



Virtuosi

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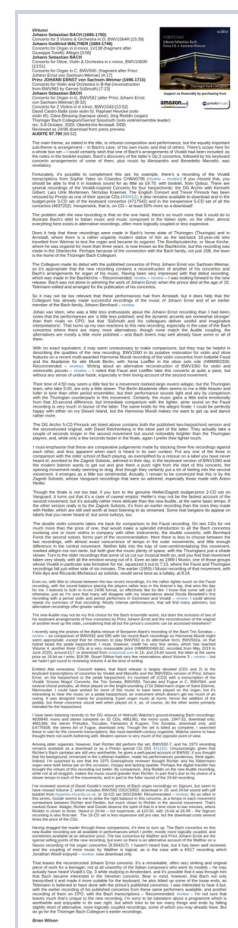
The main theme, as stated in the title, is virtuoso composition and performance, but the equally important sub-theme is arrangement – in Bach’s case, of his own music and that of others. There’s scope here for a whole box set – I could certainly wish that one of Bach’s arrangements of Vivaldi had been included: as the notes in the booklet explain, Bach’s discovery of the latter’s Op.3 concertos, followed by his keyboard concerto arrangements of some of them, plus music by Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello, was revelatory.

Fortunately, it’s possible to complement this set; for example, there’s a recording of the Vivaldi transcriptions from Sophie Yates on Chandos. If you missed that, you should be able to find it in lossless sound for as little as £4.79, with booklet, from Qobuz. There are several recordings of the Vivaldi-inspired Concerto for four harpsichords: the DG Archiv with Kenneth Gilbert, Lars Ulrik Mortensen, Nicholas Kraemer, The English Concert and Trevor Pinnock has been reissued by Presto as one of their special CDs; it also remains available to download and in the budget-price 3-CD set of the keyboard concertos and in the inexpensive 5-CD set of all the concertos. Inexpensive, that is, on CD – at least 50% more as a download!

The problem with the new recording is that on the one hand, there’s so much more that it could do to illustrate Bach’s debt to Italian music and music composed in the Italian style, on the other, almost everything here exists in alternative recordings, often more logically coupled or less expensive.

Does it help that these recordings were made in Bach’s home state of Thüringen (Thuringia) and in Arnstadt, where there is a rather ungainly modern statue of him as the laid-back 18-year-old who travelled from Weimar to test the organ and became its organist. The Bonifaziuskirche, or Neue Kirche, where he was organist for more than three years, is now known as the Bachkirche, but this recording was made in the Oberkirche. Perhaps because of the connection with the Bach family, not just JSB, the town is the home of the Thüringer Bach Collegium.

The Collegium made its debut with the published concertos of Prinz Johann Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar, so it’s appropriate that the new recording contains a reconstruction of another of his concertos and Bach’s arrangements for organ of his music. Having been very impressed with that debut recording, which was made in the Bachkirche – I was looking forward to the new release. Bach was not alone in admiring the work of Johann Ernst; when the prince died at the age of 18, Telemann edited and arranged for the publication of his concertos.



So it may not be too relevant that these performances hail from Arnstadt, but it does help that the Collegium has already made successful recordings of the music of Johann Ernst and of an earlier member of the Bach family, Johann Bernhard.

Johan van Veen, who was a little less enthusiastic about the Johann Ernst recording than I had been, notes that the performances are 'a little less polished, and the dynamic accents are somewhat stronger' than their rivals on CPO, but that 'Süßmuth and his colleagues deliver zestful and imaginative interpretations'. That sums up my own reactions to this new recording, especially in the case of the Bach concertos where there are many more alternatives; though none match the Audite coupling, the alternatives are mostly a little more polished – and Bach lovers may well already have some or all of them.

With no exact equivalent, it may seem unnecessary to make comparisons, but they may be helpful in describing the qualities of the new recording. BWV1060 in its putative restoration for violin and oboe features on a recent multi-awarded Harmonia Mundi recording of the violin concertos from Isabelle Faust and the Akademie für alte Musik Berlin, with Xenia Loeffler in the oboe solo role. Writing about an alternative reconstruction of BWV1060 for violin and violoncello piccolo I noted that Faust and Loeffler take this concerto at quite a pace, but without any sense of undue haste, especially in their loving account of the second movement.

Their time of 4:50 may seem a little fast for a movement marked *largo ovvero adagio*, but the Thuringian team, who take 5:00, are only a little slower. The Berlin Akademie often seems to me a little heavier and fuller in tone than other period ensembles, but their performance sounds light and airy by comparison with the Thuringian counterparts in this movement. Certainly, the music gains a little extra emotionally from that 10-second difference, but immediate comparison with the lighter, airier sound on the Faust recording is very much in favour of the latter. The same holds for the *allegro finale*; I could be perfectly happy with either on my Desert Island, but the Harmonia Mundi makes me want to get up and dance rather more.

The DG Archiv 5-CD Pinnock set listed above contains both the published two-harpsichord version and the reconstructed original, with David Reichenberg in the oboe part of the latter. They actually take a couple of seconds longer in the second movement but sound noticeably brighter than the Thuringian players, and, while only a few seconds faster in the finale, again I prefer their lighter touch.

I must emphasise that these are comparative judgements made by stacking three fine recordings against each other, and less apparent when each is heard in its own context. Put any one of the three in comparison with the older school of Bach playing, as exemplified by a reissue on a label you have never heard of, ascribed to the Zagreb Soloists, admired in their day, in the keyboard version of BWV1060 and the modern listener wants to get out and give them a push right from the start of this concerto, the opening movement really seeming to drag. And though they certainly put a lot of feeling into the second movement, it emerges as a little too sentimental. Actually, I remain to be convinced that this is by the Zagreb Soloists, whose Vanguard recordings that were so admired, especially those made with Anton Heiller.

Though the finale is not too bad, if you turn to the genuine Heiller/Zagreb budget-price 2-CD set on Vanguard, it turns out that it's a case of *caveat emptor*; Heiller's may not be the fastest account of the second movement, but it's actually rather more delicate than the new Audite, at the same basic tempo. If the other version really is by the Zagreb Soloists, it's from an earlier recording than the ones

they made with Heiller, which are still well worth at least listening to as streamed. Some real bargains do appear on labels that you never heard of, but some turkeys, too.

The double violin concerto takes me back for comparison to the Faust recording. On two CDs for not much more than the price of one, that would make a splendid introduction to all the Bach concertos involving one or more violins in company with other instruments; the double concerto, with Bernhard Forck the second soloist, forms part of the recommendation. Here there is less to choose between the two recordings, with almost exact concurrence of tempo in the outer movements, and little enough difference in the central movement. Neither falls into the trap of over-sentimentalising this movement, marked *allegro ma non tanto*, but both give the music plenty of space, with the Thuringians just a shade slower. Turn to the older recordings that some of us cut our musical teeth on, and you find that movement taken very slowly, with all the emotion wrung out of it. Even as late as 1989 I Musici, one of those groups whose Vivaldi in particular was formative for me, squeezed it out to 7:13, where the Faust and Thuringian recordings fall just either side of six minutes. The earlier (1959) I Musici recording of that movement, with Felix Ayo and Riccardo Michelucci as soloists, would serve best as a lullaby, at 8:24.

Even so, with little to choose between the two recent recordings, it's the rather lighter touch on the Faust recording, with the sound balance placing the players rather less in the listener's lap, that wins the day for me. I listened to both in hi-res 24/96 format, so effectively like for like. I know that some will call it otherwise, just as I'm sure that many will disagree with my reservations about Nicola Benedetti's first recording with a period violin and period performers in Geminiani and Vivaldi. I could almost repeat my summary of that recording: Mostly intense performances, that will find many admirers, but alternative recordings offer greater variety.

The new Audite may not be my first choice for the Bach ensemble works, but does the inclusion of two of his keyboard arrangements of four concertos by Prinz Johann Ernst and the reconstruction of the original of another level up the odds, considering that all but the prince's concerto can be accessed elsewhere?

I recently sang the praises of the Alpha reissue of Benjamin Alard's recording of the Bach Trio Sonatas so comparison of BWV592 and 595 with his recent Bach recordings on Harmonia Mundi might seem appropriate, except that he chooses to play BWV592 in its alternative form, BWV592a, on that hybrid beast the pedal harpsichord. I must, however, credit his very fine series, which has reached Volume 4, another three CDs at a very reasonable price (recorded from May 2019 to June 2020), around £17, or download from eclassical.com in 16- and 24-bit sound, the latter at the same price as 16-bit as I write, \$18.98. Stuart Sillitoe had very few reservations about Volume 3 but we hadn't got round to reviewing Volume 4 at the time of writing.

Entitled *Alla veneziana, Concerti italiani*, that Alard release is largely devoted (CD1 and 2) to the keyboard transcriptions of concertos by Vivaldi and Marcello and the BWV592a version of Prinz Johann Ernst, on the harpsichord or the pedal harpsichord; it's rounded off (CD3) with a transcription of the Vivaldi 'Grosso Mogul' Concerto, the Trio Sonata, BWV583, Toccata and Fugue in C, BWV564, and several choral preludes, all these played on the bright-sounding 1710 Silbermann organ of Saint Etienne, Marmoutier. I could have wished for more of this music to have been played on the organ, but it's interesting to hear the music on a pedal harpsichord, an instrument which doesn't get too much of an outing. It was designed mainly for practising 3-part organ music at home, hence the addition of the pedals, but these

concertos sound well when played on it, as, of course, do the other works primarily intended for the harpsichord.

I have been listening recently to the DG reissue of Helmuth Walcha's ground-breaking Bach recordings: mono and stereo complete on 32 CDs; the mono cycle, 1947-52, download only; the stereo Preludes, Toccatas, Fantasies & Fugues, Trio Sonatas, download only, and the stereo Art of Fugue, download only. Though the set is billed as complete, I searched these in vain for the concerto transcriptions; like most twentieth-century organists, Walcha seems to have thought them not worth bothering with. Modern opinion is very much of the opposite point of view.

Among older organists, however, Karl Richter did perform the set, BWV592-7, and his 1973 recording remains available as a download or as a Presto special CD. Unsurprisingly, given that Richter's Bach cantatas are still very worthwhile, he gives a well-paced account of BWV592; if you thought that his background, immersed in the Lutheran tradition, made his performances ponderous, think again. Indeed, I'm surprised to see that the 1975 Gramophone reviewer thought Richter and his Silbermann organ were both below par on this occasion, choppy and lacking sparkle. Perhaps the digital transfer has brought the virtues of this recording out better. By comparison, Jörg Reffin on the new Audite recording, while not at all sluggish, makes the music sound grander than Richter. In part that's due to his choice of a slower tempo in each of the movements, and in part to the fuller sound of the 24-bit recording.

I've reviewed several of David Goode's recent series of Bach organ recordings on Signum, but seem to have missed Volume 2, which includes BWV592 (download in 16- and 24-bit sound with pdf booklet from hyperion-records.co.uk, or 16-CD set. As so often in this series, Goode seems to me to strike the right balance in this concerto, at a tempo in each movement somewhere between Richter and Reffin, but much closer to Richter in the second movement. That's marked Grave: Adagio; Richter and Goode observe the spirit of that in a time close to two minutes, where Reffin is closer to three. Heard in 24-bit – not expensive, at £10.50, with 16-bit at £6.99 – the Signum recording is also first-rate. The 16-CD set is less expensive still pro rata, but the download costs several times the price of the CDs.

Having dragged the reader through these comparisons, it's time to sum up. The Bach concertos on this new Audite recording are all available in performances which I prefer, mostly more logically coupled, and sometimes available at an attractive price. The two concertos by Walther and Prinz Johann Ernst are the special selling points of the new recording, but even so there is an alternative account of the Walther on a Naxos recording of his organ concertos. I haven't heard that, but it has been well received, and the coupling of more music by Walther is logical, as is the case with a K617 recording which Jonathan Woolf enjoyed: now download only.

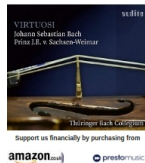
That leaves the reconstructed Johann Ernst concerto. It's a remarkable, often very striking and original piece of work for a teenager, not at all unworthy of the Italian composers who were its models – he may actually have heard Vivaldi's Op. 3 while studying in Amsterdam, and it's possible that it was through him that Bach became interested in the Venetian concerto. Bear in mind, however, that Bach not only transcribed it and made it more suitable for the keyboard, he also tidied up some of the loose ends, as Telemann is believed to have done with the prince's published concertos. I was interested to hear it but, with the earlier recording of his published concertos from these same performers available, and another recording of them on CPO, with the Bach transcriptions – I'm not sure that leaves much that's unique to the new recording. I'm sorry to be lukewarm about a programme which is worthwhile

and enjoyable in its own right, but which tries to be too many things and ends by falling slightly short of alternative, more logically coupled recordings, some of which you may already have. But do go for the Thüringer Bach Collegium's earlier recordings.



Virtuosi

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)
 Concerto for 3 Violins & Orchestra in D, BWV1064R [15:39]
Johann Gottfried WALTHER (1684-1748)
 Concerto for Organ in d minor, LV138 (fragment after Giuseppe Torelli); Allegro [5:06]
Johann Sebastian BACH
 Concerto for Oboe, Violin & Orchestra in c minor, BWV1060R [13:51]
 Concerto for Organ in C, BWV595 (fragment after Prinz Johann Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar) [5:17]
Prinz JOHANN ERNST von Sachsen-Weimar (1696-1715)
 Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in B-flat reconstruction from BWV983 by Gernot Süßnuth [7:23]
Johann Sebastian BACH
 Concerto for Organ in G, BWV592 (after Prinz Johann Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar) [8:32]
 Concerto for 2 Violins in d minor, BWV1043 [13:52]
 David Castro-Balbi (solo violin II); Raphael Hevické (solo violin III); Clara Bessina (baroque oboe); Jörg Fredlin (organ)
 Thüringer Bach Collegium/Gernot Süßnuth (solo violiniensemble leader)
 rec. 5-8 October, 2020, Oberkirche Arnstadt, DGD
 Reviewed as 2496 download from press review
AUDITE 97.790 [66.52]



The main theme, as stated in the title, is virtuosic composition and performance, but the equally important sub-theme is arrangement – in Bach's case, of his own music and that of others. There's scope here for a whole box set – I could certainly wish that one of Bach's arrangements of Vivaldi had been included: as the notes in the booklet explain, Bach's discovery of the latter's Op.3 concertos, followed by his keyboard concerto arrangements of some of them, plus music by Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello, was revelatory.

Fortunately, it's possible to complement this set, for example, there's a recording of the Vivaldi transcriptions from Sophie Yates on Chandos CHAN736 (review – review) If you missed that, you should be able to find it in lossless sound for as little as €4.79, with booklet, from Qobuz. There are several recordings of the Vivaldi-arrangements for four harpsichords: the DG Acishe with Kenneth Gilbert, Lars Ulrik Mortensen, Nicholas Kraemer, The English Concert and Trevor Pinnock has been reissued by Presto as one of their special CDs (H5123); it also remains available to download and in the budget-price 3-CD set of the keyboard concertos (4717542) and in the inexpensive 5-CD set of all the concertos (4637252), inexpensive, that is, on CD – at least 50% more as a download!

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Does it help that these recordings were made in Bach's home state of Thüringen (Thuringia) and in Arnstadt, where there is a rather ugly modern statue of him as the last-back 18-year-old who saved from Weimar to test the organ and became its organist, the Bonifatiuskirche, or Neue Kirche, but this recording was made in the Oberkirche. Perhaps because of the connection with the Bach family, not just JSB, the town is the home of the Thüringer Bach Collegium.

The Collegium made its debut with the published concertos of Prinz Johann Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar, so it's appropriate that the new recording contains a reconstruction of another of his concertos and Bach's arrangements for organ of his music. Having been very impressed with that debut recording, which was made in the Backkirche – Recommended: review – review – I was looking forward to the new release. Bach was not alone in admiring the work of Johann Ernst when the prince died at the age of 18, Telemann edited and arranged for the publication of his concertos.

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Johan van Veen, who was a little less enthusiastic about the Johann Ernst recording than I had been, notes that the performance is a little less polished, and the dynamic accents are somewhat stronger than their rivals on CPO, but that Süßnuth and his colleagues deliver zestful and imaginative interpretations. That sums up my own reactions to this new recording, especially in the case of the Bach concertos, where there are many more alternatives, though none match the Audite coupling, the alternatives are mostly a little more polished – and Bach lovers may well already have some or all of them.

With no exact equivalent, it may seem unnecessary to make comparisons, but they may be helpful in describing the qualities of the new recording, BWV1060 in its putative restoration for violin and oboe features on a recent multi-awarded Harmonia Mundi recording of the violin concertos from Isabelle Faust and the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, with Xenia Loeffler in the oboe solo part (HMM902329; Recommended – review). Writing about an alternative reconstruction of BWV1060 for violin and violoncello piccolo – review, I noted that Faust and Loeffler take this concerto at quite a pace, but without any sense of undue haste, especially in their loving account of the second movement.

Their time of 4:50 may seem a little fast for a movement marked *largo ovvero adagio*, but the Thüringer team, which take 5:00, are only a little slower. The Berlin Akademie often seems to me a little heavier and fuller in tone than other period ensembles, but their performance sounds light and airy by comparison with the Thüringer counterparts in this movement. Certainly, the music gains a little extra emotional ton from that 10-second difference, but immediate comparison with the lighter, stiffer sound on the Faust recording is very much in favour of the latter. The same holds for the allegro finale; I could be perfectly happy with either on my Desert Island, but the Harmonia Mundi makes me want to get up and dance rather more.

The DG Archiv 5-CD Pinnock set listed above contains both the published two-harpischord version and the reconstructed original, with David Reichenberg in the oboe part of the latter. They actually take a couple of seconds longer in the second movement but sound noticeably brighter than the Thüringer players, and, while only a few seconds faster in the finale, again I prefer their lighter touch.

I must emphasise that these are comparative judgements made by stacking three fine recordings against each other, and each assessed when each is heard in its own context. Put any one of the three in comparison with the older school of Bach playing, as exemplified by a reissue on a label you have never heard of, accredited to the Zagreb Solists, each in their day, in the keyboard version of BWV1060 and the modern listener wants to get out and give them a push right from the start of this concerto, the opening movement really seems to drag. And though they certainly put a lot of feeling into the second movement, it emerges as a little too sentimental. Actually, I remain to be convinced that this is by the Zagreb Solists, whose Vanguard recordings that were so admired, especially those made with Anton Hellner.

Though the finale is not too bad, if you turn to the genuine Hellner/Zagreb budget-price 2-CD set on Vanguard, it turns out that it's a case of caveat emptor: Hellner's may not be the fastest account of the second movement, but it's actually rather more delicate than the new Audite, at the same basic tempo. If the other version really is by the Zagreb Solists, it's from an earlier recording than the ones they made with Hellner, which are still well worth at least listening to as streamed. Some real bargains do appear on labels that you never heard of, but some turkeys, too.

The double violin concerto takes me back for comparison to the Faust recording. On two CDs for not much more than the price of one, that would make a splendid introduction to all the Bach concertos involving one or more violins in company with other instruments; the double concerto, with Bernhard Forck the second violin, forms part of the recommendation. Here there is less to choose between the two recordings, with almost exact concurrence of tempo in the outer movements, and little enough difference in the central movement. Neither falls into the trap of over-sensationalising this movement, marked *allegro ma non tanto*, but both give the music plenty of space, with the Thüringers just a shade slower. Turn to the older recordings that some of us cut our musical teeth on, and you find that movement taken very slowly, with all the emotion wrung out of it. Even as late as 1989 I Musici, one of those groups whose Vivaldi in particular was formative for me, squeezed it out to 7:13, where the Faust and Thüringer recordings fall just either side of six minutes. The earlier (1959) I Musici recording of that movement, with Felix Ayo and Riccardo Michelucci as solists, would serve best as a lullaby, at 8:24.

Even so, with little to choose between the two recent recordings, it's the rather lighter touch on the Faust recording, with the sound balance placing the players rather less in the listening line, that wins the day for me. I listened to both in hi-res 24/96 format, so effectively like for like. I know that some will call it otherwise, just as I'm sure that many will disagree with my reservations about Nicola Benedetti's first recording with a period violin and period performers in Geminiani and Vivaldi – review. I could almost repeat my summary of that recording: Mostly intense performances, that will find many admirers, but alternative recordings offer greater variety.

The new Audite may not be my first choice for the Bach ensemble works, but does the inclusion of two of his keyboard arrangements of four concertos by Prinz Johann Ernst and the reconstruction of the original of another level up the odds, considering that all but the prince's concerto can be accessed elsewhere?

I recently sang the praises of the Alpha reissue of Benjamin Alard's recording of the Bach Trio Sonatas – review – so comparisons of BWV552 and 555 with his recent Bach recordings on Harmonia Mundi might seem appropriate, except that he chooses to play BWV552 in its alternative form, BWV552a, on that might lead the pedlar harpsichord. I must, however, credit his very fine series, which has reached Volume 4, another three CDs at a very reasonable price (HMM902466.62, recorded from May 2019 to June 2020), around £17, or download from eclassical.com in 16- and 24-bit sound, the latter at the same price as £4.64 as I write. Stuart Silburn had very few reservations about Volume 3 – review – but we hadn't got round to reviewing Volume 4 at the time of writing.

Entitled *Alla veneziana*, Concerti italiani, that Alard release is largely devoted (CD1 and 2) to the keyboard transcriptions of concertos by Vivaldi and Marcello and the BWV522a version of Prinz Johann Ernst, on the harpsichord or the pedal harpsichord; it's rounded off (CD3) with a transcription of the Vivaldi *Grosso Major* Concerto, the Trio Sonata, BWV533, *Tocatta and Fugue in C*, BWV564, and several other preludes, all these played on the bright-sounding L110 Silbermann organ of Saint Eulalie, Marmoutier. I could have wished for more of this music to have been played on the organ, but it's interesting to hear the music on a pedal harpsichord, an instrument which doesn't get too much of an outing. It was designed mainly for practicing 5-part organ music at home, hence the addition of the pedals, but these concertos sound well when played on it, as, of course, do the other works primarily intended for the harpsichord.

I have been listening recently to the DG reissue of Helmuth Walcha's ground-breaking Bach recordings: 4839949, mono and stereo complete on 32 CDs; 4861361, the mono cycle, 1947-52; download only, 4861366, the stereo *Preludes, Toccatas, Fantasies & Fugues, Trio Sonatas*, download only, and E477608, the stereo *Art of Fugue*, download only. Though the set is billed as complete, I searched these in vain for the concertos transcriptions. Like most twentieth-century organists, Walcha seems to have thought them not worth bothering with. Modern opinion is very much of the opposite point of view.

Among older organists, however, Karl Richter did perform the set, BWV502-7, and his 1973 recording remains available as a download or as a Presto special CD DG 411132). Unsurprisingly, given that Richter's Bach cantatas are still very worthwhile, he gives a well-paced account of BWV52, if you thought that his background, immersed in the Lutheran tradition, made his performances ponderous, thank again indeed. I'm surprised to see that the 1975 Gramophone reviewer thought Richter and the Silbermann organ were both below par on this occasion, choppy and lacking sparkle. Perhaps the digital transfer has brought the virtues of this recording out better. By comparison, Jörg Fredlin on the new Audite recording, while not at all sluggish, makes the music sound grander than Richter. In part that's due to his choice of a slower tempo in each of the movements, and in part to the fuller sound of the 24-bit recording.

I've reviewed several of David Goode's recent series of Bach organ recordings on Signum, but seem to have missed Volume 2, which includes BWV592 (SICCD002, downloaded in 16- and 24-bit sound with pdf booklet from <http://www.signumrecords.co.uk>, or 16-CD set SICCD002; Recommended – review). As so often in this series, Goode seems to me to strike the right balance in this concerto, at a tempo in each movement somewhere between Richter and Fredlin, but much closer to Richter in the second movement. That's marked *Gave: Adagio*; Richter and Goode observe the spirit of that in a time close to two minutes, where Fredlin is closer to three. Heard in 24-bit – not expensive, at £10.95, with 16-bit at £5.99 – the Signum recording is also first-rate. The 16-CD set is less expensive still pro rata, but the download costs several times the price of the CDs.

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That leaves the reconstructed Johann Ernst. It's a remarkable, often very striking and original piece of work for a teenager, not at all unworthy of the Italian composers who were its models – he may actually have heard Vivaldi's Op. 3 while studying in Amsterdam, and it's possible that it was through him that Bach became interested in the Venetian concertos. Bear in mind, however, that Bach not only transcribed it and made it more suitable for the keyboard, he also killed up some of the loose ends, as Telemann is believed to have done with the prince's published concertos. I was interested to hear it but, with the earlier recording of his published concertos from these same performers available, and another recording of them on CPO, with the Bach transcriptions – Recommended: review – I'm not sure that leaves much that's new to the new recording. I'm sorry to be taken away about a programme which is worthwhile and enjoyable in its own right, but which lies to be too many things and ends by falling slightly short of alternative, more logically coupled recordings, some of which you may already have. But do go for the Thüringer Bach Collegium's earlier recordings.

Brian Wilson