

C. P. E. Bach Harpsichord Concertos

Michele Benuzzi & Arcomelo

Concerto in C minor Wq 37, Concerto in G minor Wq 6, Concerto in D major Wq 18

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A key factor that distinguishes the performance of early music now and previously is, of course, the simple realisation that so much of the repertoire can be performed not just adequately, but often to advantage, by small forces. The Italian ensemble Arcomelo exemplifies that principle well. Nine string players make an excellent job of conveying the power and range in these three concerti by the most famous of the sons of Bach. But of course it is not merely a question of adequate volume and power - important though that may well be: they add to it a very impressive vibrancy that would be largely lost by a more sizeable ensemble. Their sense of cohesion, inter-reliance, and intimate ensemble is truly excellent. If there is any overall fault to note, then it is a 'good fault'. In seeking to avoid making the harpsichord artificially prominent, they have perhaps erred too much on the side of caution. The soloist is often rather over-powered by his own ensemble.

The opening work is the Harpsichord Concerto in C minor Wq 37, where the performance of the very first movement (*Allegro assai*) establishes the musicians' ability to convey both its genial and its dramatic elements. In the *Andante ed arioso* which follows, the intimate understanding between members of the group enables the string players to support and mirror flawlessly the expressive devices that soloist Michele Benuzzi employs - with obvious justification, given the style of the music. The right-hand wandering melody exemplifies this performer's extraordinary talent for tonal beauty. In appropriate contrast, a happy jig-like movement dances along at a brisk, but not cloudingly excessive, pace. Many listeners may feel C P E is rather close to his J S roots here; and yet, there is a clear element of his own original flavour. It is a flavour presumably to be labelled 'classical'; and yet - as Benuzzi's delicately lingering mini-cadenza demonstrates - its emotional quality anticipates the romantic even as it establishes the classical, and lingers with the baroque.

The bold opening movement of the Concerto in G minor Wq 6, with its dramatic gestures, at times seeming to foreshadow Beethoven rather than Mozart, brings out the skill of this ensemble in handling a varied emotional palette: they let the music frown at times here - but it is always a handsome frown. The *Largo* that follows provides an opportunity for the strings to excel, adding a deep richness to their tone, which well suits this more melancholy and generally 'dark' slow movement. The third movement (an *Allegro*) fully proves what the opening movement established: that this ensemble, though they may excel in the languid movements, are more than competent in handling other moods. The biting opening chord of a repeated motif is taken to the very edge of aggression, without advancing over it. But this is emotionally (as well as musically) sophisticated material, of course: dashing passage work on the harpsichord leads appropriately into a brighter section. The skilled fingers of the soloist transform a tone that is silver in the slow movements into diamond clarity here. And there is a suitably exciting gathering of spiritual momentum through to the end of the piece.

As one might expect from the choice of key, the Concerto in D major Wq 18 is a predominantly genial work: the ensemble produces an appropriately bright tone in the opening *Allegro*, and the soloist concentrates on the sense of forward movement that is so essential, allowing himself no more than the occasional and subtle restraining of the tempo here - just enough to establish that the music is still thoughtful. In some respects it is a movement that looks back to Leipzig - there is even, perhaps, a touch of Vivaldi. The *Andante* is taken at a good balanced pace, and the melodic line is shaped without disturbing the essentially flowing character of this tuneful movement. The initial mood is calm and almost - perhaps deceptively - carefree; but solo passages lead a partial transformation, as a darker wistfulness is superimposed upon the sunny calmness. Arcomelo prove themselves absolute

masters of both the expression and control of feeling here - the strings mirroring perfectly the mood and character of an earlier moment of more extravagant emotion from the harpsichordist, to end the movement on a beautifully controlled dying appoggiatura. And that is merely one example in a recording packed with such artistry. With a good healthy stress on the 'molto' in the final Allegro di molto, Arcangelo bring their first CD to a most genial but still dramatic close. It seems most unlikely that anyone listening to it will fail to look forward eagerly to their future recordings - hoping only, perhaps, to hear the harpsichord a little more forward in the recording next time.

This CD is eminently worthwhile for the quality and interest in the music alone; the skilful and sophisticated playing, capturing the range and depth of emotion so essential to the style, makes it an essential acquisition for all listeners interested in the music of this period.

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