



REVIEW: RECORDING

Symphonies, volumes 1 and 2

Theodor von Schacht (1748–1823)

Evergreen Symphony Orchestra / Gernot Schmalfuss (conductor)

Volume 1, Classic Produktion Osnabrück CPO 777737–2, 2014; one disc, 78 minutes

Volume 2, Classic Produktion Osnabrück CPO 777912–2, 2021; one disc, 64 minutes

Bertil H. van Boer

Department of Music, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA
vanboer@wwu.edu

Joseph Haydn once remarked about a friend and patron, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, that his symphonies were ‘as stiff as the Baron himself’ (Vernon Gotwals, *Haydn: Two Contemporary Portraits* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 38.). While this has nothing to do with the two volumes of symphonies by Freiherr (Baron) Theodor von Schacht (1748–1823) reviewed here, the comment reflects the common feeling among professional musicians of the time that their noble patrons, who could be composers in their own right, were amateurs at best. This probably reflects a niggling idea of class difference, whereby anyone with a title could be considered as someone who dabbled in music as a hobby. Though there may be some truth to this, there were a fair number of nobles who were, in fact, competent, talented and able to produce compositions that were on a par with those of their professional musical employees. One of these was Schacht, who held the post of director of music at the Thurn und Taxis court in what is today Regensburg in Bavaria.

Born into a family of minor nobility, he exhibited a talent for music at an early age, and was trained locally by Johann Küffner and Joseph Riepel. Schacht was then sent to Stuttgart, where he was a student of the famed Niccolò Jommelli. In Wetzlar, however, he was trained in law as a prerequisite for a career as a counsellor to Prince Alexander Ferdinand von Thurn und Taxis. His own choice of vocation, therefore, had to be subordinated to an appropriate position in Regensburg as a *Hofkavalier*, or Knight of the Realm, regardless of his own inclination. A close friendship with the enlightened heir, Carl Anselm, eventually led to Schacht being named *Hof-Intendant*, with the further responsibilities of overseeing all of the court’s musical entertainments and helping to establish an Italian opera troupe there. In 1774 he was also appointed administrator of the opera house, a post he held for over two decades. The baron’s duties also included managing court protocols, serving as privy counsellor and supervising diplomatic missions. One might have thought these obligations at court would preclude musical composition, but Schacht found the time to become a prolific composer, whose works ran the spectrum of genres from sacred music to chamber pieces.

Theodor von Schacht is not well regarded today, primarily because of the strict discipline he exercised over the Regensburg musical establishment. As the Thurn und Taxis princes were in charge of the imperial postal service throughout the Holy Roman Empire, and so were very wealthy, their court could boast about forty very fine and talented musicians, quite similar to more famous courts such as those located in Eszterháza, Ludwigsburg, Mannheim and Munich. Although Schacht

was partly responsible for the high reputation of the *Hofkapelle*, he was not a popular figure with the musicians in the ensemble. Indeed, as J. Murray Barbour demonstrated back in 1963, extreme animosity developed between Schacht and František Pokorný, a fellow Riepel student, court violinist and court chamber composer ('Pokorný Vindicated', *The Musical Quarterly* 49/1 (1963), 38–58). The cause of their hostility remains unknown, but it was revealed that Schacht, possibly after Pokorný's death in 1794, attempted to blot his name out from history by 'reattributing' to other musicians much of that composer's music held in Regensburg. It is possible that this extreme act of animosity was due to a conflict caused by their social class, with Schacht being a member of the nobility and thus of higher status than Pokorný, who was an employee, albeit the concertmaster responsible for the day-to-day performances of the *Hofkapelle*. Such a division of leadership seems to have led to a conflict between the two, but one that may not have become open, given that the concertmaster was well respected. In any case, this act has made archival research into the correct attributions of the works in the Thurn und Taxis library more difficult, which in turn has had an effect on the musical reputation of Schacht himself. This was apparently not how others viewed Schacht during his tenure as music director, for when Swedish Kapellmeister Joseph Martin Kraus paid a visit to Regensburg as part of his grand tour in 1783, he noted that 'every day concerts were organized at the court on my behalf, where I could not marvel enough at the perfection of the orchestra' (Bertil van Boer, *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 150). The *Intendant* Schacht was no doubt at the heart of this musical feast, and Kraus wrote to his parents in a letter dated 5 April 1783 to say that the Baron had paid him a special visit just prior to his departure for Vienna (Boer, *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus*, 151). After Schacht was pensioned in 1805, he settled in Vienna, where he continued to compose music, which was politely received in various concert venues.

It is interesting to note that very little of Theodor von Schacht's music has seen the light of day. While one may think of this as Pokorný's posthumous revenge, the fact is that much of it rests in the Thurn und Taxis library, still a private court library, where it is only accessible if one cares to look. He was, however, a prolific composer, having written some thirty-five symphonies, not to mention forty-five concertos for all instruments, no doubt for his crew to perform, as well as a multitude of chamber works and a substantial amount of vocal music. What has been recorded so far has been a few clarinet concertos (for one, two and three instruments), the odd chamber work and, most recently, a triple oboe concerto.

The two discs reviewed here represent a good start in bringing his music to the fore. The notes state somewhat cryptically that Schacht modelled his music on that of Joseph Haydn, whose symphonies are found in Regensburg in substantial numbers. Haydn, of course, was perhaps the most popular composer of the era, and while his works were certainly quite well known, there does not seem to be any evidence that Schacht took them as his direct models. Indeed, the works on these two discs represent good, solid compositional skills in their own right, and there can be no doubt that Schacht, given his output of thirty-five symphonies, was fully capable of his own original work without resorting to the models of Haydn or anyone else.

The three symphonies of volume 1 are all in four movements, and two of them begin with a slow introduction, one of the more modern features for the time. Indeed, that of the first symphony on the disc, in C major, is quite lengthy and indeed imperial in terms of its power, heard in the flourishes and fanfares of the trumpets and timpani. The Allegro that follows is bright and cheerful, with a lyrical lightness and good contrasting set of main themes that flow easily, though with some unexpected and interesting harmonic twists. The opening hammerstroke of the second symphony on the disc, in E flat major, is solemn and stately, though the softer material that follows seems more akin to the early nineteenth century in terms of style, with perhaps a hint of Carl Maria von Weber lurking in the background. Interesting contrasts of orchestration and harmonic progressions characterize the lively main portion of this first movement. The slow movements of both symphonies evince a fine sense of graceful lyricism. That of the E flat symphony (the first of two on the

disc) has a quite simple theme that forms the basis for a set of variations. The minuets that follow are solid and decisive in their brass writing, particularly in the case of the C major symphony. The finales of all of the symphonies on the disc scurry about at a fast pace, with some quite dramatic minor-key interpolations. Indeed, the final movement of the E flat symphony is a lively gigue. The third symphony on the disc, also in E flat major, differs from the first two in that it is labelled 'echo' and is dated 1774, whereas the other two are undated, making their composition dates a matter of conjecture. The first movement features distant echoes repeating scattered motives, forming an interesting call and response. The Andante is quite lyrical, having a memorable theme that is fluid yet placid, but the real treasure is the finale, which is in a furious tempo and uses the echo effect to outline several themes in a helter-skelter race to the conclusion.

The second disc is of equal interest. The B flat symphony from 1792 has a mysterious, even ghostly, tread in the slow introduction, but then the Allegro begins with the dominant key, delaying the entry of the tonic, and the orchestration is both bright and with a progressive use of the winds and strings in varying textures. After another lyrical slow movement, the minuet is almost like a scherzo in its decisiveness. The finale is light and airy. The second symphony on the disc, that in F major, begins with a powerful Allegro and good thematic contrasts in the obbligato wind writing. The mincing, ghostly second movement has a pair of basset horns giving it a darker tone, while the minuet is more like a Bavarian folk dance than a courtly minuet, with a bouncy rhythm and lilting main theme. The fast finale is filled with syncopation and dramatic moments. Schacht's Symphony in G major, the last on the disc, begins with a long and slow introduction, the opening chords of which are then mimicked in the Allegro. The lilting variations of the slow movement move into the Ländler-style minuet of the third movement. With the bouncy finale and its sometimes unexpected chromatic moments, this work comes to a lively and joyous conclusion.

There are two takeaways from these discs. First, the performance by the Taiwanese Evergreen Orchestra on modern instruments is excellent, with performances that are precise and imbue the symphonies with a nice dramatic flair. The pace set by conductor Gernot Schmalfuss allows these works to come alive. The second takeaway is that all six of these symphonies are fine examples of a talented and highly creative composer. Whatever Schacht's life as a nobleman and official courtier might have demanded, his musical abilities were considerable, and these works demonstrate that he ought to be considered one of the most progressive composers of the age, resident in a location where the musicianship was at the highest level. Schacht is one of those figures whose music deserves to be resurrected, if the quality and ingenious compositional content of these symphonies are indicative of his oeuvre. The symphonies performed on these discs are a good start, and one may look forward to further recordings both by the Evergreen Orchestra and of Schacht's music.

Bertil van Boer is Professor Emeritus of Musicology–Theory at Western Washington University. He has published widely on music of the eighteenth century, including *The Musical Life of Joseph Martin Kraus: Letters of an Eighteenth-Century Swedish Composer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).