

KROMMER Symphonies: No. 1 in F, op. 12; No. 2 in D, op. 40; No. 3 in D, op. 62 • Howard Griffiths, cond; O della Svizzera Italiana • CPO 555 099-2 (77:26)

The Czech-born František Vincenc Kramář (1759–1831), who became Franz Krommer when he moved to Vienna in 1785, is a case study in how our evaluation of a composer can be compromised by the company he keeps. Krommer, in my opinion, has long been slotted into the wrong pigeonhole as a result of a series of Chandos recordings titled *Contemporaries of Mozart*, made back in the 1990s. Those CDs—five in all—lumped Krommer in with Leopold Kozeluch, Ignace Pleyel, Carl Stamitz, and Pavel Vranický. While it's true, chronologically, that all of these composers were more or less contemporaneous with Mozart and Haydn, they were a bit behind the curve in terms of form and content when it came to writing symphonies. Krommer, on the other hand, outlived not only Mozart and Haydn; he outlived Beethoven by four years and was thus aware of how the meaning of the term "symphony" had been transformed.

The three symphonies on this disc—Krommer composed 10 symphonies in all, one of them unnumbered—date from between the late 1790s to around 1810, with a specific date of 1803 given for the Symphony No. 2. These are big, substantive works in a late-Haydn/early-Beethoven mold—i.e., four movements, with a Menuetto in third place, an *Adagio* introduction to a fully worked out sonata-allegro first movement, and running to the better part of 30 minutes apiece. Krommer's writing is never less than harmonically interesting and sometimes daring, his thematic material and its development strong and often quite striking, and his use of woodwind instruments highly colorful. Even the practiced ear might mistake one of these symphonies for a lost score from the workbench of late Haydn or early Beethoven. Krommer may not have crossed over the line separating the Classical and Romantic periods, as Beethoven did, but he came very close, and his symphonies and numerous other works stand at the apex of high Classical style.

It can't be said that conductor Howard Griffiths is a specialist in music of this period. To the contrary, his very wide-ranging repertoire literally encompasses composers from A (Addinsell) to Z (Hans Zimmer). However, with the Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana he has recorded a well-received disc of symphonies and an overture by another Mozart contemporary, Franz Anton Hoffmeister, and a two-disc set of symphonies by Franz Danzi. So neither Griffiths nor the orchestra are strangers to music of this era. These three symphonies by Krommer are engaging and engrossing, and they are superbly executed and stylishly played. Moreover, at

present, this seems to be the only recording listed for the Symphonies 1 and 3. The Symphony No. 2, along with the Symphony No. 4, can be heard in the aforementioned Chandos series with Matthias Bamert and the London Mozart Players.

It would be a real coup for Griffiths, the Swiss Italian Orchestra, and CPO if they follow up on this release with a complete survey of Krommer's symphonies, which I don't believe anyone has done before. Highly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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KROMMER Symphonies: No. 4 in c, op. 102; **No. 5 in E \flat** , op. 105; **No. 7 in g**, Padrta I:7 • Howard Griffiths, cond; O della Svizzera Italiana • CPO 555 125-2 (79:20)

Discussions about Franz Krommer (1759–1831) usually contain a sentence or two in which the writer marvels at how so accomplished a composer could have slipped into oblivion almost immediately. (For example, in 1996 our George Chien wrote, "I am again astonished that this gifted composer, so successful during his lifetime, should have been so completely forgotten so quickly after his death.") In his booklet note to the present release, annotator Bert Hagels makes a very similar observation. Indeed, it is not fair ... but who ever said that life was fair? Krommer (born František Kramář in a town between Prague and Vienna) was an older contemporary of Beethoven and Schubert, outliving them both. I mention those composers because Krommer's music resembles the works of Beethoven and Schubert more than those of Mozart and Haydn, whose contemporaries he sometimes has been lumped in with. All three of the symphonies on this CD include a third movement marked Menuetto, but they sound more like a Beethoven scherzo. (If the Seventh's third movement is a minuet, then the dancers must be wearing boxing gloves.) All three of the symphonies have turns of phrase that suggest Beethoven in one place, Schubert in another. Krommer's sense of humor is boisterous, not courtly, and the fugal finale of the Symphony No. 7 attests to his organizational skills and intelligence. Only the slower movements are relatively tame, although they are beautifully written for what they are. The *Andante sostenuto* from Symphony No. 5 has several melting passages, including one at the start, but it is never sentimental. In fact, because of its toughness and occasionally militant affect, overall, Krommer's Fifth resembles another composer's more famous symphony in E \flat —Beethoven's "Eroica." At times, the slow movement of Krommer's Seventh—again, not too far from the parade ground—suggests Rossini. On the basis of this CD, I'd have to concur with those who have said that Krommer was an inventive, happy composer whose music is surprisingly forward-looking. All three of these symphonies, by the way, were

composed in the 1820s, before the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert. Jerry Dubins greatly admired the predecessor to this CD (Symphonies 1–3) in *Fanfare* 41:1, and I am right behind him, offering similar praise. These symphonies are not mere novelties, but intelligent works that have plenty to communicate to us today. The Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana performs them with splendid enthusiasm and style, and conductor Griffiths allows the music to be weighty but not pompous or ponderous.

Krommer might not have been a missing link, but this release suggests that he was, after his death, a man overboard who was lost at sea. This disc, and the one that came before it, throw Krommer a life preserver. I will be adding this to my Want List. **Raymond Tuttle**

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