Joseph HAYDN (1732-1809)
Trumpet Concerto in E flat major, Hob: VIIe/i (1796) [14:42]

Johann Nepomuk HUMMEL (1778-1837)
Trumpet Concerto in E major, S.49 (1803) [18:42]

Johann NERUDA (1708- c.1780)
Trumpet Concerto in E flat major (c.1770) [16:08]

Ketil Christensen (trumpet)
Liepaja Symphony Amber Sound Orchestra/Atvars Lakstigala
rec. May 2012, Normunds Slava Riga Radio
DANACORD DACOCD742
[50:46]

The first two pieces on this CD owe their existence to the Austrian virtuoso Anton Weidinger.

As a celebrated trumpeter, Joseph Haydn composed his infamous Trumpet Concerto in 1796 for Weidinger to perform at the Imperial and Royal Court Theatre in Vienna on 22 March 1800. Succeeding Haydn as Kapellmeister to the Esterhazy family, in 1803 Johann Nepomuk Hummel also composed his Trumpet Concerto for Weidinger. This was first performed on New Year’s Day 1804 to mark Hummel’s entrance into the court orchestra of Prince Esterhazy Nikolaus II. Until Weidinger’s championing of an organisire trompete - writing music with chromatic scales to make use of the new klappentrompete or keyed trumpet - the trumpet was merely used to provide harmonic support. It was not the muscular or finely-tuned virtuosic instrument it is today. The limited range, primarily high-register, of the natural trumpet, whereby notes were altered through the vibration of the lips, was developed to allow composers to incorporate melodies in the middle and lower registers. This was a time of exciting possibilities; composers were experimenting and discovering wondrous sounds. This enthusiasm can be heard in Haydn’s Allegro and Hummel’s Allegro vivace where obvious thematic parallels are evident.

Studying music at Jazeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music and graduating as a French-horn player, Atvars Lakstigala knows the inner workings and capacities of brass musicians and instruments. This puts him in a position to maximise their ability gallantly to charm and softly to caress. Founded in 1881 as The Baltic Philharmonics, the Liepaja Symphony Amber Sound Orchestra writhes with vigour. Its woodwind section is particularly heartfelt as you can hear in the agile bassoon passage in Hummel’s Concerto in E major. The sound quality heard in this concerto allows both the orchestra and soloist to be heard. No section of the orchestra and no quiet passage for the soloist is muted or drowned-out.

The cornerstone of the trumpet repertoire - perhaps due to its extremely catchy final movement - Haydn’s Trumpet Concerto contains both high spirited and emotive passages. To perform this piece requires confidence and assertiveness. However, gusto alone is not enough; a degree of humility and reserve is imperative to deliver the profound sincerity of the Andante. This, I feel, is where trumpeter Ketil Christensen excels. Graduating from the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen, studying in London, Paris and New York, Christensen is a consummate performer. He has been playing the first trumpet in The Royal Danish Orchestra since 1972. In this CD Christensen blends the passionate, the plaintive and the piquant to portray a range of emotions. His ability to interpret each musical phrase and get behind the demographics of the piece to the heart of the matter is what makes these recordings most praiseworthy.

Opening with a zesty and spirited Allegro, Hummel’s Concerto contains unusual modulations which alert the listener to Christensen’s virtuosity. Similarly, the woodwind section of the orchestra demonstrates flare and punctuality. However, it is the languorous Andante which, on this recording, errs towards a Romantic style in its directness and arresting stillness. Hummel’s concerto is usually performed in E flat major, however on this recording it is performed in the original E major key.
Czech composer of the eighteenth century, Johann Baptist Georg Neruda composed his Trumpet Concerto for a corno di caccia. This valveless horn is of the sort used in the works of Bach and Handel, thus its range and agility is not as great as the modern trumpet. However, this does not in any way undermine this magnificent piece. Neruda’s Largo, written in the home key of E flat, highlights Christensen’s ability to make his trumpet sing as if the melody belongs to a loving aria. With subtle inflections and varied articulations, Christensen’s tone remains pure and steady.

Christensen has recorded Danish Concertos for Trumpet and Orchestra with Collegium Musicum and Danish Brass Concertos with the Aalborg Symphony Orchestra. However, Christensen’s self-effacing sound is perhaps most recognisable on the charming motion picture CD Smile. I hope that upon listening to this CD, at least one other Christensen admirer will emerge.

Lucy Jeffery

And another review...

Ketil Christensen is a very experienced trumpeter and for over thirty years has been the principal trumpet of the Royal Danish Symphony Orchestra. Not only that, but he has had enjoyed parallel positions in the Collegium Musicum in Copenhagen and was a co-founder of the Royal Danish Brass Ensemble, in which he played for a decade. He has teamed up with Latvian conductor Atvars Lakstigala and his strangely named (at least it sounds strange to me) Liepaja Symphony Amber Sound Orchestra, for a short programme of three trumpet concertos.

These are middle-of-the-road performances with modern instruments. The recorded sound is a little blowsy and it’s not desperately subtle, though I wouldn’t condemn it. I wondered if the engineers were trying to inflate what seems like a relatively small band. Certainly the basses sound a bit huffy and puffy in the mix. Against that the band is well-disciplined and performs with conviction. The winds in the slow movement of the Haydn Concerto are particularly fine. Christensen plays the concerto rather straight, not bringing overmuch colour to it. There’s one odd moment in the finale when the tempo is more than halved before the last tutti; no idea why.

Hummel’s Concerto is played in its original key in this recording - important to note as it’s sometimes played in E flat these days. The performance of the outer movements is a touch portentous and unyielding. It lacks the kind of tonal and phrasal flexibility that Maurice André brought to it in his recording with the Ensemble Orchestral de Paris under Jean-Pierre Wallez, a disc I reviewed as part of Warner’s retrospective box set tribute to the trumpeter. Christensen rather lacks the pinpoint precision that the Frenchman brought to this work, not least in the trills, and the sense of gracious elegance too. Johann Neruda’s Concerto was also something André recorded. I think this is the best of the three concerto performances. Christensen and Lakstigala take a decisive walking pace tempo in the Largo, and their lithe approach works well on its own terms. André was significantly slower and more obviously expressive in his recording, with the same accompaniments as the Hummel.

These are solid performances, but I can’t pretend that they are in any way special.

Jonathan Woolf