

MYSLIVEČEK Keyboard Concertos: in F; in B \flat . *Six Easy Divertimenti. Six Easy Lessons* • Clare Hammond (pn); Nicholas McGegan, cond; Swedish CO • BIS 2393 (SACD: 76:38)

The reputation of Josef Mysliveček (1737–1781) was quite substantial during his lifetime, when he was dubbed “Il Boemo,” perhaps in conjunction with his prowess as a composer of *opera seria*. A violinist by trade, he soon migrated to Italy, where he began a career in the opera houses as a composer of popular works. By 1775 he was not only feted in Italy, but he was also commissioned elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire, and his music found willing audiences in Prague, Vienna, and Munich. His fame eventually was found fleeting, and he wound up eking out a bare living. His last opera, *Antigono* from 1780, was successful in Rome, but given that his two previous ones were dismal failures, it did not help to ease his last days, particularly since he was quite ill and a number of last-ditch attempts to find a permanent position also failed; Joseph Martin Kraus reports that a test piece for Stockholm was literally hissed off the public concerts. Because of this reputation as an opera composer, it is often overlooked that he was a prolific composer of instrumental music, including 55 symphonies, numerous chamber works, and concertos for his own instrument and others. His music is not completely unknown (as the booklet notes seem to imply). CPO and the L’Orfeo period instrument orchestra issued a selection of symphonies and overtures in 2005, and Shizuka Ishikawa has recorded two volumes of his violin concertos on Supraphon, and of course the London Baroque Players have included a disc of symphonies on the Chandos label. All of these are well done and show him to have been a significant composer.

Less well known are his works for keyboard, most likely for fortepiano. These consist of a pair of concertos, and two volumes of pieces that are meant for amateurs. The latter include six divertimentos, single-movements that are often redactions of lyrical minuets. Of these, the divertimenti and lessons are the simplest and clearly not of the same challenging content as the two concertos. The first of the divertimentos, for example, is graceful and mimics a French rondeau, with a clear melodic line and flowing Alberti bass. The third divertimento is a strange minuet that minces about and then rushes forward with a rolling bass line that is hardly a dance characteristic. The final *Andantino* is a lyrical aria that betrays its operatic origins in the lovely melody. In all of these six, the accompaniment is standard for the period, just what any amateur would expect, with few harmonic distractions or technical difficulties. The melodies are often flowing and graceful. One could do worse to begin one’s training here. The Six

Lessons are anything but easy, and given that they were published at the end of his life, they represent a sort of strange swan song. They are two-movement sonatas, each with various degrees of difficulty. The second work, for example, begins with a spirited *Allegro* that has its share of smaller motivic units that compete with the lyrical main theme. Here too the operatic origins are to be discerned. The rondo that concludes the work is gentle and fluid, with occasional moody interjections into the minor key that are made more urgent by a rhythmic change to triplets. A passage in parallel thirds thickens the texture, but the calm mood of the main theme soon returns. There is a frenetic energy to the Fifth Lesson, where the first movement is positively virtuosic, almost a concerto in and of itself. Not to be outdone, the finale is a jaunty and bouncy movement, with a relentless left hand accompaniment that lends it considerable energy.

The larger pieces are the two concertos, here in a more conventional mode. The first has a rather march-like opening, with the main theme punctuated by decisive chords. The ritornello is cleverly short, making the focus on the solo piano, with its virtuoso runs and scalar passages, more effective. If one is to find a model for Mozart's concertos for the instrument, this may well be one of them, given his appreciation for Mysliveček's music. The second movement is a gentle minuet that flows along easily, while the final rondo seems quite French in style, with some impressive ornamentation of the main theme by the piano. The companion piece in F Major is brighter and more Mozartean (if one can anachronistically use that term). One discerns the stylistic aspects of the latter composer in the use of good contrasting themes and in the ritornello some parallel octaves. The solo part is effervescent and filled with trilling ornaments. The *Larghetto* is mysterious and almost spectral in the muted main theme, softly marching accompaniment, and a lyrical line that begins as a lament and morphs into a genteel tune that has nice motivic sequences that seem to come unbidden. The finale is a forceful minuet in which the trio sections feature the solo in almost a set of variations that keep getting more complex as the movement progresses.

The disc itself presents a dichotomy, with the solo works of such superficial character that the more vibrant concertos seem almost out of place. One can forgive this in that these represent the composer's corpus for the instrument (a sonata of dubious attribution has been omitted). Clare Hammond's playing, on a modern instrument, is fluid and she is able to provide the often gnarly accompaniment and ornaments with a nice flair. The Swedish Chamber Orchestra, of course, is a fully professional group whose accompanimental abilities are both lively and support the keyboard work as an equal partner. Conductor Nicholas McGegan uses good tempos. If one is used to modern performances of Mozart's piano concertos, it is not difficult to see connections here, both for soloist and orchestra. There are some glitches, too. In the B \flat -Major Concerto the horns are in the wrong octave (they should be *alto* not *basso*), and in the Lessons Hammond at times seems to rush a bit in terms of tempo. The resonance of the modern piano also seems a bit much for some of the delicate passages, something that would

benefit recording on a fortepiano of the time. Still, one should be grateful that this missing bit of the composer's music has been recorded, and perhaps it will serve as inspiration for a period performance. The two concertos, especially, deserve a wider audience, and this is a good place to start. **Bertil van Boer**

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:2 (Nov/Dec 2019) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

MYSLIVEČEK *Sinfonies concertante*: in B \flat , op. 2/1; in E, op. 2/2; in G, op. 2/3; in A, op. 2/4; in D, op. 2/5; in C, op. 2/6 • Gary Brain, cond; Uralsk PO • TOCCATA 0023 (68:47)

Josef Mysliveček (1737–81) danced around the genres popular in the mid 1700s with a series of symphonies, operas, and chamber music that made him one of the most popular composers in his adopted Italy. Though he never entirely abandoned his native Czech sensibilities where his composition was concerned, he nevertheless took to the simpler, more direct melodic style that was all the rage on the peninsula at the time. The result is music that appeals to the heart (and feet) in that uniquely Italianate manner while rarely skimming the more profound sensibilities that would inundate the music of his admirer, the young Mozart. One does in fact have to do a bit of an aural double take to see exactly what it is Mozart found so attractive in this music. As we are discovering almost every day, there is an abundance of worthy classical composers whose skill and emotional fortitude afford much pleasure to Mozart-weary ears. And many of them are far better composers—to put it bluntly—than Mysliveček.

Yet he remains a master of sorts. His textures, especially in his chamber music, are subtly innovative in the use of divided strings, particularly in the violas. There is a certain fullness of sound that accompanies the often delightful turns of phrase that so adorn his lyrical melodies. But like other composers of this ilk—say, Boccherini—a little bit can go an awfully long way.

This new Toccata Classics release subtitled “Music for Strings—Volume I” leads us to believe that a series is underway that could prove most enlightening. I say “could” because the philosophical underpinnings of the notes give me slight pause for concern. Though these works are all called by the name of *Sinfonie concertante*, the writer Daniel Freeman posits the idea that they were created with either string quintet (two violins, two violas, and cello) or a larger ensemble in mind. While there is little doubt that this form did indeed cause some consternation among those engaged in performance, in the end the scoring of the composer effectively bears witness against the idea of a large body of strings. While Mysliveček was quite interested (as Mozart was later) in the idea of dividing the violas, and essentially creating a “concertante” relationship between them,

middle range voices of an orchestra, as the violas certainly are, get muddled and sonically confused when dealing with a similar tonal color as found in a body of strings. I think a string quintet would be far more effective in putting this music across.

The Uralsk Philharmonic barely lives up to its exalted name, as it is obviously a chamber group. They have some difficulties with intonation, and the string tone, while certainly not offensive, could be better. The ensemble as a whole sounds under-rehearsed, and by and large the overall impression is that of a competent local orchestra. The recording venue (a theater) is slightly boxy and dry.

Conductor Brain leads skilled and largely convincing readings that lack the last degree of finesse. These are the first recordings of the op. 2 quintets, and Toccata is bold in taking on this music. But one must really insist on first-rate performances when trying to sell lesser, though well-deserving composers.

Steven Ritter

This article originally appeared in Issue 30:5 (May/June 2007) of *Fanfare Magazine*.