



RECORDINGS

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FRANZ XAVER DUSSEK (1731–1799)

FOUR SYMPHONIES

Helsinki Baroque Orchestra / Aapo Häkkinen

Naxos 8.572683, 2012; one disc, 54 minutes

Considering his late-century reputation as an acclaimed keyboard virtuoso, pedagogue and composer, it is unfortunate that Franz Xaver Dussek (František Xaver Dušek) can be easily confused today with other prominent but unrelated Dusseks of the time, notably his contemporary, the organist and composer Jan Dussek (1738–1818), and Jan's sons, Jan Ladislav (1760–1812) and František Josef (1756–after 1816). In late eighteenth-century Bohemia, however, Franz Xaver Dussek was the most important by far: at the height of his fame he and his wife, Josefa, a well-known soprano in her own right, presided over musical life in Prague from their summer residence, the Villa Betramka. The couple welcomed numerous artists and musicians from the late 1780s until Franz Xaver's death in 1799, helping them to make connections with leading members of the Czech nobility. Among their guests was Mozart, who stayed at the Dusseks' villa in 1787 for most of his work on *Don Giovanni* and again in 1791 while finishing *La clemenza di Tito*. Throughout this period, Dussek maintained connections with the orchestras of Counts Pachta and Clam-Gallas, and enjoyed a status among native Bohemian musicians as the leading composer of secular music.

Dussek's humble beginnings – he was born in 1731 to a farmer in the small Bohemian village of Chotěborky – did not make him a likely candidate for the centre of Prague's cultural life. Nonetheless, his musical talents caught the attention of Count Jan Karel Sporck, who financed Dussek's move to Prague in 1748 to learn composition from Franz Habermann, and from there to Vienna in 1751 to continue his studies with Georg Wagenseil. Between 1760, when he left Vienna, and 1770, the date by which he resettled in Prague and began building his reputation as a teacher and performer, Dussek's employment and activities remain somewhat murky. However, most of his approximately forty symphonies date from this period. On the current recording, Naxos has made available four symphonies from this group, numbered G4, B \flat 2, A3 and B \flat 3 according to the catalogue system devised by Vladimír Altnér for Dussek's symphonies (see Dorotyya Somorjay, Vladimír Altnér, Vladimír Novák and Eva Hennigová-Dubová, eds, *The Symphony in Hungary / The Symphony in Bohemia*, *The Symphony 1720–1840*, Series B, Volume 12 (New York: Garland, 1984), xxxvii–xli). Thanks to invigorating performances by Aapo Häkkinen and the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra, we can gain a better appreciation for this relatively unknown composer's craft, charm and wit. The ensemble identifies Dussek's many moods – from suspension-weighted sentimentality to barrelling exhilaration – and plays them with relish.

Founded in 1997, the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra is a period-instrument ensemble with a rapidly expanding resumé of well-received recordings of unpublished or reconstructed works. Since Häkkinen assumed the artistic directorship in 2003 the group has recorded symphonies by Franz Xaver Richter (Naxos 8.570597, 2007, and 8.557818, 2009) and orchestral works by Johan Agrell (AEOLUS AE10047, 2010). Recordings of more familiar works include Claudio Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (Alba ABCD 198, 2004) and a disc of J. S. Bach's harpsichord concertos (AEOLUS AE10057, 2012). Currently they put on a monthly Early Music Series in Helsinki and appear regularly in major music festivals throughout Europe.

Of the four symphonies on this disc, Altnér G4 is the only one that can be dated with any accuracy. Yet as Allan Badley points out in his helpful liner notes on their provenance and dating, the 1763 marking on the single set of manuscript parts could indicate either an acquisition date or performance date; Dussek



may have composed it while still in Vienna. Such issues of chronology aside, this symphony's brief, uncomplicated movements make it convenient for examining Dussek's usual treatment of form in the symphonies recorded here. The outer movements of Altner G₄, then, conform to what James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy classify as a 'Type 2 sonata form'; that is, the second rotation – a term they prefer to 'recapitulation', particularly in this context – begins with the first theme in the dominant and ends with the second theme in the tonic (see Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially chapter 17). Before this tonal return, Dussek consistently interpolates a region of minor-key turbulence, adding drama and modal interest to what would otherwise be major-key monotony. In the first movement of Altner G₄ a threefold statement of ascending sequential material leads to a cadence on iii before a circle-of-fifths progression and dominant prolongation eventually restore the tonic. Dussek adopts this exact structural frame, adding a slow introduction, for the first movement of Altner A₃.

Dussek is not rigid in his formal constructions, however, and he expands the opening movements of Altner B₂ and especially Altner B₃ by including more melodic ideas. Moreover, he also demonstrates a keen awareness of how manipulations of phrasing can create musical momentum. My favourite example is in the finale of Altner G₄, a Presto 3/8 movement with a constantly shifting phrase rhythm that keeps the listener off balance. Though four- and six-bar phrases predominate, Dussek sometimes shortens to three bars in the build-up to a cadence and even tosses a five-bar phrase into the middle of each rotation. These irregularities, combined with frequent phrase overlaps, accented syncopations and sudden dynamic changes, make this *moto perpetuo* movement something of a roller-coaster ride. The Helsinki Orchestra appropriately pushes the tempo and accounts for all of Dussek's formal, rhythmic and dynamic nuances with an urgent flair.

Dussek's orchestration grants considerable independence to his winds (oboes and horns in pairs), a trait not found as often in the symphonic wind writing of his teacher Wagenseil in the 1750s and 1760s. Orchestration also tends to be determined by Dussek's formal layout. In the first movements of these four symphonies, the tonic theme invariably begins with the full orchestra. The arrival of the dominant reduces the texture to violins and viola, sometimes including oboes, with the full orchestra rejoining for the approach to the rotation's major cadence. Timbral variety comes from Dussek's juxtaposition of wind and string sonorities. For example, at the opening of the first movement of Altner G₄, a divided viola section moving in parallel thirds provides a dark timbral counterpoint to the pair of oboes that echoes it a few bars later. Meanwhile, quadruple stops in the violins balance a martial dotted figure in the horns. The Helsinki Orchestra recognizes the sonic possibilities built into Dussek's scoring, and they wisely do not hide the winds in the background. By bringing them to the fore when necessary, the ensemble illustrates the palette yet available to modest performing forces. On this count, I feel the horns contribute a bright, enjoyably edgy sound that helps to propel the faster movements. One quibble, however, is with the addition of the fortepiano continuo, which adds some sparse embellishments to the Andante movements of Altner G₄ and Altner A₃. Its balance relative to the orchestra is acceptable on the latter, but it tends to get buried in the mix on the former, diminishing its contribution. The liner notes do not discuss the presence of the keyboard continuo, or why they chose a fortepiano over harpsichord. Considering the premium the ensemble seems to place on vivid instrumental colour, it is puzzling that the fortepiano should be so subdued.

Finally, the selections on this disc also spotlight another aspect of Dussek's compositional personality: his sense of humour. Much like Haydn, Dussek occasionally adds touches of levity to his work by toying with audience expectations, as he does in the first movement of Altner B₃. During the minor-key section of the second rotation Dussek makes his way to a half-cadence in D minor (V/iii). Three bars of arpeggiation on an A major chord followed by a long hold on A major, marked *mancando* (failing, dying), make clear what is happening: the music has wandered into a distant harmonic neighbourhood from B flat major and is not sure how to get back. After the fermata, the violins propose a solution, beginning immediately in F major (V) with a previously heard theme, but at a sheepish *piano* dynamic. The rest of the orchestra confidently



joins in with a response in the same key, and it seems the way is prepared for a smooth return to tonic, the awkward A major disruption comfortably behind us. However, the music soon ventures back to D minor and takes another crack at achieving the perfect authentic cadence it could not reach before. Dussek makes the event as dramatic as possible, with a grand six-bar cadential gesture featuring repeated semiquavers in the violins, a harmonic rhythm of one chord per bar, a secondary diminished-seventh chord preceding and stoking anticipation for the dominant and a $\frac{6}{4}$ suspension on the dominant's arrival. The Helsinki Orchestra recognizes the humour of the situation, and when they finally attain the long-awaited D minor cadence, they do so with a clear sense of victory.

Given the attractive qualities of Dussek's music and his additional renown as a teacher and performer, it is hard to understand why his music disappeared for so long. Badley speculates that it may have something to do with his aristocratic patrons' contractual restrictions. Nevertheless, this highly engaging performance by the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra, coupled with the recent publication of edited scores by Artaria Editions and Naxos's 2002 release of three Dussek symphonies performed by Helios 18 under Marie-Louise Oschatz (Naxos 8.555878), perhaps signal that Franz Xaver Dussek is making a name for himself once again.

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IGNAZ PLEYEL (1757–1831)
PRUSSIAN QUARTETS 4–6
Pleyel Quartett Köln
cpo 777 551–2, 2012; one disc, 59 minutes

Upon the death of Frederick the Great in 1786, his nephew, Frederick William II, ascended the throne as the new King of Prussia. This occasion prompted Joseph Haydn's Viennese publisher, Artaria, to call on the Prussian ambassador regarding the possibility of a commission. Ultimately, Haydn's eighth set of string quartets, Op. 50 (1787), came to be known as the 'Prussian' quartets, as did Ignaz Pleyel's set of twelve string quartets Ben 331–342 (1787).

Although neither Frederick William nor his uncle was remembered as an impressive military leader, they were both highly regarded as artistic patrons. In the court of Frederick the Great, an accomplished flautist, the knowledgeable visitor might have expected to hear J. J. Quantz playing the flute or C. P. E. Bach at the harpsichord. Frederick William was a talented cellist who received in his court a similarly impressive list of performers and composers. For example, he employed the cellists Jean Pierre Duport and Luigi Boccherini: Duport was the king's private cello teacher and is likely to have given the premiere performances of Beethoven's first two cello sonatas, Op. 5 (1796), with the composer; Boccherini, meanwhile, was retained as a composer in residence, even though he resided in Spain at the time.

The string quartet benefited greatly from Frederick William's patronage. In addition to Haydn and Pleyel, W. A. Mozart also wrote quartets for the king. Mozart began his final three quartets (K575, K589 and K590) on the return leg of a journey north in 1789; although not explicitly commissioned by the king, these quartets were probably inspired by Mozart's visit to Berlin. Unlike Mozart's quartets, Pleyel's bear a dedication to King Frederick. They were ultimately published in four books of three quartets each, and the second book is the focus of this review. But this wealth of material, which was written for one particularly accomplished cellist and king, raises a question: as a cellist, how talented was he?