

Orchestral Works by the Schuncke family
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Now here's something of genuine interest, no pun intended. Each of the three works listed in the above headnote was composed by a different member of a once-prominent family of German musicians, and all three works are recorded here for the first time, increasing their respective composers' representation on disc, in two out of three cases, from zero to one.

Only a single work, an oboe concerto, by Johann Gottfried Hugo Schuncke, otherwise abbreviated to just Hugo Schuncke, aka Schunke (1823–1909), has previously appeared on disc. A recording or two of the piece turns up in the current listings, and reviewing one of them, by Lajos Lencsés, in 29:3, George Chien wrote, "With regard to Schunke, I am indebted to Lencsés's notes for the present release, since Harvard, Oxford, New Grove Concise, and Baker's Concise all declined to waste ink on his behalf." Chien penned that in 2006. Seven years later, I was still not able to find a biographical entry on Hugo Schuncke, a composer whose life spanned the entire Romantic period, and who cofounded with Schumann the critical journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

Christoph Wagner and Pavel Baleff's booklet notes tell us that the *Concertante for Violin, Cello, and Orchestra* was written in 1840, and that "it follows the tradition of early Romanticism, which was shaped by the works of Mendelssohn, Weber, and Spohr." I'd leave Mendelssohn out of the equation, for though he was still alive in 1840, he never wrote anything so insipid. Weber did, but in 1840, he was of course long dead, having shucked off his mortal coil in 1826. So, that leaves Spohr, who was still alive in 1840 and who, on occasion, also composed some music that sinks to the level of Hugo Schuncke's banality.

The *Concertante* cannot be properly understood or appreciated without acknowledging the influence opera had on the instrumental music of the period. The opening orchestral tutti, with its march-like fanfares, trumpets blaring, and kettledrums drumming, is reminiscent of the orchestral curtain-raiser to Paganini's D-Major Violin Concerto, which sets the stage for the instrumental equivalent to the diva's mad scene. The violin and cello enter, flying through the air from their opposite trapezes and catching each other 30 feet above the circus floor in an embrace of virtuoso acrobatics. The structure of this particular platform, though, is a bit shaky. An unusually short first movement of just over six-and-a-half minutes is followed by an almost equally short second movement of six minutes. The 11-minute finale is then almost as long as the first two movements combined and double in their measure of dross. Other than this piece and the aforementioned oboe concerto, I have no idea what else Hugo Schuncke wrote, but if the rest of his output is anything like this *Concertante*, I'd grant him the dignity to decompose in peace.

The second of our three Schunckes is Johann Christoph (1791–1856), uncle to Hugo. The valve horn—or what is referred to in the header as "chromatic" horn—was fairly new on the scene when Johann Christoph composed his *Concertino* for the instrument c. 1820. The exact date isn't known because the piece didn't receive its first performance until 1830 at the Royal Saxon Court Theater in Dresden. But the fact that the valve mechanism came into being as early as 1814 and that composers had already been writing for the "new" instrument for half a century before Brahms came to compose his Horn Trio in 1865 posed a dilemma for Brahms, for he is said to have preferred the sound of the natural horn, but freely acknowledged the superiority of the valve instrument.

That debate aside, Johann Christoph's Concertino gives evidence of a composer far more talented than his nephew. The horn part is a real virtuosic showpiece and sounds incredibly difficult. Nonetheless, J. C.'s musical instincts are sounder than Hugo's, his melodic invention quite striking, and his orchestral material more structured and germane to the work's developmental progress. In other words, despite the fact that the piece is highly effective as a display vehicle for the soloist, there's nothing campy or corny about it. It's quite an attractive work, with an especially beautiful slow movement. Hornist Robert Langbein is superb, but the score's technical difficulties are so demanding that they can be even a bit much even for him to navigate without the occasional burbled note or smudged run. In any case, there aren't any other recordings of the piece, and I'm not sure that anyone could play it better anyway.

The album note doesn't reveal the family relationship of Herrmann, the third Schuncke on the disc (1825–1898), but his dates suggest that he may have been a younger brother to Hugo or possibly a first cousin. All the note says is that he was of the same third generation of Schunckes as Hugo, but apparently even less is known about him than about other members of the clan.

The booklet cover and jewel case back plate give the title of Herrmann's op. 6 as "Sinfonia in B [German for B♭] for large orchestra," but in the booklet's text, the work is properly titled "Symphony." It was written in 1850, the same year as Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony (No. 3); it's in four ample movements with a Largo introduction and a Menuetto in third place, and it plays for over 25 minutes. Therefore, calling it a "sinfonia" is a malapropism. I realize that German and English musical terminology doesn't always correspond, but since Genuin is a German-produced label, it should have properly titled the work "Sinfonie." The word with an "a" on the end, "Sinfonia," has different implications.

To come out as it did, Schuncke's symphony had to travel through Haydn and Beethoven. The dark and dire sounding introduction, hovering around B Minor, is a bit reminiscent of the gloomy, foreboding opening of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony in the same key. Schuncke's score then gives way to an invigorating, happy B-Major Allegro that could have been written by the "Papa" himself. Haydn stalks the Andante too, with sudden forte outbursts that remind one of the "Surprise" Symphony. The Menuetto is a boot-clomping German dance, with heavy accents on one and two, and a contrasting trio with a piping flute solo. And for the finale, Schuncke practically quotes the principal theme from the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. Though 1850 may be a bit late for a work that sounds like it was written somewhere between 40 and 50 years earlier, it's still a very well-crafted and enjoyable score; and while the talent fairy gave Schuncke's older brother or cousin, Hugo, only a light dusting, she gifted Herrmann with an extra generous portion.

Violinist Yashusi Ideue and cellist David Pia give Hugo's potboiler Concertante everything they've got. Hornist Robert Langbein, as noted above, plays Johann Christoph's Concertino superbly, and the Baden-Baden Philharmonic plays with real conviction and polish under the able leadership of conductor Pavel Baleff. This is definitely a worthwhile purchase to consider if you're into exploring hitherto untapped romantic repertoire. © 2013