Johann Ernst IV. von Sachsen-Weimar: Concerti

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Just as the stile nuovo which was born in Italy around 1600 quickly captured most of Europe, the concertos written by Italian composers in the early 18th cemtury exerted a strong fascination on composers across the Alps. In February 1711 Johann Ernst, Prince of Saxe-Weimar, left for the Netherlands to further his education. In Amsterdam he heard Jan Jacob de Graaf, organist of the Nieuwe Kerk. He was wont to play Italian solo concertos in his own adaptations for the organ. This made such an impression on the young prince that he started to collect Italian concertos. Many such pieces were published by Roger in Amsterdam. After his return to Weimar he started to compose concertos in that style.

Soon after his return Johann Ernst fell seriously ill. He continued to compose, though, and he himself prepared the publication of his concertos. In July 1714 he left Weimar for a spa cure which brought him to Frankfurt, where he died in August of that year. Georg Philipp Telemann, since 1712 director of music and Kapellmeister at the Barfüsserkirche in Frankfurt, took care of the publication which includes a preface in French in which he sings the praise of the Prince. The collection of six concertos op. 1 came from the press in 1718. In 1715 Telemann had already published a set of six sonatas for violin and basso continuo which he dedicated to Johann Ernst. They are written in the Italian style which the Prince so much loved.

The concertos by Johann Ernst have become mainly known, because Johann Sebastian Bach and his cousin, Johann Gottfried Walther, arranged some of them for harpsichord and organ. Walther became organist of the St Peter and Paul, and was also appointed the keyboard teacher of the young Prince. In 1708 Bach took the position of organist at the court in Weimar. There can be little doubt that Johann Ernst played a crucial role in Bach's acquaintance with the genre of the Italian concerto. This would greatly influence his development as a composer of instrumental music.

Johann Ernst received violin lessons from Gregor Christoph Eylenstein, the first violinist of the court orchestra, and developed into a highly-skilled violinist. The solo parts in these concertos bear witness to that, for instance through the inclusion of many episodes with double stopping. All but one concertos have three movements in the order fast - slow - fast. This was undoubtedly the influence of Vivaldi whose concertos op. 3, L'Estro Armonico, had been printed in Amsterdam in 1711 and which he must have known. The Concerto No. 4 in d minor opens with a dramatic movement in which slow and fast sections alternate. Other movements are also divided into two contrasting sections, for instance the central movement of the

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Concerto No. 1 in B flat: adagio – allegro. The slow movement of the Concerto No. 6 in g minor is called recitativo, which is characterised by rhythmic freedom. It is followed by a fugal allegro. The central movement of Concerto No. 3 in e minor is a pastorella which has the typical features of such pieces as we know them, for instance, from Italian concertos for Christmas Eve.

A few years ago CPO released a recording of these concertos – the six of the Op. 1 and two concertos in manuscript – in a fine performance by the Ensemble 'Fürsten-Musik', with Anne Schumann as the soloist. This disc has some nice additions. The first is the Concerto in C for two violins. It is only known in Bach's arrangement (BWV 985 and 595), and for this recording it has been reconstructed by Gernot Süßmuth. The second is the Concerto in C for trumpet. The liner-notes don't discuss it, and there is no information where it has been found. Michael Maul only states that "[it] is not certain if the concerto (...) can be attributed to the Prince". Then, one wonders why it has been included.

In comparison to the CPO recording, these performances are probably a little less polished, and the dynamic accents are somewhat stronger. Süßmuth and his colleagues deliver zestful and imaginative interpretations. In the recitativo movement from the Concerto No. 6 they take a bit more rhythmic freedom than Fürsten-Musik. The tempi are generally somewhat faster. I have enjoyed both recordings and would not like to choose between them. The inclusion of two concertos which are not on the CPO disc, could be a reason to add it to one's collection, even if one has the latter.

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JOHANN ERNST, Prince of Saxe-Weimar (1696 - 1715)
Concerto No. 3 in e minor [5:38]
Concerto No. 4 in d minor [4:45]
Concerto No. 7 in G [5:43]
Concerto No. 5 in E [6:17]
Concerto for two violins in C [7:35]
Concerto No. 8 in G [6:32]
Concerto No. 1 in B flat [6:30]
Concerto No. 2 in a minor [9:28]
Concerto No. 6 in g minor [7:05]
Concerto for trumpet in D [3:21]
Gernot Süßmuth, David Castro-Balbi (violin)
Rupprecht Drees (trumpet)
Thüringer Bach Collegium
rec. 2018, Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Kirche, Arnstadt, Germany
AUDITE 97.769 [63:37]

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