

CZERNY Symphonies: No. 1 in e; No. 5 in E^b • Nikos Athinaios, cond; St O of Frankfurt an der Oder • SIGNUM SIG X89-00 (77:21)

Symphonies by Carl Czerny? That sounds almost as improbable as symphonies by Frederick Chopin. Czerny was, of course, the doyen of the 10-finger exercise, the man who wrote method after method to demonstrate how every problem connected with the playing of the piano could be mastered (the secret: practice, practice, practice). His individual pieces for solo piano run into the hundreds and may well exceed a thousand. But Czerny was also a piano pupil of Beethoven, and some of that titan's embrace of all forms of instrumental music rubbed off on him. Collectors already have in their record libraries examples of Czerny the composer of chamber music: a lively Nonet for piano with mixed winds and strings, a Grand Sérénade Concertante for a similar layout, several works for flute in combination with piano and/or strings, Variations on Haydn's *Gott erhalte* for piano and string quartet. There was also proof that Czerny was comfortable in writing for an orchestra, at least in accompanimental mode, in a Piano Concerto in A minor, op. 214, a Concerto for Piano Four-Hands in C, op. 153, and a Divertissement for Piano and Orchestra—all three works, unhappily, now strictly the property of collectors of out-of-print recordings.

But symphonies, without the participation of the piano? Yes, there are six of them. The totally inadequate program notes for this Signum recording do not list them or say when they were written, nor is *New Grove* much more helpful in that respect. Czerny seems to have waited a good long time after Beethoven's death before essaying his first symphony, in C Minor, which bears the staggering opus number 780. His Second Symphony in D followed immediately upon the First, judging by the fact that it is op. 781. None of the subsequent symphonies has an opus number attached to it, since none of them managed to find a publisher. Czerny had written and published too much, and he had gone out of fashion; toward the end of his life (he died in 1857) few publishers were interested in his wares. The last four symphonies, all in manuscript, are respectively in the keys of C Major, D Minor, E^b Major and B Major.

The Greek conductor Nikos Athinaios, who now serves as principal conductor of the Frankfurt an der Oder City Orchestra, has dug up two of Czerny's buried symphonies for revival on this disc— or perhaps the credit for the spadework should go to the always-inquiring producer of the recording, pianist Horst Göbel. The first movement of Czerny's First Symphony moves between manic Beethovenian grandeur (à la *Coriolan* and the Fifth Symphony) and more lyrical elements that continue to invoke the spirit of Beethoven. It is a grand fresco, nearly 13 minutes long, extremely well orchestrated and, despite its borrowed feathers, very impressive. The succeeding Andante sostenuto provides the necessary relief from the unrelentingly *fortissimo* dynamics of the opening movement, but it has its loud outbursts as well; Czerny's handling of the massed

cellos in their songful tenor range is notable. The scherzo suggests that in his later years Czerny had become acquainted with the music of Mendelssohn. It features goblins rather than fairies, and a change to march rhythm in its trio. The rondolike finale maintains a cheerful forward thrust while remaining true to the C-Minor tonality.

Czerny's Fifth Symphony, in the "Eroica" key of E \flat , begins, most unusually, with a long Andante, although as it is played here it sounds more like an Allegro pure and simple. The movement has some strong ideas but insufficient contrasts between them, and again the unrelenting *forte* dynamics eventually weary the ear. Like the First Symphony, the Fifth has Andante sostenuto as the marking of its slow movement—and this time it is actually played sostenuto, resulting in a movement almost 12 minutes long, with enough good tunes to sustain its length. Czerny's use here of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and (again) high cellos is impressive. The scherzo, after a light-fingered beginning, develops into an outright plagiarism of the parallel movement of the "Eroica." The finale returns to Czerny's normal procedure of imitating Beethoven rather than stealing from him. It begins with a wonderful idea, and there are others along its course, but it ultimately fails to sustain one's interest.

The author of the program note, one Christoph Henzel, is dismissive of Czerny's E \flat Symphony, complaining that "whenever the themes fail to support the envisaged symphonic breadth, the composer resorts either to repetitions or the clamor of the tutti." There is more than a modicum of truth in that, but much of this clamor can be laid to the doorstep of the conductor and his huge orchestra, as well as to the sound engineers, who seem often unable to distinguish between a crescendo and an explosion, and whose concept of *a. forte* doesn't differ from their concept of a *fortississimo*. But despite the unnuanced playing and engineering there is plenty here to interest collectors of music stemming from the Beethoven atelier. The orchestral Czerny was one of the most devoted of the Master's clones, on the evidence of this surprising disc. **David Johnson**

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Amazon Review by Discophage - Rating 5*/5*

The Beethoven model looms large, but Czerny's symphonies aren't vastly inferior to their model(s)

Czerny. The terror of generations of aspiring pianists. Piano as expressionless mechanism rather than as music. If you want etudes that are not just the pretext for mechanical activity but for poetic invention, go to Chopin, go to Liszt...

...goes the common wisdom, or slander, about Czerny. But then you have others

who lauded Czerny, like his pupil Franz Liszt ("of all living composers who have occupied themselves especially with pianoforte playing and composing, I know none whose views and opinions offer so just an experience") or Stravinsky ("as for Czerny, I have been appreciating the full-blooded musician in him more than the remarkable pedagogue"). Would there be more to Czerny than just repellent mechanism?

I definitely side with Liszt and Stravinsky. I've discovered two of Czerny's most famous pedagogical books, the 30 "Etudes de Mécanisme" op. 849, Studies for the Mechanism (you mean for Robots to play, Hal 9000's first steps at the piano?) and the 40 studies from Die Schule der Geläufigkeit op. 299 ("School of Velocity"), through the recordings made in the mid-1970s by Christoph Eschenbach for DG Japan, in the context of a 15-volume installment of a pedagogical series for the Japanese market, the "Piano Lesson" series (see my reviews of [CZERNY 30](#) and [CZERNY 40](#)). I found them not just dry studies in mechanism, but lovely music, in a Haydn-to-Beethoven style (the Beethoven of the Bagatelles rather than of the sonatas), pushing at times towards Schubert. Sure the harmonic processes are simple, it isn't the purpose of those studies to be harmonically exploratory - but "simple" doesn't mean "not effective": the time-hallowed tonic-subdominant-dominant harmonic scheme is capable of producing lots of lovely music, and Czerny's wealth of melodic invention seems endless.

So it made me want to explore more Czerny, and Czerny outside of the piano. Czerny was born (in Vienna) in 1791 and died in 1857, which makes him Beethoven's younger by 21 years and the exact contemporary of Meyerbeer (1791-1864), and of the same generation as a throng of Austro-German early-romantic composers, Ferdinand Ries (1784-1847), Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859), Weber (1786-1826), Heinrich Marschner (1795-1861) to name but a few... and Schubert of course (1797-1828), with the shadow of Beethoven looming large over all of them. Czerny's output is immense, and the pedagogical exercises are only the tip of the iceberg. There are many more piano pieces of "salon" nature and potpourri from operas in vogue in Vienna, and, according to Wikipedia, Czerny himself divided his output in four categories: Studies and exercises, easy pieces for students, brilliant pieces for concerts, "serious music". "The majority of the pieces called by Czerny as [sic] 'serious music' (masses, choral music, quartets, orchestral and chamber music) remained unpublished. The manuscripts are held by Vienna's Society for the Friends of Music, to which Czerny (a childless bachelor) willed his estate." According to the CD's liner notes, there are some 300 of such "serious" works.

Czerny was first a pupil and then an assistant of Beethoven, and (if Wikipedia is to be trusted) premiered his first Piano Concerto and gave the Vienna premiere of the Emperor. So it's comes as no surprise that the Beethoven influence is heard in the two symphonies, No. 1 op. 780 and the unpublished Fifth in E-flat major. Dates of

composition are not given in the liner notes and I'm not sure they are even known, and I doubt that the opus number of the first gives any indication: in that era chronology of publication didn't always follow chronology of composition.

Czerny's Wikipedia entry claims that "Czerny's symphonic music brings to light a missing link between the classic and the romantic symphonic music", and one can be even more specific: as with the music of Ries (also a pupil and assistant of Beethoven) or Spohr, it brings to light a missing link between Beethoven and romantic music. The First symphony is Beethovenian in its buoyancy, verve and huge dramatic impact, although it is more the Beethoven of the first two symphonies than of the later ones, and although Czerny's lacks, perhaps, the unique melodic twists that makes those of Beethoven's immediately imprint on the listener's memory. But it certainly puts in resonance the Beethovenian imprints that this listener has in his memory. In its dramatic expression the First symphony offers the early 19th-century version of the mid-to-late-18th century "Sturm und Drang" style, but with heightened dramatic impact due to the use of a Beethovenian orchestra, with trumpets and timps.

Even the liner notes seem skeptical about the merits of the (unpublished) 5th Symphony in E flat major ("Scherzo and final movement both once again clearly show the limits of Czerny's concept of brilliant symphonic music: wherever the themes fail to support the envisaged symphonic breadth, the composer resorts either to repetitions or to the clamour of the tutti. Czerny staked everything on monumentalism here, and the edifice remains superficial" - great sales pitch, really!), and I don't agree at all: the first movement opens with a slow intro that is grand in a Beethovenian manner - again the Beethoven of the first Symphony rather than of the Eroica and the other "big" ones - but as it unfolds it offers a few personal twists of its own, like the superb horn at 2:24 then that opens its "allegro" proper, and in the course of its development it comes in fact fairly close to the Eroica, not only because it follows the same lilting 3/4 time signature, but more fundamentally in its dramatic impact, forceful accents and assertive horns. Annotator Christoph Hentzel calls the sonata-form unfolding "contemplative rather than forceful": we don't hear the same thing, and in fact I am appalled that he would have remained deaf to what I hear. Or maybe he finds Beethoven's symphonies monumental, clamorous and superficial. I've found that movement remarkable, as well as the other three. The slow movement ("andante sostenuto") is also strikingly Beethovenian and lush in its dramatic unfolding, and while it may not display Beethoven's striking melodic twists that with three or four notes imprint durably in the listener's memory, it is a superb movement. Likewise with the Scherzo, which starts in an apparently merry and lightweight manner, but soon develops the bounce and energy of a typical Beethoven Scherzo, and the Finale has altogether the exhilarating Beethovenian dramatic grandeur, the rhythmic bounce and the merriment found in Beethoven's Finales... and not only those of the early symphonies. Czerny's first and fifth are also Beethovenian-monumental

in their sheer duration, the 1st clocking, in the reading of Nikos Athinaios, 36 minutes and the 5th overstepping the forty-minute mark.

Sure, Czerny's symphonies 1 & 5 are deeply indebted to the Beethoven model (whether of the early symphonies or of the Eroica), but I don't find them enormously inferior to their models. TT 77:19. This same recording, made in 1997 for Signum, was later reissued by Christophorus, [Czerny: Symphonies Nos. 1 & 5](#) . In both forms it sells cheaper on the European sister companies. I've just ordered all the other CDs I could find with Czerny's symphonies, an alternative version of the 1st ([Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto; Czerny: Grand Symphony](#)), the 2nd ([Czerny: Piano Concerto, Op. 153 / Symphony No. 2](#)) and 2nd & 6th ([Czerny: Symphonies No. 2 & 6](#)).