

Vivaldi, Jacob, Francaix & C.P.E. Bach: Bassoon Concertos

Christian Kunert is the principal bassoonist of the Hamburg Philharmonic and a member of Trio d'Anches Hamburg. With the other members of the trio, he recorded a disc of Henri Tomasi wind concertos for Farao that was highly recommended by critic Jerry Dubins in *Fanfare* 35:1. We sometimes do not see eye-to-eye (for example, Debussy String Quartet, 36:1), but here we agree on all but one passing comment: "It may be that the bassoon ... is not the most versatile or expressive instrument when cast in a solo capacity." Nonsense, and Kunert and these four works demonstrate it is such.

Kunert starts with Vivaldi, who wrote 42 bassoon concertos, crafting virtuosic music while avoiding the limitations of the nearly keyless Baroque bassoon. The RV 497 (not RV 472 as ArkivMusic conjectures in absence of any specifics in the track listing) is one of the best-known of these. The vigorous performance allows Kunert to show his chops in the treacherous passagework, as well as his beautiful singing tone and elegant phrasing, the latter especially in the arcadian *Andante molto* middle movement.

The C. P. E. Bach concerto, initially a flute concerto for Frederick the Great, was subsequently rewritten for cello with some modifications to the melodic line. One can hear the Classical style elbowing out the Baroque in this work, which, while it offers opportunity for display, is most notable for the charm of the outer movements, and the deeply felt *Largo* movement with its long-lined lyricism. Here dark emphasis by the lower strings dramatically underscores the soloist in the highest reaches of the tenor register. It is wonderfully mournful, as Bach requested, and quite beautiful on bassoon, even if, as is pointed out in the notes, it could never have been played on the bassoons of Bach's time.

However, what makes this release indispensable to aficionados of bassoon music are the two remaining works. There have been few recordings of these delightful 20th-century concertos, the finest being Robert Thompson (Chandos) in the orchestral version of the Gordon Jacob concerto—there is a wind band arrangement—and Gilbert Audin playing the Jean Françaix concerto with the composer conducting (*Cybelia/Etoile*). However, the Thompson is available only as a download, and the Audin/Françaix is unavailable except on YouTube. Kunert is so accomplished in these works, though, and the orchestra as well—notably better than the one Françaix conducted—that this is now less keenly felt.

The opening movement of the Jacob concerto is mostly carefree exuberance, though the composer, like a fine comedian, knows the power of the bittersweet. The *Adagio* central movement is modal and melancholy in the English manner, and exploits the lyric capabilities of the bassoon throughout its considerable range. The concluding *Rondo-Allegro Giocoso*, at first mysterious and expectant, suddenly launches into a quirky and amusing finale complete with a challenging cadenza before the final dash to the end. This performance uses bells, snare drum, xylophone, et al. They are optional, but it is hard to imagine the work without them.

The neoclassical Françaix concerto is as French as the Jacob is English, but like its discmate, it exudes fantasy and droll charm. The *Allegro moderato* veers between high spirits and almost sentimental wistfulness, a carefree *Scherzando* in 6/8 is light and flowing, the *Grave* third movement is lyric and more pensive than sad, while the *Risolto* final movement is saucy and impertinent, and quite demanding technically. A final cadenza runs through all the moods of the piece, before it ends with a cheeky flourish. Kunert is brilliant, but never lets the technical show get in the way of the good humor. He does not play a French basson, as Audin did, but he catches the style perfectly. It is a lovely performance to celebrate the composer's

centenary.

So, kudos to the artistic development folks at Genuin Classics of Leipzig, who definitely have a nose for finding outstanding nexuses of talent and repertoire. The orchestral accompaniments are all alert and stylish: HIP where appropriate without being doctrinaire. The recorded sound is strikingly beautiful, as is the norm for this label run by engineers, and if the soloist is too close in the sound picture, it is not to where it is off-putting. Therefore, to anyone who enjoys hearing bassoon, that marvelously expressive instrument, expertly played: nothing but the highest recommendation.

Ronald E. Grames

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