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JOSEPH WÖLFL (1773–1812)

PIANO CONCERTOS NOS 1, 5 AND 6

Yorck Kronenberg (piano) / SWR Rundfunkorchester Kaiserslautern / Johannes Moesus
classic produktion osnabrück cpo 777 374-2, 2008; one disc, 76 minutes

A previous review in this journal of a CD of piano sonatas by Wölfl opened with the observation that ‘posterity has not been kind to Joseph Wölfl’ and ended by commenting that ‘a niche should be found in the repertory for this late classical “Kleinmeister” of the keyboard’ (*Eighteenth-Century Music* 5/1 (2008), 134, 136). At the time of writing this was certainly true in relation to recordings of his music, but the general reputation of Wölfl as a composer is gradually being rehabilitated, with several recordings of his works now available, including his sets of piano sonatas Opp. 6 and 15, his only two symphonies, Opp. 40 and 41, not to mention the Op. 31 *Grand Duo* for cello and piano and the three string quartets, Op. 4. His nineteen accompanied violin sonatas (one set, Op. 14, is based on themes from Haydn’s *Creation*) and six piano trios would doubtless also make for rewarding listening, as would some of his theatrical music, but given the recent increase in recordings, musicologists interested in this composer’s music should not grumble too much at the present time.

Since he was considered the only major rival pianist to Beethoven in the closing years of the eighteenth century (the review cited above includes a number of attestations to his prowess), it is not surprising that Wölfl composed no fewer than seven piano concertos between the years 1799 and 1812, in addition to a *Concerto da camera* for piano with flute and string quartet, and a double concerto for violin and piano that was performed in Berlin in December 1800. All these works were presumably intended for his own use. The disc reviewed here contains three concertos (in addition to the Andante slow movement of the Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major (*Le calme*, Op. 36)): No. 1 in G major, Op. 20; No. 5 in C major (*Grand concerto militaire*, Op. 43); and No. 6 in D major (*Le coucou*, Op. 49). Concerto No. 4 is in fact a revised version of No. 1 that Wölfl made later for London, possibly because the former work had not yet been performed there. (Concerto No. 7 is also a recycled and much abridged version of No. 2, presumably made for the same reason.) The new slow movement recorded here replaced the original one, but the revised outer movements are still recognizably the same, albeit with several major changes, such as the provision of a cadenza in the first movement (though it is unclear from the present recording if this is what is being performed at the cadenza point in No. 1) and the excision of twelve bars from the finale.

The numbering of Wölfl’s piano concertos was not made by the composer himself, but it dates from the period. Wölfl’s piano concertos, like Beethoven’s, were not necessarily published in order of composition: the earliest is No. 5 (1799), and No. 1 dates from 1802. It is likely that Wölfl composed the former specifically for the extensive concert tour that he undertook to Brno, Prague, Leipzig, Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin and Paris in 1799. Gerber reported that he played this, ‘one of the most difficult of concertos that had ever been heard in Dresden, [a semitone higher] in C sharp major, with an ease, skill, accuracy and precision that amazed the entire orchestra’ (my own translation) at a pre-concert rehearsal there in May 1799 owing to his own piano’s being pitched a semitone below the orchestra; the rapidly summoned piano tuner required an hour to retune the instrument (Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Neues historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler* (Leipzig: A. Kühnel, 1813–1814), ed. Othmar Wessely (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1966), volume 4 (in volume 3 of reprint), 599). Wölfl may also have performed the same concerto in Leipzig on 11 April that year. It must be presumed that the other six concertos were composed either in Paris, where Wölfl was based from 1801 to 1805, or London, where he resided for the remainder of his life. He performed a concerto in London on 27 May 1805, and his Concerto No. 4, ‘composed’ there before July 1807, ‘was especially popular and performed at four concerts within the space of just two months’ (Ewan West, ‘Joseph Wölfl’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), volume 27, 511). Of the concertos recorded here, No. 1 was



published by Naderman in Paris in 1802 and – according to the CD liner notes (but not *The New Grove*, second edition) – the others in London between 1806 and 1812. However, most were later republished in Germany: Nos 4 and 6 by Breitkopf and Härtel in Leipzig in 1808 and 1811 respectively, and No. 5 by Johann André in Offenbach as late as c1816 (copies of the German orchestral parts were used for the recording of these concertos, and the Paris set for No. 1). In terms of overall performing length, the current recording of No. 1 is by far the longest of the three complete concertos, coming to around thirty minutes (the first movement is equal in length to the other two combined), with No. 5 at 23'30" and No. 6 at just 17'15": there is clearly no gradual expansion of the genre (as with Beethoven, for example).

Each of the concertos is cast in the normal three-movement structure of the day. The finale of No. 1 is a *Rondeau à la polonaise*, with the typical rhythmic motive of a quaver, two semiquavers and four quavers dominating the refrain, whilst that of No. 6 bears the work's subtitle, *Le coucou*, overall for audibly obvious reasons (a descending third commencing with an anacrusis heard twice at the beginning of the catchy 6/8 refrain), as does the slow movement of No. 4, with its calm and almost constantly flowing accompaniment of semiquavers lying under the piano's right-hand melody (for which the equivalent movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Piano Sonata, Op. 13, springs to mind as a possible influence). Martial rhythms, a dramatic mood lacking in Nos 1 and 6, the dominance of trumpets and timpani in the opening ritornello (including a solo trumpet fanfare answered by the wind 'Harmonie') and the opposition of C major and minor in the first movement of Concerto No. 5 are clearly also responsible for its *militaire* appellation, although such major-minor passages of music are not uncommon in each of these concertos, and occasionally sound contrived.

Wölfl's relatively early Concerto No. 1 is Mozartean in style, to the extent that he actually quotes from the opening eight notes of 'Non più andrai' from *Le nozze di Figaro* at the outset of both phrases of the main theme in the playful and melodious first movement. As he was a pupil of Leopold Mozart and possibly more than just an acquaintance of Wolfgang, this musical quotation is perhaps not surprising. The second subject grows out of this first one, as does also the codetta motive at the end of the solo exposition, and the development is also motivically related, albeit with a new-sounding melodic idea, resulting in an economy of musical material not usually encountered outside the works of the 'great' composers of this period. The downside to this, of course, is the sheer frequency with which the basic rhythmic unit of a dotted quaver and a semiquaver (on a weak beat) and a crotchet (on a strong beat) recurs over the course of the entire movement, albeit often varied or ornamented, especially by the piano. The first movement of No. 5 is similarly dominated by a martial motive of a crotchet, dotted quaver, semiquaver and two crotchets (taken from the coda of 'Non più andrai?'), whilst that of No. 6 reverts to the same basic three-note motive that was used in No. 1 (the effect here is quite martial but undramatic). The 2/4 finale of No. 5 is based on a trite and rhythmically repetitive folksy tune which is dominated by an upbeat quaver preceding four quavers and a crotchet, whilst that of No. 6 naturally leans very heavily on the initial cuckoo motive. This commonly encountered over-reliance on a simple basic rhythmic motive must be considered a major failing in Wölfl's compositional style. Various other features are also commonly encountered in these works, such as the alternation of the piano with the orchestra (either in its full complement or only the wind or string sections) at the outset of the slow movements of Nos 1, 4 and 5. A duet between the horns and piano in the opening bars of the finale of No. 1 and occasional dialogues between the piano and various other instruments elsewhere are imaginative touches of orchestration that are rarely experienced outside the works of major concerto composers at that time. The orchestration is similar in all the concertos, with what sounds to be one flute, pairs of oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets and timpani (these last two are omitted from all four slow movements) with strings, but no clarinets.

The slow movement of No. 6 is redolent of the first two bars of 'Il mio tesoro' from *Don Giovanni*, and the style of figuration employed both in this concerto and in No. 1 is also relatively Mozartean: the outer movements of his Piano Concerto No. 23 in A K488 may be a direct influence for many of these and also for Wölfl's sequences, not least in development sections. Only the scalic figurations not infrequently encountered in the first movement of No. 6 seem to lack imagination. The far showier and more extensive



semiquaver figurations found in No. 5 are much closer to Beethoven, whose first two concertos were still relatively new in 1799 (although he revised No. 1 in 1800). Wölfl's clear-cut structures are Mozartean, with generally well-defined internal subdivisions within each movement. The slow movements of Nos 4 and 5 are in ternary form, in the latter case ending with a half close that resolves rather indecisively in the finale, the opening of which is dominated by tonic–dominant bass movement that can sound monotonous upon repeated listening. In various other movements of these concertos, the use of similarly repetitive harmonies or of a tonic pedal, occasionally with a left-hand piano trill (as in the coda to the slow movement of No. 1), is another compositional weakness.

The German pianist and composer Yorck Kronenberg was born in 1973. He won the 1998 Johann Sebastian Bach International Piano Competition and was awarded the special prize in the 1999 Wartburg Piano Competition at Eisenach. His previous CD releases include music by Bach, Beethoven and Schubert, amongst others. The conductor Johannes Moesus is well known in Germany, where this cpo disc was made in collaboration with Südwestrundfunk and recorded at the SWR Studio in Kaiserslautern with the accompaniment of the in-house orchestra: there is a photograph of the soloist on the rear cover of the extensive booklet (seven pages of liner notes in the English translation of the German original), but no fewer than three of Moesus inside. Wölfl's likeness is represented by two illustrations: an engraving by J. G. Scheffner and a heavily cropped oil painting by Lampi (reproduced in monochrome). The performances, on modern instruments, are well balanced between the soloist and the orchestra, though the fairly reverberant acoustic does obscure some of the orchestral detail at times, notably in the middle of the texture. The rendition of No. 5 is suitably dramatic and extrovert, but the interpretations of Nos 1 and 6 are comparatively intimate and relaxed in the Mozartean sense: the problem is that neither of these works *sounds* to be any more technically demanding than an average mature Mozart piano concerto. I say a 'problem' because this is probably far removed from Wölfl's own virtuosic performance style, as recounted by various writers of the time, and both concertos may perhaps have benefited from more energy and drive, though the first movement of each is only an *Allegro moderato*. The finale of No. 6 sounds to be on the slowish side, in spite of being marked *Allegro molto*; the convivial lilting tempo adopted here may be ideal for the 'cuckoo' refrain but it is certainly not fast enough for the solo episodes. Of course, other listeners may prefer the somewhat laid-back approach to both concertos, one that is certainly well suited to their lyrical side. The bottom line is to ask whether these concertos make for repeated listening, and the answer is in the affirmative, as they are sufficiently musically interesting despite the repeated rhythmic figurations and other negative features already discussed. It must be borne in mind that Wölfl was a 'minor' composer and that these concertos would have been written to satisfy not only the traditional expectation of audiences to hear music composed by the soloist and but also his own self-respect as a virtuoso pianist.

Although the Naxos label is probably more familiar to British consumers of non-mainstream eighteenth-century music, cpo is to be commended for continuing to provide consistently fine recordings such as the superb J. C. Bach orchestral music project masterminded by the late Ernest Warburton and performed by The Hanover Band under Anthony Halstead. Many other recordings that explore the highways and byways of classical repertory are unique to the cpo catalogue, such as J. C. F. Bach's cantata *Cassandra*, string quartets by Gaetano Brunetti (1767–1798), the three delightful Viennese wind divertimentos by A. C. Cartellieri (1772–1807), Joseph Eybler's *Requiem* (another Mozart-influenced work) and now these piano concertos by Joseph Wölfl.

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