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Site review by [Geohominid](#) April 18, 2013

Performance: ★★★★★ Sonics: Stereo ★★★★★ Multi-ch ★★★★★

Young conductor Johannes Klumpp is evidently an advocate for the bassoon. In his copious notes, he writes about the history of bassoon concertos as well as neatly describing the four pieces on this disc. Klumpp reminds us that bassoon concertos had a Golden Age, stretching from the Baroque (Vivaldi, 39 or 40 concertos) through the Classical Age (Mozart's masterpiece one; Hummel's Grand Concerto) to the Early Romantic of the early 1820's and Weber's Concerto as well as his Andante and Rondo Ungarese. All these Golden Age pieces are collected on this disc.

From the 1830's there is a gap in the production of bassoon concertos (and many other solo forms) until the C20th heralds a new flush of concertos (e.g Francaix, Jolivet, Tomasi and Gubaidulina). Klumpp opines that the reason for this gap was an invention of a new form of the bassoon around 1830 by Johan Adam Heckel, which was quickly taken up (except by the French). This meant a period of readjustment by bassoonists and thus silence from composers, awaiting familiarization with the "new" instrument's capabilities before using it on a large solo scale.

It bodes well for these performances that the conductor is a knowledgeable enthusiast about the solo instrument. Further expectation is generated by Ars Produktion's engagement for soloist; Matthias Rác. Bassoonists will have heard his name, record collectors are more likely to have heard him without knowing it. Reading through his in-progress biography is like tracing his sure trajectory towards stardom. Born in 1980 in Berlin, Rác picked up the bassoon at age 10; thereafter getting instruction, winning competitions and earning scholarships. At 15 he gave his first solo performance with the Cologne Chamber Orchestra (televised) and subsequently was invited to play before many of the most important orchestras and in international festivals. At age 21 he joined the Gürzenich Orchestra as Principal bassoonist. Since 2003 he as also been Principal of the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra and solo bassoonist of the famous Lucerne Festival Orchestra, hand-picked by maestro Abbado

The Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie is one of Germany's network of excellent provincial orchestras. Judging from their group photo in the inner tray, they are a large body, not often used in full for rendering Classical works in these days of HIP. Indeed, their lighter, more chamber music sound here suggests to me that they have cut back the strings and made at least some nods and winks in the HIP direction, despite their modern instrumentation. The same is true for Rácz (whose vibrato is never obtrusive) and the whole ensemble adopts a general Classical style of phrasing, transparency of orchestration, clear dynamics and crisp but not too flexible rhythms. Rácz's wonderful tone, from his "Zurich" model of bassoon, might be described in gustatory terms as dark chocolate cream in the bass range, topped off with a translucent golden honeyed treble.

Each of the four pieces is given a treatment appropriate to its dating and style, and Rácz is a master of intuitively characterising the solo part for each movement. All the composers take the opportunity of showing off the melodic singing capabilities of the bassoon, to which Rácz responds with an expressive cantabile of delectable freedom and lightness. Mozart, Hummel and Weber also dutifully followed a long-held tradition of the bassoon representing a buffoon, so there are a whole host of opportunities for soloist and orchestral players for humour of various kinds. Listen to the Rondo of Hummel's Grand Concerto (Track 9), where Rácz plays with a gentle, almost child-like whimsy, subtly recalling the comic antics of B/W movies with Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy. I defy anyone not to smile when hearing this movement, as soloist's tiny accelerations and momentary leaning on notes in phrases (i.e. rubato) is also passed on to the orchestra, who respond in kind under Klumpp's direction.

In cadenzas, Rácz is inventive but idiomatic, weaving them seamlessly into his rhetoric. His flawless passage work is expressive as well as brilliant. In short, this disc offers superb playing from all, unfailingly delightfully turning each piece and revealing it as wonderful entertainment. The masterly Mozart concerto in particular is given a superb reading, its depth and conviction standing head and shoulders above the other composers' efforts.

Ars Produktion's engineering is usually excellent. My purchased first pressing had a problem with the first three tracks where the sound was claustrophobic (rather like a theatre's sonics) and with disturbingly tubby and boomy bass. The other tracks were fine, with the slightly dry acoustic of the Nordwestdeutschen Philharmonie providing space for a quite intimate and well-focussed setting of soloist and orchestra. Ars Production have responded, as they found a mixing/mastering error on the first three tracks, and issued a new pressing which I have found to correct the problem.

This dryish, two-dimensional sound persists for the three tracks of the Weber concerto, but in the rest of the disc (to my great relief), the sound has been improved notably, with a more pleasing open ambiance, well-controlled bass and the revelation of some 3-D imaging of the sound stage. This improvement showed up most in the 5.1 track, as expected. I also got the impression that further adjustments made by the technicians subtly produced more amelioration of the dry sound in each of the later pieces, particularly helping to resolve the soloist's position in front of the band more realistically, and putting some more "air" around him.

Both music and performers won my heart and lifted my spirits here. Performance-wise this disc has to be in the very top echelon for performances of these Golden Age Bassoon concertos. A delightful banquet of bassoonery which gives much pleasure.