

GRAF, ABEL CELLO CONCERTOS AND SINFONIAS • KLAUS-DIETER BRANDT • L'ARPA FESTANTE reviewed by Jerry Dubins, Fanfare Magazine

ABEL Cello Concerto in C. C. E. GRAF Sinfonias: I; III. Cello Concertos: No. 1 in D; No. 2 in D • L'Arpa Festante (period instruments); Klaus-Dieter Brandt (vc) • ARS 38068 (SACD: 74:20)

Only one entry for Graf appears in the Fanfare archive, but it's a recording of flute quartets by Friedrich Hartmann Graf (1727-95). The Graf we're dealing with here, another of seven Graf brothers, is Christian Ernst (1723-1804). Little of his biography or his music is known. He was born in Rudolstadt, a town in the German province of Thuringia. Failure to secure a respectable court position, increasing debt, and other adverse circumstances led to his fleeing Rudolstadt for the Netherlands, allegedly taking with him a number of stolen instruments. Eventually, he landed a position as composer at the court of Princess Anne of Hanover, widow of Willem IV at the Court of His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange. Shortly thereafter, he adopted the Dutch spelling of his name, Graaf.

In 1765, the Mozart family, visiting The Hague, apparently met Graf, for an entry in Leopold's diary mentions him, and the 10-year-old Wolfgang's Eight Variations on "Laat ons Juichen Batavieren," K 24, is based on a song written by Graf. Of the dozens of symphonies, concertos, quintets, quartets, trios, and duos attributed to him, Graf's non-pioneering style closely resembles that of the Mannheim school and the early classical composers at a time when Haydn was already writing his mature symphonies, oratorios, and chamber works.

Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787) is a far better known figure in the music history annals, if, for no other reason, than for his close ties to J. C. Bach, with whom Abel established England's first subscription concerts. Further acclaim accrued to Abel's reputation when it was discovered that a manuscript in Mozart's hand, catalogued as the boy wonder's Symphony No. 3 in E \flat , K 18, was in fact a misattributed work by Abel, the concluding number in the composer's Six Symphonies, op. 7.

In listening to the works of Graf and Abel one after the other, it's fascinating to hear how old-school the former is compared to the latter. In Graf, one still hears the Mannheim school: the "rockets," the "sighs," the orchestral crescendos and decrescendos, and so forth. Not that any of this is to be denigrated; Graf was very good at it and had an obviously musical ear for melody and harmony. The extended slow movements of the two cello concertos, with their dark chromatic excursions, are especially moving. But then one turns to the Abel concerto, the one work by which he is represented on this disc, and one hears music in a full-blown classical style close to Haydn.

Cellist Klaus-Dieter Brandt may already be known to collectors from a couple of Naxos recordings of chamber works by Quantz and Roman in which he participated. He is also the cellist in a violin/cello twosome calling itself the Jansa Duo, whose recent recording of duos by Toch, Schulhoff, Moór, and others, was positively received by Jim North in 34:1. I haven't heard that

disc, though I assume from the dates of the composers included, Brandt plays a modern cello. On the current release, for the Abel and Graf Concerto No. 2, Brandt uses a 1776 cello by the Southern German maker Sebastian Wolfram; and for Graf's Concerto No. 1, he plays a 1764 instrument by another Southern German maker, Gabriel David Buchstetter. Both cellos, retrofitted to their original setups, display a full-bodied, vibrant sound, with none of the nasality or astringency sometimes associated with period strings. Too, Brandt plays them with masterfully controlled technique and real musical sensitivity.

Founded in 1983, L'Arpa Festante takes its name from a dramatic cantata by Giovanni Battista Maccioni first given in 1653 to open the Munich Opera House. It's one of those ensembles that plays with such fullness and roundness of tone and such freedom from the excesses and eccentricities of some period instrument groups that one could easily mistake the sound for a modern instrument band. The horns in particular are exceptionally solid and secure sounding. I will definitely be seeking out recordings the ensemble has made of works by Monn, C. P. E. Bach, and others.

This is a wonderful addition to the catalog of early classical composers, especially to that of Christian Ernst Graf, the surface of whose music has barely been scratched.

Jerry Dubins