

**BEETHOVEN The Five Piano Concertos.** • Steven Lubin, fortepiano; Academy of Ancient Music, conducted by Christopher Hogwood. • L'Oiseau-Lyre 421 408-2 (three compact discs [DDD]; 60:28, 67:19, 37:41), produced by Peter Wadland.

The steady forward march of the "early music" movement has definitely caught up with Beethoven. I know of at least three recording cycles in progress of Beethoven's symphonies by period-instrument ensembles (this one, the London Classical Players, and the Hanover Band). Almost simultaneously with this release comes another series of the Beethoven piano concertos, with Anthony Newman and Stephen Simon (from Newport Classics), which I have not heard. Obviously these recordings are selling well, and I think there's a reason for it. We all love those rare, revelatory performances of well-known masterpieces that give us fresh insight into the music without violating its bounds. Here is yet another way to hear familiar music with new ears.

Even more than by the qualities of performance in this set, I am intrigued by the sound of the music played by these instruments in this setting. The first two concertos were recorded in a church, St. Barnabas' in London, obviously a fairly small space. The last three were played in Walthamstow Assembly Hall, a venue often used for recording full orchestras of modern instruments. But the pickup used for the later concertos is still fairly close, and the music sounds more compact than usual. The orchestra varies in size from 21 to 57 players; evidently the smallest ensemble is used for No. 2, the largest for No. 5. But these less sonorous instruments (particularly the piano!) give us a far different sound picture of Beethoven's music than do performances on modern instruments.

Even in so admirable a set of these concertos as the Fleisher/Szell (fortunately reissued for our delectation by CBS, M3K 42445), the clarity of the music cannot be projected as well as it is here. We simply can hear the music better. If you know the music well, you will frequently hear little bits of Beethoven business, muttered by a bassoon, perhaps, or a little figure in the violins, and think, I didn't know that was there. Of course, it is there, and it is meant to be heard just as it is here, not at the forefront but nevertheless registering. The greatest conductors endeavor to do this with modern orchestras, but the task is simply easier here. I do not think Christopher Hogwood is a greater conductor than George Szell—in fact, I haven't cared much for his Beethoven symphonies so far—but I can hear more Beethoven in these concertos from Hogwood than from Szell.

Lubin's instruments are interesting, and he writes about them in detail. All are modern replicas of period instruments, chosen for their suitability to the individual piece. For Nos. 1 and 2, two different replicas of the same Walter fortepiano are

used. Lubin finds each more suited to the requirements of its concerto, but how interesting that is! It's a tacit admission that replicas are not identical to the original, nor to each other. No. 3 is played on a replica of a c. 1818 Fritz. Nos. 4 and 5 are played on the same Regier replica of an 1824 Graf, but the instrument is differently voiced for each concerto!

Lubin and Hogwood have done a lot of thinking about the texts they play here. You can read all you want to know about that in the booklet, but it's worth mentioning that we hear some unusual things. In the first two concertos, Lubin has written his own excellent cadenzas instead of using Beethoven's. He explains that Beethoven's own cadenzas for these pieces were written long after the concertos and don't suit the same instruments. (True, although they are by Beethoven.) Lubin says the same about Beethoven's cadenzas for No. 3, but he uses them anyway.

He arpeggiates the opening chord in No. 4, and gives his justification for doing so; it's an arresting sound if you've heard the chord played together hundreds of times. And in the finale of No. 1, Lubin adds a nice cadential flourish, which in a way irritates me. If he can do that so convincingly, why didn't he do it more often? Aside from this, the only pianist I have heard do any improvising with Beethoven was Igor Kipnis (in a concert performance of the "Pathétique" Sonata, which I gather he is recording). We know for certain that Beethoven and other pianists of his time did this, so why not do it now if you're comfortable with it?

What about the performances themselves? As one might expect, they tend to sound rather modest on first hearing. After all, the sounds are simply softer. And Lubin is not out to make the usual virtuoso impression on you. But once you live with the recordings for a while, you realize that there is plenty of personality in these performances, particularly from the pianist. I was pleased to read of recently discovered evidence that No. 2 was first composed when Beethoven was in his teens, since I never think very highly of that concerto and usually nod out of it until the bouncy finale. But Lubin plays with such liveliness and attention to detail that the piece held my attention throughout, a very rare event. No. 1 sparkles and flows; this is one of my favorite performances of the piece. The contrast between Nos. 3 and 4 could hardly be more obvious. The full drama of No. 3 is brought out vividly, while the gentler, poetic nature of No. 4 as heard here almost makes it sound like the work of a different composer. And the public proclamations which take up most of No. 5—usually not a favorite piece of mine—are set out here with the required mathematical regularity, but Lubin puts a lot of personality into it as well. The rather strange, harplike sound of the piano's upper register in this piece (deliberately voiced that way) may take a little getting used to, but I eventually decided I liked it. In the first movement I heard the only detail in these performances I didn't like, some rather awkward-sounding trills in the piano. (Other trills sound just fine.) It's a minor fly speck in an otherwise distinguished series of performances.

Hogwood and the orchestra are beautifully coordinated with Lubin's conceptions of the music. Perhaps that's why I like their playing so much more than in their

Beethoven symphonies. The players themselves are thoroughly excellent; there's never a problem with execution anywhere in this set. (I'm amused to note that the leader of the violins is Roy Goodman, director of the Hanover Band. The London early music world is quite incestuous!) Of course, balance is never a problem either, despite the small sounds of the various pianos. Even in the "Emperor," where one might expect the orchestra to properly swamp the piano at times, no detail of the solo part is lost.

The only previous period-instrument recording of a Beethoven piano concerto I have heard was a version of No. 4 by Paul Badura-Skoda with Collegium Aureum, issued in 1974 by Harmonia Mundi. Badura-Skoda plays beautifully, and so does the orchestra; I'm very fond of this recording. (I also like the birds at the beginning of the slow movement. Badura-Skoda plays an authentic Graf fortepiano from 1820, which I like better than Lubin's replica; it seems to have more character. But Lubin's performance is better executed than Badura-Skoda's and more poetic as well. It's very interesting to contrast the sounds of the two orchestras. Both play "authentic" instruments, yet AAM cultivates a much leaner sound than CA.

I must curse L'Oiseau-Lyre for a waste of space. There is no excuse for having the 'Emperor' occupy an entire CD. It could have been combined with No. 1, and then there would have been enough space on the disc with No. 2 for another major work—like the piano arrangement of the violin concerto, or the violin concerto itself, or the triple concerto. A major opportunity has been lost here, and I regret it. Still, any set that gives us such excellent performances, so well recorded, and provides us the opportunity to hear old music with new ears deserves a strong recommendation. I'm especially glad that the worthy playing of Lubin, a superb artist, will be getting this wide exposure. Now maybe Arabesque will be goosed into completing his excellent Mozart concerto series!

**Leslie Gerber**

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### **Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) - MusicWeb Review - Wallisch** ***The Six Piano Concertos***

**Piano Concerto No. 1** in C Major, Op. 15 [32:23]

**Piano Concerto No. 2** in B flat Major, Op. 19 [27:23]

Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in B Major WoO 6 [8:47]

**Piano Concerto No. 3** in C minor, Op. 37 [33:41]

**Piano Concerto No. 5** in E flat Major, Op. 73 Emperor [35:43]

**Piano Concerto No. 4** in G Major, Op. 58 [33:07]

Piano Concerto in D Major, Op. 61a (Violin concerto arranged by the composer) [38:54]

Gottlieb Wallisch (fortepiano)  
Orchester Wiener Akademie/Martin Haselböck  
rec. 2017-20, Vienna, Austria  
**CPO 555 329-2** [3 CDs: 210:05]

As we approach the halfway point in this year of celebrations, there seems to be no let up on new recordings of Beethoven's music. This release may be the fourth of the complete piano concertos. There are two with fortepiano, although this recording is more complete: it includes not only the B Major Rondo but the D Major Concerto Op. 61a. Gottlieb Wallisch employs three original period fortepianos, two by Conrad Graf and a Viennese instrument by Franz Boyer. Martin Haselböck founded the Orchester Wiener Akademie. It has gained an international reputation, and participated in over 100 recordings.

The first disc opens well with a fine recording of the First and Second Piano Concerti. The piano, an 1818 Graf, was Beethoven's own instrument borrowed from the Beethovenhaus in Baden. The studio recordings have a live feel about them, and a nice natural ambiance which gives the impression of a true performance. The piano sounds fine and Wallisch has a good partnership with the orchestra, but the instrument sounds a little too light at times. The combination works well in the less boisterous movements, especially in both slow movements but it needs a little more heft or volume in the outer movements. Even so, the final movement *Rondo* comes across really well. The disc culminates with the B Major Rondo. It follows nicely the last movement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Concerto, and again gets a spirited, compelling performance.

The second disc begins with an engaging performance of Concerto No. 3, played on a slightly newer Graf instrument from 1823/1824. The piano has a marginally heavier timbre, especially useful in the Fifth Concerto which is programmed second on this disc. The piano has a little more richness and depth of sound than the earlier model, and this leads to a rather better balance between the soloist and the orchestra. The instrument shines in the C minor Concerto, which has always been my favourite. This is especially so in the second movement *Largo* in a splendid performance backed up by a very good rendition of the *Rondo* finale. The opening of the E flat Concerto is handled well. The piano gives a colourful and well-figured account of the opening gesture; the piano is big enough, but only just. Those used to a modern grand piano might want a little more, but I found the sound of Graf more than adequate. Again, it is in the second movement *Adagio* where Wallisch and the instrument shine with a nicely measured performance. The piano theme is picked out well especially where the piano rises above the orchestra. The transition between the *Adagio* and the third movement *Rondo. Allegro* is handled really well. The delicate announcement of the main theme appears at the end of the second movement only to be boldly stated at the

opening of the third. Here the piano performs very well indeed, with a nice rich and clear sound throughout until the rousing conclusion.

Concerto No. 4 in G Major comes first on the third disc. In the opening, Gottlieb Wallisch is quite sympathetic in his approach. The instrument, a Bayer piano, comes across really well and stands its own ground against the orchestra. The instrument can be a little plummy at times in this concerto. That leads to the occasional slight buzz, especially in the second movement *Andante*, but it sounds fine in the transition into the final *Rondo*. Here everything comes together well. The piano sounds good. The soloist and the orchestra show a wonderful understanding in what is one of Beethoven's most memorable final movements as it rushes to a most pleasing conclusion. The final work in the set is controversial: the piano version of the Violin Concerto. I remember reading that the Violin concerto was originally designed for the piano; the composer changed and augmented the piano part of what he had already composed after he received a commission for a violin concerto. This performance supports the argument: it sounds perfectly at home on the piano, and the Bayer piano may play its part in this. The booklet notes clearly state that the work was written originally for the violin during November and December of 1806, only to be revised in May the following year, while the first edition of the piano version did not appear until August 1808. Whatever one thinks, the performing version of this concerto should be listened to and enjoyed, and not just by completists. The outer movements in this performance are particularly strong. One soon forgets about the violin altogether, and the performers make the most of this wonderful music.

This is a really useful and enjoyable set. Gottlieb Wallisch and the Orchester Wiener Akademie give strong and committed performances under the direction of Martin Haselböck. The tempi are generally swifter than the norm, and that leads to some exciting passage work and scintillating playing. Just listen to the *Rondo* of the Violin Concerto to see what I mean. This may be in part due to the more clipped sound of the piano, and in any case the result is most rewarding. People who insist on modern instruments will probably complain about the pianos, but their sound is generally very pleasing. The orchestral sound is big and bold; the sound of the horn and the rap of the timpani are a highlight. It is all brought together very well by Haselböck. The recorded sound is also fine, and so are the erudite booklet notes, especially the way they are divided into different aspects of interest that firmly place the concertos in Beethoven's piano world. Interesting information about the pianos and the recording process is also included, all of which aids the listener's enjoyment.

**Stuart Sillitoe**

CVNC Arts Journal (<https://cvnc.org/article.cfm?articleId=10087>)

*Beethoven; The Six Piano Concertos*, Gottlieb Wallisch, fortepianos: Conrad Graf, 1818, Graf, 1823-24, & Franz Bayer, c. 1825, cpo 555 329-2, © 2017, TT: 201:05 (68:35, 69:27, 72:03); \$33.99, Available from [Arkiv Musik](#).

The 6th concerto is the composer's own transcription of his violin concerto. The 1818 Graf belonged to Beethoven, so he played it, although it is questionable how much he actually heard, and is now in the collection of the Beethoven Haus in Bonn; it is used for #'s 1 in C, op. 15, and # 2 in B-flat, Op. 19, and the Rondo in B-flat (the original final movement of Op. 19), WoO 6 that fills out CD 1. The 1823-24, in the collection of Gert Hecher in Vienna, is used for #'s 3 in c, Op. 37, and # 4 in G, Op. 58; and the Bayer, also in Hecher's collection, is used in # 5 in E-flat, Op. 73, and # 6 in D, Op. 61a. Wallisch is a Vienna native; he wrote the excellent introductory note in the accompanying booklet; Hecher wrote the details about the instruments and the "Beethoven's Piano World" one; together they say some of the same things I wrote above about the development of the instrument in Beethoven's lifetime. The notes about the individual works are by Dr. Julia Ronge of the Beethoven Haus, Dr. Hans-Werner Küthen of the G. Henle Publishing house, and Martin Haselböck, the conductor of the Orchester Wiener Akademie (= Vienna Academy [period-instrument] Orchestra, founded by him in 1985. All are authoritative, thorough, but succinct, and outstanding.

My other period-instrument set is by Netherlands Arthur Schoonderwoerd, pianist and conductor, with Ensemble Cristofori, on the Alpha (Paris) label (820), © 2008, that also includes # 6, but uses a Johann Fritz (Vienna, c. 1827-10) for #'s 4, 5, & 6, and a 1996 replica by Paul Poletti & Gérard Truinman of a c. 1800 Anton Walter, for #'s 1, 2, & 3. Modern instrument sets (of which I own a few) rarely include # 6. Although I like the Schoonderwoerd set very much (I have several other CDs played by him), the Wallisch (by whom I also have other recordings) set gets the crown for these in my rating.

## Review - Website

This project featuring the complete recording of Beethoven's piano concertos on original Beethoven fortepianos has close ties to the performances at original historical sites in Vienna. During past years the concert series "Resound Beethoven" has brought back Beethoven's works to the places where they are documented to have been performed. It has been possible to perform and in part to record the complete cycle in halls such as the Eroica Hall in the Palais Lobkowitz, the Festsaal of the Akademie der Wissenschaften, and the Niederösterreichischer Landhaussaal. For Gottlieb Wallisch this was a unique experience, a veritable immersion in the sound world of Beethoven's times: "The combination of the fortepiano sound with the original-sound orchestra results in a fascinating opportunity to shed new tonal light on Beethoven's music and to

understand it in new ways. The sound of this fortepiano from the period around 1820 captivates the listener with its special color in the various registers and its elegant purity while already discreetly looking into the future with its somewhat greater volume. The main characteristic in performance with the orchestra is the appealing transparency of all the voices, especially in the dialogue between the piano and the woodwind instruments." Beethoven's transcription of his Violin Concerto op. 61 for piano and orchestra - in music history the rare case of a transfer of a work from a stringed instrument to a keyboard instrument - gains authenticity and musical logic through performance on the fortepiano. His Rondo WoO is heard in a first-time recording; it originally formed the concluding movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2.