapidaverunt:*** The word 'monumental' comes to mind! The distinctly individual countersubject is rather more instrumental than vocal in shape and does remind one somewhat of a singing warm up/pitching exercise…or even a form of musical press-ups! But the singers in this recording clearly give it all their worth.. if not the last word in refinement. (EX. 2 – vocal parts only)
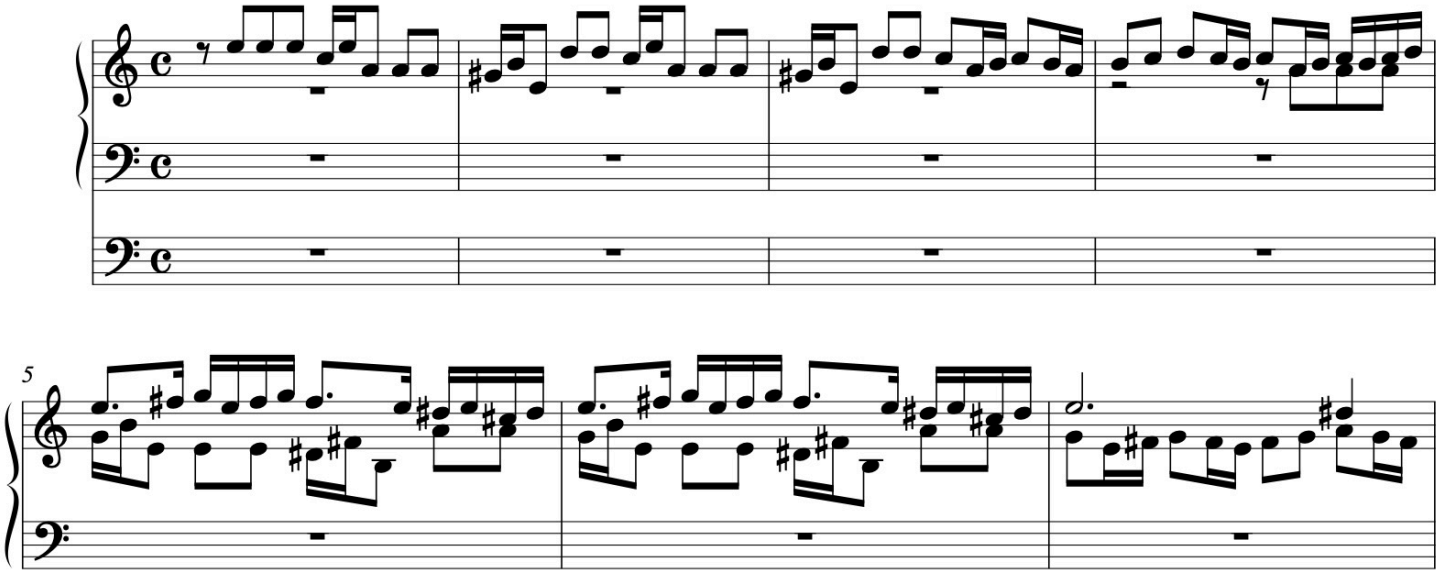


Among his finest works must also be counted ***Laudate Jesus Christus***, its smoothness of line and fluidity of counterpoint contrasting with the much more angular vocal writing of the above works. The influence of *prima practicca* and much earlier church music is clearly evident.

In contrasting style again, the motet, ***Regina Coeli*** dating from his time in Assisi bears the influence of Handel, whose music he became acquainted with there, but with echoes of polychoral works of earlier composers such as Gabrieli.
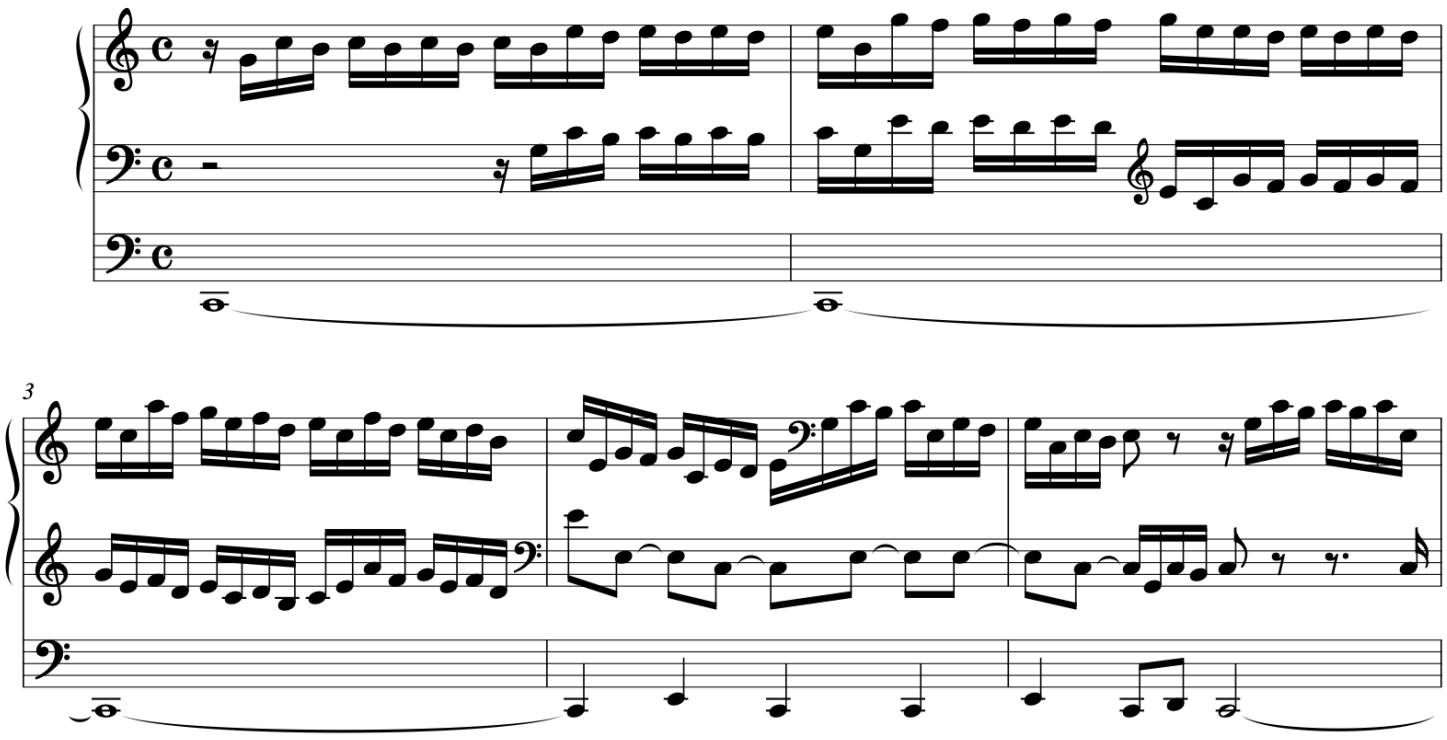
As stated above, much of the organ music formerly attributed to Černohorský is now thought to be by various other composers, both those of earlier and later generations. The ***Fugue in C minor*** though with its characterful fugue subject can be counted as authentic. (EX.3)
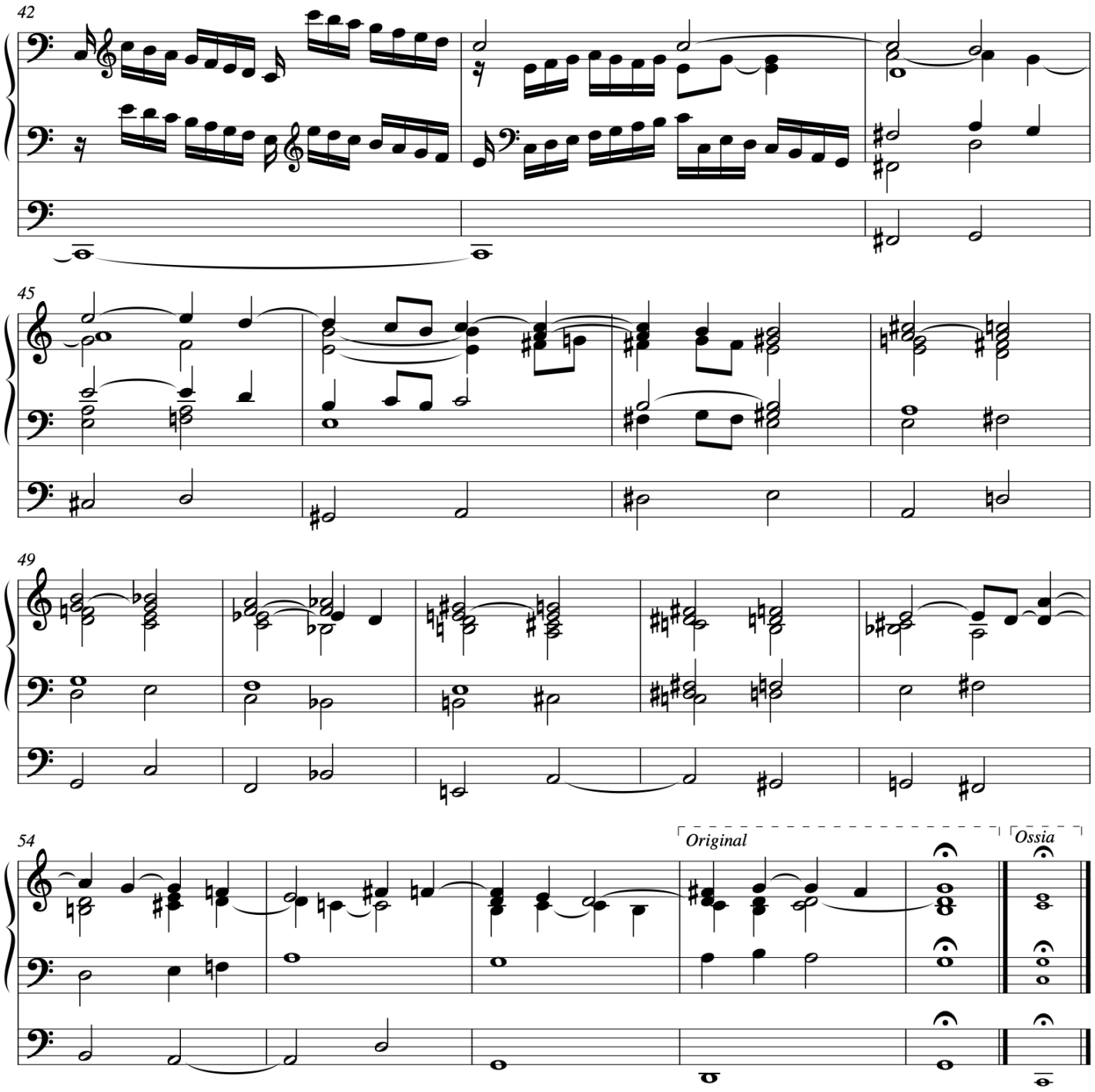


Most of the other attributions are worthy of exploration, the ***Fugue in A minor*** being perhaps the most distinctive with its lively subject and transparent counterpoint. (EX.4)



The ***Toccata in C*** is most likely the work of Pachelbel, the ending though is in very different style to the rest of the piece, the chromatic harmony redolent of what we would associate with much later composers, a pre-whiff of Reger even! (EX.5 – opening section. EX.6 – closing section – overleaf).
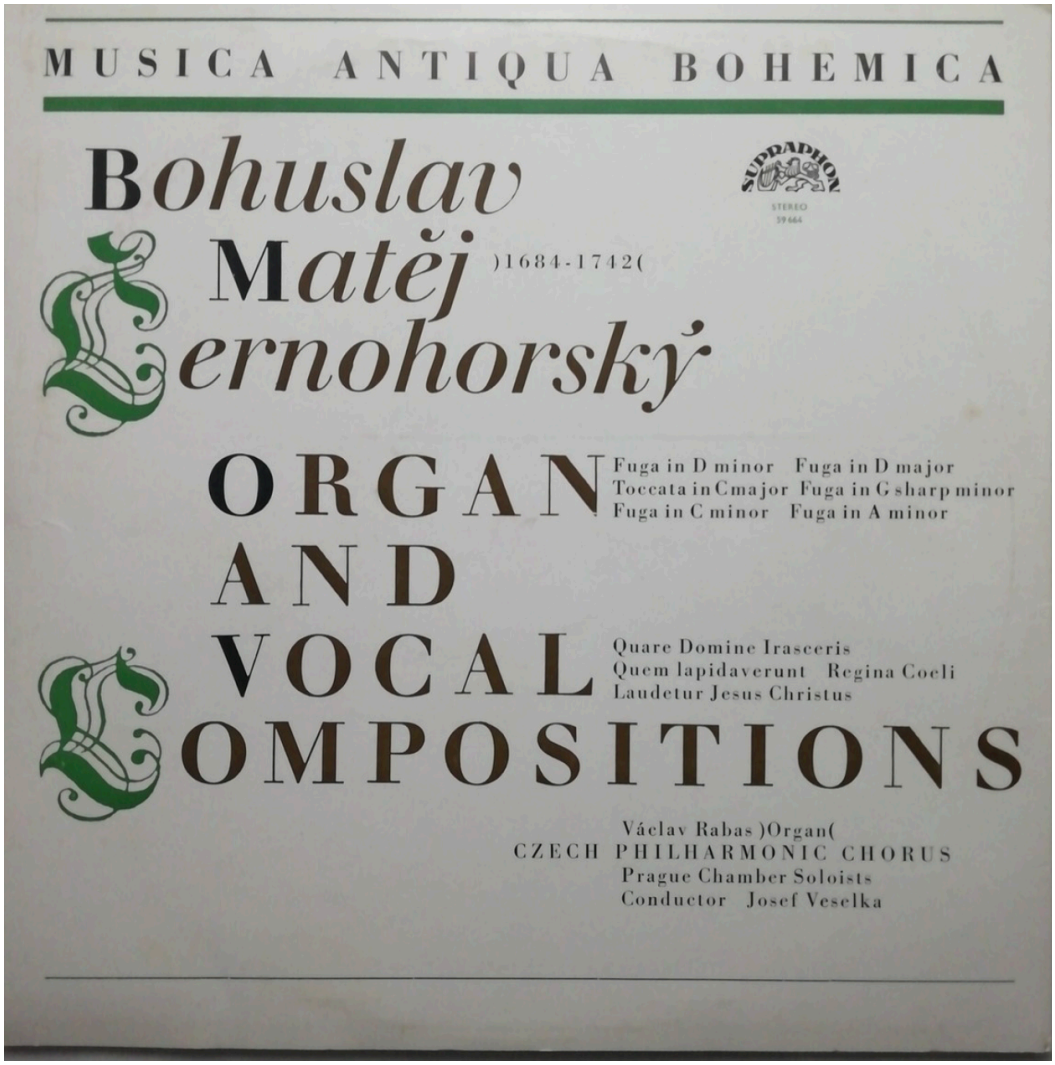




This work could not be mistaken for one by Bach, nor, for that matter, could the organ of St James's Church, Prague in this recording be for a North German instrument. For a full history and specification of the huge organ, click **here.** (The recordings though predate the most recent rebuild.) Scores for all of the organ works can be found **here** on IMSLP.

In conclusion therefore, it is clear that Černohorský was a significant figure in his time, a respected teacher and influential composer. His skill in counterpoint was particularly notable; indeed, later commentators have labelled him the 'Bohemian Bach'. (That title has also been applied to his near contemporary Jan Dismas Zelenka, albeit working in a style characterised by greater degrees of chromaticism and some quirkiness.)

Despite his many achievements, Černohorský's life, career and legacy though were affected with setbacks and some tragedy. As an independent-minded artist trying to find accommodation with his role of priest and at times less than sympathetic authorities, some of this was inevitable given the culture of the times. The fire at the monastery in Prague was a great loss to his legacy, though some of this was carried indirectly through his pupils, notably Joseph Seger.

So, do explore playing this organ music And does it matter whether a work is spurious or recently assigned to another composer, or even the highly prolific and long-lived Anon. as long as the music engages the ear!

Do limit your listening exposure though to *Quare domino irasceris;* the long imitative subject can easily become an embedded ear worm, such is the richness of motifs, repeated in overt and more subliminal forms throughout the ensuing contrapuntal development.



The original 1967 cover of most of the above recorded excerpts. Like the performances, they don't make LP covers quite as they used to!