



Virtuosi

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Italy has been the birthplace of many musical developments and genres. One of the latter was the solo concerto, which emerged around 1700 and in Vivaldi's oeuvre received the form which was to become the standard for most of the 18th century.

In Germany, Johann Sebastian Bach can be considered one of the first who composed solo concertos in the Italian style. However, it was an aristocrat, Johann Ernst Prince of Saxe-Weimar, who was largely responsible for Bach's becoming acquainted with the Italian concerto. He was the second son of Johann Ernst IX of the Ernestine branch of the Saxon house of Wettin. He was educated at the violin and received keyboard lessons from Johann Gottfried Walther. In February 1711 Johann Ernst left for the Netherlands to further his education. In Amsterdam he heard Jan Jacob de Graaf, organist of the Nieuwe Kerk, who used to play Italian solo concertos in his own adaptations for organ. This made such an impression on the young prince that he started to collect Italian concertos. Many of such works were published by Roger in Amsterdam. After his return to Weimar, Johann Ernst started to compose concertos in that style and asked his teacher Walther and Bach – who from 1708 to 1717 was court organist – to arrange them for organ or harpsichord.

The disc under review here documents Bach's investigations into the Italian style and in particular the form of the concerto. Michael Maul, in his liner-notes, points out that this was part of a common habit at the time, called in Latin imitatio and aemulatio, "i.e. the principle of an initially competitive imitation and finally the attempt to develop further and even surpass the imitation". Copying compositions and then adapting them to one's own instrument was the most suitable way to internalize the features of a style or form. Bach's instruments were the organ and the harpsichord. His concerto adaptations are well-known and available in many recordings. Some of them are included here to complete the picture of Bach's dealing with the concerto form.

One of the adaptations is heard here in an orchestral version. The track-list mentions Johann Ernst as the composer, but Maul is more cautious. The composer of the concerto that Bach adapted for the harpsichord (BWV 983), is not known, and Maul merely writes that "it is perfectly feasible" that Johann Ernst was the composer. His name as composer needs a question mark or the addition "attributed". The attempt to reconstruct it as a concerto for violin, strings and basso continuo is one of the most interesting parts of this disc.

The other concertos are rather well-known. That goes in particular for the Concerto in D minor (BWV 1043) for two violins. It is the only original work included here; the

CD liner notes for 'Virtuosi' by Johann Sebastian Bach, including track list, recording details, and liner notes by Michael Maul.

version for two harpsichords (BWV 1062) is a later adaptation for the performances of the Collegium Musicum at Zimmermann's coffee house in Leipzig. Most of the harpsichord concertos are adaptations of pre-existent works written for other instruments, either in Weimar or in Köthen. Attempts have been made to reconstruct the original versions. Some of them are controversial, but there is little doubt that the Concerto in C minor (BWV 1060) was originally conceived for oboe and violin. It is one of Bach's most frequently-performed concertos, and there are many recordings, which mainly differ in the choice of key: either C minor or D minor.

There are also several recordings of reconstructions of the Concerto in C (BWV 1064) for three harpsichords. These are usually scored for three violins, strings and basso continuo, but although the track-list mentions that an "orchestra" is involved here, the violins are accompanied by basso continuo alone. Michael Maul writes: "The small-scale themes and the fact that the three soloists often 'argue' in unison with the violins of the orchestra give rise to two assumptions: on the one hand, as has been realised here, that the concerto could originally have been conceived only for three solo instruments, probably three violins and basso continuo – in that case, Bach would have added the orchestral parts later on – or, on the other hand, that the entire style may well indicate a considerably earlier composition than assumed above". The latter refers to a copy by Johann Friedrich Agricola which dates from between 1738 and 1741. It is the first time I have heard this piece without tutti strings, and I wonder if it has been recorded without them previously. It also seems that this version is not just the same reconstruction performed in other recordings but then without strings. I had the impression to hear a different piece. This is the second reason that this disc may appeal to Bach aficionados, who have all the other items on the programme in their collection.

The performances are technically very good and one won't be bored by the way the Thüringer Bach Collegium is playing. However, I often felt a little uncomfortable while listening to this disc. The version of BWV 1064 played here is very interesting, but I have heard reconstructions which I found more convincing. Moreover, the three violins don't blend that well. The playing of this ensemble has some rough edges and is less polished than that of other comparable ensembles. I am all in favour of strong dynamic accents, but one should not exaggerate, and I often felt that exactly that is the case here. In the slow movement from the Concerto BWV 1043 I sorely missed the nicely swaying rhythm, which is so beautifully realised in my favourite recording by La Petite Bande, with Sigiswald Kuijken and Lucy van Dael as the soloists.

To sum it up, I find this disc interesting rather than musically satisfying and enjoyable.

Virtuosi

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

Concerto for three violins and bc in D (BWV 1064R) [15:37]

Johann Gottfried WALTHER (1684-1748)

Concerto for organ in D minor (after Giuseppe Torelli) [3:06]

Johann Sebastian BACH

Concerto for oboe, violin, strings and bc in C minor (BWV 1060R) [13:49]

Concerto for organ in C (BWV 595) (after Johann Ernst Prince of Saxe-Weimar) [4:17]

JOHANN ERNST Prince of Saxe-Weimar (1696-1715) (attrib.)

Concerto for violin, strings and bc in B-flat (after JS Bach, BWV 983) [7:21]

Johann Sebastian BACH

Concerto for organ in G (BWV 592) (after Johann Ernst Prince of Saxe-Weimar) [8:30]

Concerto for two violins, strings and bc in D minor (BWV 1043) [13:52]

bc=basso continuo

Gernot Süßmuth, David Castro-Balbi, Raphael Hevické (violin)

Clara Blessing (oboe)

Jörg Reddin (organ)

Thüringer Bach Collegium/Gernot Süßmuth

rec. October 2020, Oberkirche, Arnstadt, Germany

AUDITE 97.790 [66:54]



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Johan van Veen

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Previous review: Brian Wilson