

Reviews

C. P. E. Bach

New CD/SACD

Empfindsamkeit!

Symphonies – E minor, H653 (Wq178); D, H663 (Wq183/I). Harpsichord Concerto in D minor, H420 (Wq17)^a. Oboe Concerto in E flat, H468 (Wq165)^b.

Christian Kjos (harpsichord); Barokkanerne/Alfredo Bernardini (oboe).

Lawo Classics LWC1038 (full price, 58 minutes).

Website www.lawo.no. Producer Vegard Landaas.

Engineer Thomas Wolden. Dates April 19th–22nd, 2012.

Over the years my reviews have occasionally made less than flattering references to the music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Particularly attentive readers may therefore be surprised at seeing me review a disc devoted to it. It is true that I consider much of his music eccentric to a point well beyond mere quirkiness and characterized by a restlessness that was inimical to melody. Nonetheless, I have enjoyed a handful of works by C. P. E. since boyhood (mostly played by the now-disbanded German period-instrument orchestra Collegium Aureum) and about half of them appear on this disc recorded by a Norwegian period-instrument orchestra under the direction of the Italian Baroque oboist Alfredo Bernardini.

Most of C. P. E.'s symphonies and concertos strike me as tedious, repetitive and unrewarding; but the four Hamburg Symphonies from 1776, the amazing E minor Symphony from 20 years earlier, the E flat major Oboe Concerto (Wq17) and a couple of the minor-key harpsichord concertos are strikingly good works. According to the notes written by the harpsichord soloist, Christian Kjos, my high opinion of the E minor Symphony (Wq178) was shared by the composer himself, who spared it from the flames in 1786, when '... excessive self-criticism motivated him to burn a number of his earlier works'. It was also well regarded outside northern Germany. Burney tells us that when he met Hasse in Vienna in 1772, the composer (whose Italianate style could not have been further from C. P. E.'s) called the work the finest he had ever heard.

It is an early example of the so-called *Sturm-und-Drang* style of symphonic writing, best known today from Haydn's slightly later examples, such as Symphonies Nos. 44 and 49 and Mozart's 'Little' G minor Symphony. Two outer movements of furious energy frame a lyrical *Andante Moderato* that, rarely for C. P. E., contains some nearly fully formed melodic material. Four years after Burney's conversation with Hasse, C. P. E. wrote the even more splendid, and significantly more musically developed, Hamburg Symphonies, written for a large

orchestra with prominent wind parts (the composer described them as having 12 obbligato parts). Again, he knew their worth, describing the four as 'the greatest thing of this type I have done'. He was right: in these extraordinary works, the composer's characteristic nervy restlessness creates exciting musical drama and, in the last movement of the D major Symphony (Wq183/I), moments of near hilarity, rather than his usual air of morose irritability.

A contemporary description recounts hearing the Hamburg Symphonies played with an orchestra of about 40 musicians. The Oslo-based Barokkanerne performs both symphonies with significantly fewer than 40 players; but under Bernardini's expert and vivacious direction (and benefiting from a wonderfully vivid recorded sound), they sound anything but small-scale or undernourished. Their performances crackle with excitement – the divided strings rush wildly up and down and throw ideas back and forth with a freedom that is possible only with highly drilled forces. The very prominent, often quirky writing for wind instruments benefits greatly from the use of period instruments, played by these Norwegian musicians with tremendous confidence and stylistic assurance.

C. P. E. Bach's concertos are rather hard to keep straight in one's mind, as he was endlessly revising them or rearranging them for other solo instruments: flute, oboe, harpsichord or cello. The D minor Harpsichord Concerto (Wq17) dates originally from 1745 and was very popular in its day, judging by the number of surviving manuscript copies. Kjos and Barokkanerne perform a revised version of the second movement, which Kjos explains contains C. P. E.'s own embellishments. It is one of his most appealing concertos, though somewhat less gripping than the better-known Wq23 in the same key. Still, it is an exciting work as played by Kjos and colleagues, with nervy drama in the fast movements and real poetry in the lengthy *un poco adagio* in between.

As for the lovely Oboe Concerto, the sparkling performance on this disc has finally surpassed the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi recording by pioneer Baroque oboist Helmut Hücke, which I have cherished for decades. It is one of C. P. E.'s most engaging and melodically successful works and Bernardini and colleagues play it with grace, poise and wit, enhanced by modest but delightful ornamentation.

I can think of no better single recording of C. P. E. Bach's music than this disc. What a shame most of his corpus is not of the same standard.

Andrew O'Connor

Zina Schiff

New

Barber Violin Concerto, Op. 14.
Ben-Haim Three Songs Without Words.
Sibelius Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47.

Zina Schiff (violin); MAV Symphony Orchestra/Avlana Eisenberg.

MSR Classics MS1459 (full price, 1 hour 6 minutes).

Website www.msacd.com. Producer Tim Oldham.

Engineer Zoltan Pecze. Date July 2011.

Comparisons:

Barber:

Stern, NYPO/Bernstein
(Sony Classical) SMK89751 (1964)

Sibelius:

Heifetz, LPO/Beecham
(EMI GROC) 7 64030-2 (1935)

Heifetz, Chicago SO/Hendl
(RCA) 82876 66372-2 (1959)

Salerno-Sonnenberg, LSO/Tilson Thomas
(EMI Classics) 7 54855-2 (1993)

Many relatives, by blood or by marriage, perform classical music together. Even so, I can't think of another pairing of mother and daughter, which is what we have on this CD. Zina Schiff studied with Heifetz, and then at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. She 'met Samuel Barber, whose Violin Concerto she introduced to audiences throughout the United States', a statement which should not be misunderstood to mean that she premiered the work. (That was Albert Spalding in 1941, before Schiff was even born, I assume.) She has won several awards and grants and has recorded other discs for MSR Classics and Naxos, although this is my first exposure to her work. Avlana Eisenberg, her daughter, is Music Director of the Boston Chamber Symphony. She studied violin (with her mother and with Erick Friedman) and conducting; she received a Master's degree in the latter from the University of Michigan. In other words, these are well-educated, experienced musicians. Of course, you could hear this CD and deduce the same.

For the most part, I like what is happening on this disc, musically speaking, although I also have moderate reservations. These centre on the Sibelius concerto, primarily, which (unfortunately, if first impressions are lasting impressions) opens the CD, but more on that later. Schiff seems to be happiest when she can play lyrically. You can hear Heifetz's influence in the *cantabile* passages, and a fondness for old-school portamento. Legato passages are accentuated. At times (for example, in the first movement of the Barber) this is luscious, and at other times it seems too heavy, as if the violin is drugged, or dragging itself from one note to the next. Her tone is large and lush, and there's certainly room for that in all three of these works. At the same time, no performer can afford to be a one-trick pony, and there are many passages in the Barber and (especially) the Sibelius in which Schiff spreads the jam with a butcher's cleaver, when a butter knife