

musica Dei donum

CD reviews

Carl Philipp Emanuel BACH (1714 - 1788): Symphonies, concertos & quartets

[I] "Symphonies"

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

Dir: Rebecca Miller

rec: Jan 30, 2014 (live), London, Queen Elizabeth Hall

Signum Classics - SIGCD395 (© 2015) (56'36")

Liner-notes: E

[Cover, track-list & booklet](#)

Symphony in D (Wq 183,1 / H 663); Symphony in E flat (Wq 179 / H 654); Symphony in F (Wq 183,3 / H 665); Symphony in A (Wq 182,4 / H 660); Symphony in b minor (Wq 182,5 / H 661)

[II] "Empfindsamkeit! - Symphonies & Concertos"

Alfredo Bernardini, oboe^a; Christian Kjos, harpsichord^b

Barokkanerne

Dir: Alfredo Bernardini

rec: April 19 - 22, 2012, Frederikstad, Østre Fredrikstad kirke

Lawo - LWC 1038 (© 2012) (58'00")

Liner-notes: E/N

[Cover & track-list](#)

Concerto for keyboard, strings and bc in d minor (Wq 17 / H 420)^b; Concerto for oboe, strings and bc in E flat (Wq 165 / H 468)^a; Symphony in D (Wq 183,1 / H 663); Symphony in e minor (Wq 178 / H 653)

[III] "Quartette für Clavier, Flöte und Bratsche"

Salzburger Hofmusik

rec: Dec 2013, Kremsmünster, Schloss Kremsegg Instrumentenmuseum

Hänssler Classic - HC 16016 (© 2016) (60'04")

Liner-notes: E/D

[Cover & track-list](#)

Quartet for keyboard, transverse flute and viola in a minor (Wq 93 / H 537); Quartet for keyboard, transverse flute and viola in D (Wq 94 / H 538); Quartet for keyboard, transverse flute and viola G (Wq 95 / H 539); Trio for viola, flauto basso and bc in F (Wq 163 / H 588)

Wolfgang Brunner, *fortepiano*; Linde Brunmayr-Tutz, *transverse flute*; Ilia Korol, *viola*

[Scores](#)

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was generally considered the most important German composer of his time. His reputation was first and foremost based on his keyboard works, but his orchestral music also found much interest. In modern times in particular his six symphonies for strings have been regularly performed and recorded, but his other symphonies and his solo concertos are no less important and reflect the modernity of his idiom which made CPE Bach an inspiration for the next generations, including the main composers of the classical era. "We have only one Bach, whose manner is entirely original and peculiar to himself alone",

the composer and writer on music Johann Friedrich Reichardt stated and that sums up the reputation of Johann Sebastian's second son pretty well.

One thing which particularly struck his contemporaries was his originality; it is an aspect which was emphasized by the English music chronicler Charles Burney to whom we owe a vivid description of the composer's way of playing at his beloved clavichord. Not all of his music is completely in accordance with what he himself preferred. A part of his keyboard works - in particular those which were printed - were written for *Kenner* (professionals) and *Liebhaber* (amateurs). In particular the latter were often rather conservative and would have had great difficulties in playing CPE Bach's more personal compositions. Such differences are also notable in his orchestral works.

Bach started to compose orchestral music during his Prussian years. We know nine symphonies from this period but it seems possible that he wrote more and that he destroyed some of them later as he considered them too old-fashioned. Obviously these symphonies were intended for public performance which limited his artistic freedom. Even so, they are considerably different from much that was written at the time. Today they are mostly performed by a full orchestra of strings and wind but the wind parts are additions from Bach's Hamburg period; originally they were conceived for strings. The *Symphony in e minor* has been preserved in two versions, one for strings (Wq 177/H 652) - the only 'Berlin' symphony ever published during his lifetime - and one with wind (Wq 178/H 653).

The largest number of Bach's symphonies are from his Hamburg period. The six symphonies for strings were the result of a commission by Baron Gottfried van Swieten who played such a major role in Vienna and in the careers of Haydn and Mozart. The above-mentioned Reichardt participated in the first performances and to him we owe much information about these pieces and their performance. Van Swieten explicitly urged the composer to "let himself go completely, without taking into account the difficulties of performance that would necessarily result. (...) Without really understanding them, listeners were delighted by the ideas in their boldly original sequence, forms and modulations of considerable novelty and infinite variety." In particular the opening movements are striking in their boldness, for instance the sudden shifts of mood. One of the features of Bach's symphonies is that the opening movements toward the end turn to a slow tempo which then lead to the slow movement. In some symphonies there is not even a formal pause between the first two movements. The closing movements are mostly more 'conventional'.

The four symphonies for twelve obbligato instruments - as CPE Bach called them - are specimens of the *Sturm und Drang*, with bold harmonic progressions, a wide dynamic range and sudden pauses. How odd Bach's symphonies were for some of his contemporaries was eloquently expressed by the poet and playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who wrote: "A symphony that expresses different passions in its different movements is a musical monster; in a symphony only a single passion must prevail, and each particular movement must depict the same passion, merely with different variations, be it in terms of its degree of loudness and liveliness or by occasionally mixed with other, related passions, and it must seek to awaken these same passions in us". This quotation summarizes the difference between the tradition and the new aesthetics to which CPE Bach's symphonies bear testimony.

Bach not only composed a large amount of music for keyboard solo, he also regularly wrote concertos for keyboard and strings, usually one or two a year. These were intended for his own use; it is likely that he performed them in private gatherings of members of the intellectual and artistic circles in Berlin. A number of them were widely disseminated in manuscript which bears witness to their popularity. The *Concerto in d minor* (Wq 17/H 420) dates from 1745; in that year Bach composed no fewer than four keyboard concertos. In comparison to the symphonies the concertos from this period in Bach's life are more conventional as they stick to the ritornello principle which is rooted in the Italian solo concerto as it was modelled by Antonio Vivaldi. The solo part is expansive and here we hear similarities with the solo keyboard music; there is no lack of expression in the slow movement. Interestingly Barokkanerne plays this movement in a version that

"in all likelihood" was embellished by the composer.

Some of Bach's keyboard concertos were later arranged for other instruments, such as the cello and the transverse flute. There is no unanimity as far as the two oboe concertos are concerned. Jörn Boysen, in his liner-notes to the recording of his ensemble [Musica Poetica](#) states that these concertos are also arrangements of keyboard concertos, but Christian Kjos (Barokkanerne) writes that these concertos were originally conceived for the oboe and only later arranged for keyboard. They date from 1765 and *New Grove* doesn't give different years for the two versions. It is suggested that Bach composed the two concertos as well as his only oboe sonata for the travelling virtuoso Johann Christian Fischer, himself also the composer of oboe concertos. Again Bach follows here the ritornello principle but idiomatically the *Concerto in E flat* is a specimen of the galant style, although technically more demanding than what one would expect. It is especially in the middle movement that the spirit of the *Sturm und Drang* manifests itself.

Let me turn to the performances. I started with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment whose disc was released last year; the recording of Barokkanerne dates from some years earlier but only recently crossed my path. OAE's performances are alright, but there is no reason to be overly enthusiastic about them. I often find the sound of this orchestra a bit bland and that is also the case here. The fast movements are mostly just a shade too slow, and the nervousness which is so much a feature of them doesn't come off to the full. The often sudden transitions between passages of a contrasting character are a little short on surprise. Having heard these symphonies regularly over the years I think that they are way more exciting than one would think on the basis of these performances.

In comparison I prefer the performances of Barokkanerne. It produces a warmer and richer sound, the contrasts are stronger and so is the dynamic differentiation. These performances are more compelling, more surprising and more theatrical. They make one understand how surprised the audiences at the time must have been. Only the *Symphony in D* appears on both discs; the tempi of the fast movements are not fundamentally different, but the largo is somewhat slower in Barokkanerne's performance (1'53" vs 1'36") and as a result the contrast to the fast movements is larger, and that is not insignificant here. Alfredo Bernardini delivers a delightful and impressive performance of the oboe concerto and Christian Kjos is excellent in the keyboard concerto.

With the third disc we are on familiar territory. The three quartets for keyboard, transverse flute and viola are among CPE Bach's most frequently recorded chamber music compositions. They date from the last year of his life, and whereas he had composed most of his chamber music for amateurs these quartets are unsuitable for them. Stylistically they point in the direction of the classical piano trio. Bach's use of the word 'quartet' for pieces scored for three instruments has raised some questions which I have discussed [elsewhere](#). Some performers include a cello, but Salzburger Hofmusik decided not to. The choice of keyboard is another matter of debate. Sometimes performers opt for the harpsichord which is legitimate, considering that this instrument was still widely used. However, as these pieces were intended for professional interpreters the 'modern' fortepiano seems a more appropriate choice. Wolfgang Brunner plays a Johann Schantz of 1790.

That instrument is less suitable for the remaining piece, the *Trio in F* (Wq 163/H 588) which is scored for viola, *flauto basso* and harpsichord. This is the most interesting part of this disc because it is usually played with a bass recorder; here Linde Brunmayr-Tutz uses a bass transverse flute. In his liner-notes Wolfgang Brunner writes: "During the twentieth century, 'flauto basso' was unquestioningly taken to mean 'bass recorder', which is certainly possible in terms of performance practice. However, a good many bass transverse flutes are displayed in European museums; their function has rarely been considered to this day. I am convinced that the trio was actually intended for bass transverse flute (...)", for which he then gives several arguments. Whether he is right will probably never be proven, but this performance is definitely a most interesting alternative to the existing recordings. It is also the first time I have encountered the bass

transverse flute.

The performances of the quartets are good but I haven't heard anything which make them a real alternative to what is already on the market. I often find Brunner's playing of the fortepiano a bit cold and uninvolved. The balance between the three instruments is not really satisfying; the transverse flute often dominates, and it is especially the viola which suffers from it.

Johan van Veen (© 2016)

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