

MÜTHEL Keyboard Concertos: No. 1 in c; No. 2 in d; No. 4 in D; No. 3 in G; No. 5 in B \flat • Marcin Świątkiewicz (hpd, cond); Arte Dei Suonatori (period instruments) • BIS 2179 (Download: 127:10)

A student of J. S. Bach during the last three months of the elder composer's life, Johann Gottfried Müthel (1728–1788) notated some of Bach's final works, was present at his deathbed, and briefly took over his duties until a permanent replacement could be found. On a trip to Potsdam, Müthel met and befriended C. P. E. Bach, who was then employed at the court of Frederick II. The friendship between Müthel and Bach was lifelong and maintained through correspondence after Müthel moved to Riga to join his brother Anton Christian.

If not for Müthel's connection to the Bachs and his favorable notice on more than one occasion by Charles Burney, there's a good chance that Müthel today would be little more than a footnote in the history books. His output is fairly modest, and little of it was published in his lifetime. Of Müthel's seven known keyboard concertos, only the No. 2 in D Minor and the No. 5 in B \flat Major appeared in print while the composer was still alive; the publication year is given as 1767.

Müthel achieved recognition not only as Riga's leading harpsichordist and organist but also for his eccentricity. A dispatch posted from the city in 1782 observed, "Also found here was an excellent clavier player named Müthel who, however, had his peculiar whims. One of them was that he would never perform other than in winter time when deep snow covered the streets, in order," as he said, "not to be disturbed by the clatter of carriages passing by." With the town snowbound, one can only wonder what mode of transportation would have conveyed people to the hall to hear him play, or, for that matter, what would even have motivated them to leave the comfort of their hearthside fires in the first place. hoasm.org's biographical entry on the composer states, "Müthel, along with C. P. E. Bach, was truly representative of the *Sturm und Drang* style of composition of German music of the mid-18th century, both in his music and his lifestyle." With due respect to HOASM, the reference to *Sturm und Drang* is not quite accurate, first because the *Sturm und Drang* movement is a bit later than these concertos, and second because the style of Müthel's music, at least as it's exhibited in these works, clearly belongs to the same *Empfindsamer Stil* as that heard in the works of C. P. E. Bach. Most historians are of a mind that mid-18th-century *Empfindsamkeit* is a slightly earlier parallel to the showier and stormier phase called *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) that emerged around 1770.

In any case, the concertos heard here are of an entirely different makeup than the

pioneering harpsichord concertos by J. S. Bach. Mützel's style evidences the same type of sudden stops, starts, lurches forward, and discontinuities in fast movements, and the tender, poignant gestures in slow movements, that are familiar in the approximately contemporaneous works of the Bach sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, as well as of Johann Quantz and a handful of other primarily German composers active in the two decades between 1750 and 1770.

Marcin Świątkiewicz plays all five of the concertos on a lovely 2008 harpsichord by Christian Fuchs, modeled after the 1624 "Colmar Ruckers," with added pedal mechanism for engaging the four-foot register. The Concerto No. 3 in G Major, however, is designated for fortepiano, which raises the question of whether this one score is of a later vintage than the others, or if indeed Mützel would have preferred the newer instrument across the board. The year 1767, when two of these concertos were published, while still not too late for the harpsichord, is not too early for the fortepiano either.

Not exactly a one-to-a-part "pseudo-orchestra," Arte Dei Suonatori is a modestly sized ensemble of 11 players—3-3-1-1-1, plus two bassoons—which I've had past occasion to praise as one of the best period instrument groups of its type on the scene today. The ensemble proves itself fully deserving of that commendation with these alert, beautifully fashioned performances, led from the keyboard by the young Polish harpsichordist Marcin Świątkiewicz, who delivers the keyboard parts with all the innate responsiveness and sensitivity to the style that Mützel could have wished for.

If you are fond of the many wonderful harpsichord concertos by C. P. E. Bach, you are bound to enjoy Mützel's concertos, for they are cut from the same cloth.

Recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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Johann Gottfried MÜTSEL (1728-1788)

The Five Keyboard Concertos

No. 1 in C minor [31:44]

No. 2 in D minor [22:25]

No. 3 in G major [22:56]

No. 4 in D major [23:47]

No. 5 in B flat major [24:21]

Marcin Świątkiewicz (harpsichord)

Arte Dei Suonatori

rec. 2013, Polish Radio, Lutoslawski Studio, Warsaw, Poland.

BIS BIS-2179 SACD [54:58 + 72:12]

Johann Gottfried M \ddot{u} thel is by no means a household name, though the MDG label has a substantial 2 CD set of concertos and chamber music ([review](#)) which in 2008 I summed up as "a lively programme of some of the juiciest pre-classical post-baroque music you will find anywhere". This is good enough reason to pursue M \ddot{u} thel further, and if extra incentive were needed for this BIS recording I'm already a big fan of Arte Dei Suonatori, and still very much enjoy their Handel [Concerti Grossi](#) and Telemann [Ouvertures pittoresques](#).

The booklet for these keyboard concertos helpfully outlines M \ddot{u} thel's background as a much admired pupil of J.S. Bach and a "creator of original and ambitious works." M \ddot{u} thel inherited the three-movement concerto plan of his teacher, but the style incorporates details more familiar from C.P.E. Bach, so you can expect plenty of *Empfindsamkeit* to go along with the crisply authentic performing approach of Arte Dei Suonatori and soloist Marcin Świątkiewicz. This was a period which built experiment onto the foundations of formality of structure, so there are plenty of wide melodic leaps, interesting dissonances, rhythmic interruptions and dynamic contrasts to keep the listener on their toes. You might think the cover art for this release to be a little odd, but this is all about bucking convention and at all costs avoiding the 'beige' in music. This artwork is a detail from a piece by Vladimír Kiseljov called *Musikalisches Opfer* and was painted during a recital given by Marcin Świątkiewicz, so there are all kinds of fascinating undercurrents of synergy at work here. I remember Marcin Świątkiewicz during his Master degree studies at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague and am by no means surprised to see him recognised as a leading performer today.

Nicely balanced and with good tone and rich bass from the strings, the harpsichord is just forward enough to give it clarity as a solo instrument while also allowing it to blend with the rest of the ensemble – a tricky 'balancing act' indeed. The instrument used is a 2008 copy of a Ruckers harpsichord from 1624 and it sounds gorgeous. You will notice the substantial running times for these concertos, and they are indeed endlessly good, the *First Concerto* with two movements over 11 minutes each and all of the *Adagio* central movements with plenty of beautifully exploratory rumination to warm our hearts.

There are qualities about M \ddot{u} thel's music which are easier to describe than they are to define. The open quality of his melodies often gives the music a kind of blue-sky positivity, and while he can give way to operatic drama there are few if any moments when you imagine vocal lyricism. These are emphatically instrumental works and perfectly written for this combination, not generic pieces which are essentially interchangeable with other genres.

I've had a look around to see if there is any competition for this release, but the only concerto which seems available is the B flat major one played on fortepiano

by Christine Schornsheim with the Berlin Akademie fur Alte Musik on Harmonia Mundi HMA1951740 alongside a couple of Bach's concertos. This is a terrifically meaty performance and counts as quite a discovery, but this harpsichord version is its equal in every respect. This concerto is a magnificent conclusion to the present set, bristling with energy in the first movement, the tender central *Poco adagio* always keeping up an underlying pace and restless tension, while the final *Allegro* is virtuoso and full of really swinging rhythm.

If you like C.P.E. Bach or just harpsichord concertos in general then this is something with which you truly need to become acquainted. I wasn't expecting to be bowled over by this music and these performances in this way, but I am now a zealous convert and am likely to make this the soundtrack to my summer.

Dominy Clements