

CD Review by Jerry Dubins

MOZART Piano Concertos: No. 11 in F, K 413; No. 12 in A, K 414; No. 13 in C, K 415 • David Curtis, cond; Mark Bebbington (pn); O of the Swan • SOMM 66 (78:07)

In 29:1, I gave Mark Bebbington's recording of solo piano works by Castelnuovo-Tedesco a strong recommendation. Other than that, I've not heard anything else by this fine British pianist who, for the most part, seems to specialize in neglected keyboard works by 20th-century English composers, such as Malcolm Arnold, Frank Bridge, Howard Ferguson, and Constant Lambert. This is my first acquaintance, however, with David Curtis and the Orchestra of the Swan.

In January of 1783, Mozart announced in the Wiener Zeitung a subscription to a trio of new piano concertos, eventually to be numbered 11, 12, and 13. The notice drew little response, causing the composer to offer the concertos to the Parisian publisher, Jean Georges Sieber. It was, however, the Viennese publisher, Artaria, that ultimately accepted and published them; and, according to the booklet note, "this was the only occasion in Mozart's lifetime that any of his piano concertos appeared in print," a revelation that is probably true, yet nonetheless shocking.

The three works on offer here represent the approximate midpoint in Mozart's 27 piano concertos, written when he was 27. He would live only another eight years; yet in that time he would write another 14 concertos, the last eight of which are among his most sublime masterpieces. These earlier pieces contain all of the limpid slow movements, the clarity of form, and the scintillating passagework that are Mozart hallmarks. They differ from the final clutch of concertos primarily in their slightly smaller scale, in their lower level of emotional intensity, and in their less rigorous working out of thematic materials. Otherwise, they are—each and every one of them—precious gems.

The aptly named Orchestra of the Swan is based in Stratford-upon-Avon, and has gained widespread attention for its dedication to commissioning and performing new works. Mozart may in fact be a little off the beaten path for this ensemble; at least that's the impression I get from visiting their Web site on the Internet. Be that as it may, they make fine work of these scores under the able leadership of David Curtis. Mark Bebbington studied at the Royal College of Music where he was a recipient of numerous international awards and prizes, including a Leverhulme Scholarship, a Winston Churchill Fellowship, and the Ivan Sutton Recording Prize. He then pursued follow-up training in Italy with famed pianist Aldo Ciccolini.

This is a full-priced disc, and although competition in Mozart's piano concertos is stiff—Brendel, Perahia, and Uchida to name just three contemporary artists, the SomM CD is very attractive, and I enjoyed the performances thoroughly.

Jerry Dubins