

Review by John Miller - July 29, 2015

The final volume of Haydn's twelve London Symphonies, traversed by Bruno Weil and period instrument band Cappella Coloniensis has finally arrived. And what a splendid arrival it is - given the inspiration of a live performance as before, the acute sensibilities for Haydn's music by Weil and his Cappella Coloniensis, and a recording which I can only call ideal.

"I'm Salomon of London and I've come to fetch you; tomorrow we'll establish an agreement." This was the famous self-introduction to Haydn of Johann Peter Salomon (1745-1815), a London-based brilliant violinist and successful concert manager. Acceptance of Salomon's generous terms and the wish of Haydn for some creative freedom from the Esterhazy family's disinterest in him, the composer arrived in England on New Year's Day 1791 for the first of two promised visits (1791-1782), the second visit being from 1794-1795. These excursions generated for Haydn a dazzling personal and musical success, not to mention gaining him wealth many times that supplied by the Esterhazys.

London's twelve symphonies were written by Haydn in three groups: Nos 93-98 for the Hanover Square Rooms with Salomon in 1791-2, Nos 99-101 for Salomon's concert season of 1794 and Nos 102-104 for a joint acquisition of the King's Theatre for concerts in 1795. The final four reaches a new artistic peak of the symphonies. Here, Haydn's bold artistry balances zest and tastefulness, humour and inner calm with a fullness, melodic richness and rhythmic novelty which dazzled his London audiences.

Continuing Ars Production's disposition of their recordings of the London Symphonies, this last set of three symphonies was also performed by Weil and Cappella Coloniensis (the first group to make music completely according to historical performance practices) at live concerts in the Alfred Krupp Hall of the Essen Philharmonie. A coloured photo on the back of the booklet shows the left half of the orchestra during a 'take', with 2 basses on the far left, behind two cellos and four first violinists closest to Weil. Second violins are to the right of the conductor, and this clear separation of 1st and 2nd violins is critical for Haydn's orchestration, as dialogue between the violin groups is a major feature of his scoring in these symphonies. Two more basses are at the back of the orchestra, as seen in the other half of the photo of a session which is in the back tray. Although the band is not large, it has a wonderfully full sound, and in fortissimo tuttis it easily fills the auditorium, despite the potential damping effect of the audience. These listeners are amazingly quiet, and the only non-musical sound is a just perceptible quick intake of breath at some downbeat starts, which could be either from Weil or the first violin's signal to the violins.

Breathtaking is also an apt word to describe the Cappella's performances under the baton of Weil. The muscular swagger of offset rhythms in minuets, chatter of extensive dialogues between first and second violins or woodwinds with strings, chortles of bassoons at pompousness from trumpets, rustic calls of horns - all draw in and excite the listener. However, in slow movements, and often the trios of minuets, the soul is soothed, with mellow moods and elegant instrumental colours - only to be suddenly shattered by segments of Haydn's disruptive " Sturm und Drang " mood. The beauty and dignity of the Cappella's period instruments, including silvery vibrato-less gut strings, dove-like flutes, plangent oboes and resonant hand-horns contribute much to the performance, marrying impeccably with Haydn's experimental scoring. Another interesting feature from these musicians was that I frequently got suggestions of early Beethoven's music, demonstrating in a direct way how much the youthful Beethoven gained from his short lessons with Haydn.

Some time ago, Weil conducted one of the earliest historically aware recordings of the London Symphonies for Vivarte with Tafelmusik, hailed by many critics as the finest model at the time. Now, after years of further research on both period instrument playing and Classical playing practise, Bruno Weil and his Cappella Coloniensis are still at the top of the periodists, and the overall quality of the output has certainly increased. I would venture to say that this disc has the best Haydn I have ever heard, bringing great joy of listening.

Complimenting this wonderful music-making, Ars Production have produced probably the best example of natural concert recording that also took my breath away. In 5.1 mode, the truthful sound was utterly transparent, every line clear, and with total focus, producing a wide stage just as in the session photograph on the back of the booklet. The amiably resonant acoustic of the hall also aids the excellent stereo mode.

As a bonus with all this series, there is an ordinary CD in the double gem box with illustrated commentaries by Bruno Weil spoken in German (and this is where the coughers were!). He also makes a comment on "Music as Therapy". The SACD is clearly marked with a red SACD on its surface to avoid confusion. A well-laid out booklet is in English and German, with context about the second visit of Haydn to London, and helpful commentaries on each symphony.

A brilliant end to a fascinating series of Haydn's London Symphonies, perhaps the foremost at the moment. A must have for collectors of period productions.

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