



**WAGENSEIL Trio Sonatas: No. 1 in F; No. 2 in G; No. 3 in D; No. 4 in C; No. 5 in d; No. 6 in B $\flat$**  • Paola Nervi (vn); Antonio Coloccia (vc); Matteo Cicchitti (db & musical director) • CHALLENGE 72896 (56:48)

When discussing music of the 18th-century Holy Roman Empire's capital Vienna, we generally tend to begin with the vibrant culture and environment of the 1770s or 1780s and beyond, with a focus on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn, and their contemporaries, leading up to Beethoven at the end of the century. To be sure, this was an age of significant composers whose musical styles were both progressive and popular, and one cannot help but note that this was the time thought by Arnold Schoenberg to be the "First Viennese School" (as he designated his group as the Second). I mention this only to observe that, as the musical center of the Empire, the entire century might equally be divided into various "schools" of composers who were also pivotal to the development of musical style. At the beginning, one has Joseph Fux and Antonio Caldara, and of course the end just noted, but in the middle period, say from 1740–70, a plethora of composers whose music was recognized as important were also active. Today, many of these regularly pop up individually, but the names of Georg Matthias Monn, Florian Gassmann, Gregor Joseph Werner, and Georg Christoph Wagenseil are hardly household, even though they are no longer unknowns.

Wagenseil was what might be considered the quintessential Viennese mid-century composer; one whose music was well known and admired during his lifetime. Born in 1715 to a family of court officials, he was trained by Fux and soon became one of that composer's favorite pupils. By 1739 he was employed at the Imperial court as a teacher to Archduchess Marianna and court *Kammernusikus*, being renowned for his performance on the harpsichord. By 1750 he was publishing symphonies and chamber music in Paris, and thus attained an international reputation, despite the fact that he remained in Vienna his entire life. He passed away in 1777, having composed no fewer than 16 operas, numerous secular cantatas, a large number of concertos (of which that for trombone and another for harp are still in the repertory), and many chamber works. He can be considered one of the principal figures in the development of the early Classical symphony, as well. As an educator, one of his students, Johann Schenk, became one of Beethoven's teachers. He was highly regarded during his lifetime, and so it is all the more unfortunate that his music remained largely unknown until relatively recently. I suspect the revival is more or less underway, with two volumes of symphonies released by CPO and his unusual quartets for low strings by the Piccolo Concerto Wien on Accent, to name a few. This selection of trio sonatas for the unusual combination of violin, cello, and contrabass adds to these slowly growing performances of his chamber music.

Each of the trios is in the three-movement format common for the time, usually an opening *Allegro* followed by a lyrical slow movement. Three of them have the usual minuet finale, while the other three have a faster *Allegro* that serves as a bookend to the sonata. The contrabass serves in all of these as the foundation, but gives it a particular

sound as the remainder of the continuo group is lacking. The violin and cello form a sonorous duet, often in imitation or repeating each phrase in their own registers, before joining together in parallel harmonies. In the *Allegro* for the Second Sonata, for instance, the cello opens with a lyrical line to which the violin skips about in arpeggiated figures. The nice parallel thirds between cello and contrabass offer a resonant lower moment, and Wagenseil's turn to the minor, however momentary, adds a bit of contrast. More dramatic is the opening *Allegro* of the D-Minor Sonata, where the deep tones of the cello lend a particular mysteriousness, above which the violin meanders about. Here and in all of these beginning movements, the contrabass is generally playing a steady stream of ostinato eighth notes.

The second movements are more heartfelt. The *Andante* of the Third Sonata, in a minor key initially, is like a mournful funereal lament, but then the major key section is like a lyrical ray of sunshine. The *Larghetto* of the Sixth Sonata is likewise a pensive introspective movement, with close harmonies and suspensions blossoming out into a lighter mood, with the violin now in a lower register and often relegated to a subordinate role. The *Andante* of the Second Sonata seems very much like a steady march that suddenly flits about in some imitation between the violin and cello, a study in contrast. As for the finales, the minuets are sometimes a bit conventional, but at other offer a kind of Austrian conclusion, the *Gehraus*, where people are musically told to "go home" after a concert. There are also combinations of these two moods, such as in the minuet of the Second Sonata, with its contrabass flourishes in the trio section. The Third Sonata concludes with a very placid and static minuet, with some imitative passages in the Trio section. That for the Fourth Sonata is more rollicking, with a theme consisting of rapid flourishes. The other three sonatas end with differing styles. The Fifth Sonata is a rapid-paced dialogue between violin and cello, almost a musical debate or argument. It is short, pithy, and concludes with an abrupt, and unsettled, cadence. The Sixth Sonata concludes with a rather gnarly bit of imitation that is complex, bandying about themes and fragments of themes between the upper two instruments. The First Sonata's finale is a rapid-fire movement with a lyrical cello answered by violin flourishes.

The performance is key to these works, and one should note that Wagenseil himself was probably not thinking of these as concert works, save in a more immediate personal setting; yes, even with a contrabass at the lowest register. He shows himself to be a progressive orchestrator, using his instruments carefully but with a sense of each one's capabilities and sound. The resultant blend is sonorous and copacetic. The trio of performers call themselves **Musica Elegentia**, and this is appropriate for the excellent performance. As I have said before, I usually would rather play such chamber works than spend much time listening to them, but here this provides yet another fine exception to this personal rule. This one will make my Want List for the year. Highly recommended.

**FANFARE: Bertil van Boer**

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