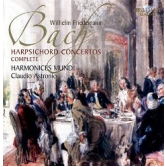


Wilhelm Friedemann Bach – Harpsichord Concertos (Astronio) [2010]

Written by bluesever

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CD1 1 Concerto for harpsichord & strings in F minor ('Berlin'), CW C73 (T. 301/4): 1. Allegro di molto 2 Concerto for harpsichord & strings in F minor ('Berlin'), CW C73 (T. 301/4): 2. Andante 3 Concerto for harpsichord & strings in F minor ('Berlin'), CW C73 (T. 301/4): 3. Prestissimo 4 Harpsichord Concerto in F major, F. 44 (BR C13): 1. Allegro ma non troppo 5 Harpsichord Concerto in F major, F. 44 (BR C13): 2. Molto adagio 6 Harpsichord Concerto in F major, F. 44 (BR C13): 3. Presto 7 Harpsichord Concerto in E minor, F. 43 (BR C 12): 1. Allegretto 8 Harpsichord Concerto in E minor, F. 43 (BR C 12): 2. Adagio 9 Harpsichord Concerto in E minor, F. 43 (BR C 12): 3. Allegro assai CD2 1 Harpsichord Concerto in D major, F. 41 (BR C9): 1. Allegro 2 Harpsichord Concerto in D major, F. 41 (BR C9): 2. Andante 3 Harpsichord Concerto in D major, F. 41 (BR C9): 3. Presto 4 Harpsichord Concerto in A minor, F. 45 (BR C14): 1. - 5 Harpsichord Concerto in A minor, F. 45 (BR C14): 2. Larghetto 6 Harpsichord Concerto in A minor, F. 45 (BR C14): 3. Allegro ma non molto 7 Concerto (Sonata) for 2 harpsichords in F major, F. 10 (BR A12) (previously attrib. J.S. Bach, BWV Anh188): 1. Allegro moderato 8 Concerto (Sonata) for 2 harpsichords in F major, F. 10 (BR A12) (previously attrib. J.S. Bach, BWV Anh188): 2. Andante 9 Concerto (Sonata) for 2 harpsichords in F major, F. 10 (BR A12) (previously attrib. J.S. Bach, BWV Anh188): 3. Presto 10 Concerto for 2 harpsichords & orchestra in E flat major ('Double Concerto'), F. 46 (BR C11): 1. Un poco allegro 11 Concerto for 2 harpsichords & orchestra in E flat major ('Double Concerto'), F. 46 (BR C11): 2. Cantabile 12 Concerto for 2 harpsichords & orchestra in E flat major ('Double Concerto'), F. 46 (BR C11): 3. Vivace

Harmonices Mundi String Ensemble Marco Facchin – harpsichord Claudio Astronio – harpsichord Claudio Astronio – conductor

In a Fanfare 33:5 review of solo keyboard works by W. F. Bach, played by Siegbert Rampe (MDG 3411592), I offered my two cents that of J. S. Bach's male progeny, Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–84), the eldest son, may quite possibly have been the most gifted. His main teacher, of course, was his father, but he also took lessons in violin from Johann Gottlieb Graun (1703–71). Wilhelm became noted as a brilliant organist and improviser, but he ran afoul of the conservative town council and church officials in Hallé where he was employed as organist at the Liebfrauenkirche. Wilhelm was not one for religious piety, and by 1764 he'd had all he could

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take of Hallé's holier-than-thou hostile environment. With no other job prospects, barely a coin of the realm in his pocket, and with not much else than the clothes on his back, he upped and left his post with his wife and surviving daughter, Friederica Sophia, in tow.

A couple of interesting tidbits I came across in my research for this review were that (1) Sophia took some of J. S.'s manuscripts with her when she emigrated to America, passing them on to her descendants who settled in Oklahoma. The manuscripts in question are believed to have been inadvertently destroyed. And (2) other of J. S.'s manuscripts were passed on by Wilhelm to his Berlin pupil, Sarah Itzig Levy, daughter of a prominent Jewish family in Berlin and great-aunt of Felix Mendelssohn. It was she who gave Mendelssohn the manuscript of the St. Matthew Passion, which she had received from Wilhelm.

Sadly, Wilhelm Friedemann did not fulfill his promise. He fell into debt, his misfortunes multiplied, and he died destitute. No one knows for sure why his life unraveled the way it did, but it's probably a safe bet that a combination of rapidly changing musical trends and daddy issues—a first-born son trying so hard not to disappoint the expectations of a famous father—conspired to seal Wilhelm's fate. A quote attributed to J. S., "The son that gives me joy is the one that I love"—if indeed he said it—tells much about his parenting skills.

It's a bit difficult to describe these harpsichord concertos by the Bach clan's eldest son, for they are seemingly caught between the vanishing world of the father's Baroque and the younger siblings' emerging world of the early Classical. Take, for example, the beautifully expressive Andante movement of the F-Minor Concerto. It might almost be mistaken for a slow movement from one of J. S.'s keyboard concertos—a continuous, melismatic spinning out of a florid melody line over a mark-time chordal accompaniment in the orchestra. Yet there is something more one doesn't normally hear in similar movements by the elder Bach, orchestral interludes that sigh in sweet sorrow as they extend and comment upon the soloist's lament. It could almost be a far-ranging anticipation of Mozart, for it reminded me of those heartbreaking sighs offered up by the orchestra in the Adagio of Mozart's A-Major Piano Concerto, No. 23. Listening to this movement and to the still more extended Molto Adagio in the F-Major Concerto, F 44, with its mix of Baroque and empfindsamer stil elements, persuades me even more of Wilhelm Friedemann's unique gift.

In the fast movements, again there is a clear nod to the keyboard concertos of J. S. in particular—the concluding Presto of the same F 44 Concerto, for example, is replete with keyboard figuration and orchestral flourishes that come right out of J. S.'s D-Minor Concerto, BWV 1052—and to the Baroque style in general. Energetic rhythmic motives drive the music forward in propulsive patterns, and virtuosic solo excursions alternate with repetitive ritornellos

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in the orchestra. The formulas may be stock, but Wilhelm fills them with music of unflagging stamina and constantly imaginative ideas.

I've long been under the impression, quite mistaken it turns out, that Brilliant Classics was a budget label exclusively engaged in acquiring the rights to previously released recordings and to reissuing them under its own flag. But this two-CD set is brand new, having been recorded in November 2009, and this is its original pressing. The harpsichords employed are modern copies of German and Flemish instruments built by Manchester maker Keith Hill.

Harmonices Mundi is the nom de plume, so to speak, for the Bozen Baroque Orchestra, just as Apollo's Fire is the handle by which the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra is known. Fanciful names aside, harpsichordist and conductor Claudio Astronio has fashioned his 2006-founded, Bolzano-based band into one of the best-sounding period-instrument ensembles I've heard. Articulation is crisp and alert, intonation perfect, and the playing infused with such spirited élan in fast movements and such warmth in slow ones that listening to these discs was a truly joyful experience. This, in combination with an excellent recording and Wilhelm Friedemann's exceptional music, wins this release a "must-have" --- Jerry Dubins, Fanfare

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