

C. P. E. BACH **String Symphonies Nos. 1–6**, Wq 182 • Sakari Oramo, cond;
Ostrobothnian CO • ALBA 374 (SACD: 63:11)

These thematically rich works were written by Bach in his 60th year, on commission from Baron Gottfried von Swieten. The Baron, nearly two decades Bach's junior, later provided some financial support to Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. The annotator for this splendid Hybrid SACD release (the ensemble's first chair cellist) suggests that von Swieten's interest in north German music was a factor in his subventing the Hamburg-based composer. In any case the set is known as the *Hamburger Sinfonien*, and so identified by ALBA.

The annotator (Lauri Pulakka) also suggests that unlike many such commissions, the Baron gave Bach free rein in his compositional efforts—asking only for sophisticated compositions which presented some technical difficulty in their execution. Bach responded with six works identical in structure (each of three movements, fast-slow-fast), similar in mood (generally cheerful), and similar in length: The Fourth Sinfonia is a hair under 12 minutes and the Sixth just 3 seconds under 9 minutes. Although one cannot imagine they were performed as a set (but, who knows?) they can be heard in barely over an hour's listening time. Unlike the works catalogued as Wq 183, which are scored for strings and winds, these are for strings alone.

Who would listen at a sitting, you might ask? In fact, within these modestly scaled works, the brilliant second son has crafted a half-dozen near masterpieces. They are inventive, melodic, and so rich in their harmonic development as to cause one, at least temporarily, to agree with those who have said C. P. E. is "the most adventurous composer harmonically before Schubert." Although in my listening prior to writing these comments I have listened several times to one or the other sinfonia, I have twice, for sheer pleasure, listened to the disc straight through with interest and delight.

The first numbered is in G Major and fascinates throughout, the first movement arresting in both rhythm and melody, a lovely slow movement followed by a particularly bracing finale. In the second work, I find the first movement a bit less individualistic, but the *poco adagio* is gorgeous and the concluding *presto* even more fun than in the preceding work. My two favorites are the Fourth and Fifth sinfonias, the two longest, and the Fifth, the only one in minor key. The Fourth, in A Major has as much richness and dark coloration as the Fifth, however, and both reach considerable emotional depth. The *poco andante* movement of the Sixth

Sinfonia is in a similar vein. All of the slow movements are in something of a free fantasia, almost arioso, style, but there is great variety among them.

These works have been most readily available to U.S. buyers in a fine Naxos recording issued in 1997; Christian Benda conducts the Capella Istropolitana with understanding and style. No one need discard that recording. However, I should say this Alba release takes priority in choice now. Sakari Oramo has been chief of this Finnish group for only two years, but has, of course, made a huge mark (and career) throughout Scandinavia as a fine conductor, brilliant interpreter of the music of Carl Nielsen, and chair of the respected Malko Conducting Competition. In leading this chamber orchestra of 19 players, gives of his talents to a repertory different from what I have known to be his historic norm. He also may have provided the keyboard player for the group, since Anna-Maaria Oramo (his sister) is listed on the roster for harpsichord and cembalo.

These works, however, offer little—if any—opportunity for continuo. They are modern sounding, as modern as Haydn (or more so), particularly given the incisive, vigorous, spot-on string playing heard in these recorded performances. This is a crack ensemble, a professional orchestra for just over a quarter-century but actually dating to 1972. As recorded in what seems to be an acoustically excellent hall in the coastal town of Kokkola (about three-quarters of the distance to the north end of the Gulf of Bothnia), the splendid sonic properties of this SACD present the music and the playing of it in the best possible framework. This ensemble offers not just precision in its playing, but also genuine tonal beauty. The conductor not only keeps things going, but seems at one with his players in shaping the music with both sensitivity and force when called for. This release calls for a strong recommendation. **James Forrest**

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Carl Philipp Emanuel BACH (1714-1788) - MusicWeb Review

Symphony in G major, Wq 182/1 (H 657) [10:17]

Symphony in B flat, Wq 182/2 (H 658) [9:15]

Symphony in C, Wq 182/3 (H 659) (1773) [10:17]

Symphony in A, Wq 182/4 (H 660) (1773) [11:54]

Symphony in B minor, Wq 182/5 (H 661) (1773) [11:17]

Symphony in E, Wq 182/6 (H 662) (1773) [8:57]

Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra/Sakari Oramo
rec. 28-31 August 2013, Snellman Hall, Kokkola.

ALBA ABCD 374 [63:11]

This is an excellent recording and performance of the six *String Symphonies Wq*

182 by C.P.E. Bach. The first notes grab you, and the extremes of contrast from the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra create by turns symphonic tumult and the lightest of finesse. The strings are given some rhythmic edge with a harpsichord continuo as is the tradition with this period of music and with most recordings, the balance of which is not over-present, enhancing rather than distracting.

There are indeed a few other recorded versions of C.P.E. Bach's *String Symphonies* around. That with the Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach Chamber Orchestra conducted by Hartmut Haenchen (see [review](#)) has been a reliable option for some time, with sharp dynamic contrasts and a rhythmic crispness emphasised by an arguably over-present continuo harpsichord. The Naxos label has a decent set on 8.553285 with the Capella Istropolitana conducted by Christian Benda which has if anything a lighter touch and a bouncy, chamber music feel. One of the more recent recordings is that directed by Wolfram Christ on the Haenssler Classic label [CD98.637](#). With a fortepiano continuo and superb musicianship from the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra this one is hard to beat.

The snappy pace, technical prowess and stylish élan of the performances on this Alba release put it into the top rank of recordings in this repertoire, and if 5.1 multichannel SACD sound is the clincher then this CD can easily top your list of choices, and will never let you down. From top to bottom the sound is excellent, with refined smoothness from the upper strings which can dig deep when required, right down to satisfyingly toothsome resonance from the basses. If you are in any doubt about this have a listen to the *Adagio* of *Wq 182 No. 3*, which has some startling bass interjections which wouldn't sound out of place in Beethoven's own *Gewitter, Sturm*. As the booklet notes indicate, these symphonies represent C.P.E. Bach's *Empfindsam* style at its very best, which is to say high-octane 18th century music whose drama is far removed from *Galant* tameness. If you don't know these pieces or even if you do, I strongly suggest you treat yourself to this recording.

Dominy Clements

AllMusic Review by James Manheim - 4*/5*

Mozart's view of the music of **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** was wonderfully contradictory: he observed that **Bach**'s music would be considered old-fashioned in his own time, but that "he [**Bach**] was the father, and we are the children." This set of six **CPE Bach** symphonies from the early 1770s gives listeners the opportunity to think more deeply on **Mozart**'s statement. **Mozart** might easily have heard these works, and if music moved in the direction of lightness and grace from **Bach**'s style during **Mozart**'s creative lifetime, one can still hear a lot of **CPE**

in **Mozart**. The six symphonies here are not representative of **Bach**'s "Sturm und Drang" style; all but one are in major keys, and even the gracefully chromatic middle movement of the Symphony in B minor, Wq 182/5, is extremely Mozartian. The economy of form, with unexpected harmonic turns achieved with the smallest possible deployment of motivic resources, feels like **Mozart**. The six symphonies were commissioned by the **Baron van Swieten**, the Viennese diplomat responsible for turning **Mozart**'s interest toward **J.S. Bach**, and he specified that the younger **Bach** should not feel any restrictions in terms of technical complexity. The symphonies have a good deal of technical complexity that may remind one of **Haydn**'s Op. 20 string quartets as well as **Mozart**. At any rate, these works are highly listenable, and they get appropriately rough performances from Finland's **Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra** under **Sakari Oramo**. There are a few other performances of these works, but the transparency and vigor of these readings recommend them to any fan of **J.S. Bach**'s most daring son.