

Stunning CPE From Schornsheim - ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10*

Period-instrument keyboard performers, like organists, are severely constrained by the tone of their instruments. Too often we are asked to accept thin, ugly, inexpressive sonorities simply because they allegedly represent historical "truth". The reality, of course, is that there are good-sounding old instruments and bad-sounding ones. I have had the opportunity to inspect (and play) dozens of them over the years, and having done that I can state categorically that there is simply no excuse for listeners being forced to endure sub-standard instrumental tone whatever the instrument happens to be, especially on recordings.

For this program, Christine Schornsheim has selected an absolutely magnificent tangent piano housed in Schloß Bad Korzingen, one that, along with her scintillating playing, really brings this music to life. Not only does it allow her to sweep up and down the keyboard in those glittering arpeggios with which Bach adorns his Fantasias (try Wq 58/6), but the instrument turns on a dime. It can sustain a tone, or cut it off with amazing abruptness, giving an extra punch to those sudden modulations and changes of timbre and texture that make this music so exciting.

The program is also an unusually interesting one—a selection of Rondos and Fantasias from Bach's Kenner and Liebhaber series of late keyboard works. The Rondos are supposed to be CPE's concession to the popular taste, but they are anything but "easy" in the sense that they are often just as virtuosic as anything else that he wrote, and they are not rondos in the classical sense at all. Formally, they are more like variation sets with brief interludes coming between each varied restatement of theme, which may not return in its entirety.

Another noteworthy aspect of this program is that Schornsheim only includes three pieces in minor keys out of a total of 13 (Wq 59/4, 56/5, and 61/4). So many programs stress the Sturm und Drang aspects of Bach's music, but this program proves that he could be just as inventive, and unpredictable, writing in a cheerier mood. There are some very substantial works here, packed with colorful contrasts, including the C major Fantasia Wq 59/6 and the wonderful E major Rondo Wq 57/1, and Schornsheim plays them all with unaffected mastery and an impish delight in their "what comes next" abruptness. The engineering of her splendid instrument is also drop-dead gorgeous. This is a great recital from start to finish, an aural and expressive delight.

C. P. E. BACH Rondos and Fantasias • Christine Schornsheim (hpd, fp) •
CAPRICCIO 5201 (73:21)

Previously, I have praised in these pages the 14-disc set of Christine Schornsheim playing Haydn sonatas. Haydn liked surprises: C. P. E. Bach is even quirkier. It's his 300th birthday this year, and Schornsheim is celebrating with a series of recitals of the master's works and with this disc of lively rondos and fantasias. She is drawn to their diversity, their occasional sentiment and to their *Sturm und Drang* qualities. In the interview that accompanies this disc, Schornsheim remarks of the D-Minor Rondo (Wq 61/4): "We have a motif that apparently recurs incessantly frequently. For me, this short motif has something restless and driven about it. It is as if you came storming through the door and simultaneously wanted to blurt out breathlessly what exciting things you had just experienced." I am not sure she associates the other pieces with her own such fantasies, but her statement captures what I like about these performances: the sometimes impetuous drama, the sense of a complex of things happening that are finally based on simple principles. This piece begins with a phrase that seems to spill out of her hands. Schornsheim seems a virtuoso not merely because of her ability to play quickly and forcefully, but because of the way she negotiates the shifts in mood and tempo in a manner that seems so correct. The recorded sound of both instruments is close and brilliant. The other recordings of some of these works that I have heard, such as Pletnev's, have been on modern pianos. This new disc will delight many readers and, I am guessing, all fans of the distinctive music of C. P. E. Bach.

Michael Ullman

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CPE BACH Rondos and Fantasias - Gramophone Review

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Author: Jed Distler

Although Christine Schornsheim has recorded sound and stylish JS Bach interpretations, she truly lets loose with his son Carl Philipp Emanuel. Her keyboard of choice is an 1801 'Tangentenflügel' that purports to fuse the best that the clavichord, harpsichord and fortepiano have to offer in regard to timbre and dynamics. It may not be an instrument of which the composer had first-hand

knowledge, yet it perfectly lends itself to his imaginative and volatile idiom. Schornsheim gives dramatic and colourful shape to the opening E flat Fantasia's cresting arpeggiations and spices up the melodic whimsy in the B flat major and C minor Rondos with split-second pauses between certain phrases. She heightens the contrast between the C major Rondo's phrases that alternate between a deadpan repeated middle C and more decorative high-register writing. Her agogic distensions in the A minor Rondo help to illuminate the music's unexpected twists of melody and harmony. The use of a 'harp' pedal adds a haunting, disembodied timbral dimension to the E major Rondo Wq58/3's long *legato* lines, as well as a woodwind-like patina to the G major Rondo's seemingly childlike tunes. Discreet yet noticeable pedal effects underline the F major Fantasia's unpredictable cadences and ear-catching dissonant nuggets. Perhaps the other E major Rondo (Wq57/1) best showcases Schornsheim's ingenuous sense of timing, as the music wanders through as many moods as changes of key.

A booklet interview with Schornsheim reveals her to be just as intelligent, insightful and witty away from the keyboard, while the superb engineering creates a warm and resonant ambience that makes the instrument come alive. In short, this is one of the CPE Bach anniversary year's more delectable offerings.