

GRAF Sinfonias 1, 3 • Cello Concertos No.1 in D, No.2 in D • ABEL Cello Concerto in C  
Klaus-Dieter Brandt (vc), L'arpa festante (period instruments) • ARS 38 068 (SACD: 74:38)  
reviewed by Steven E. Ritter, Fanfare Magazine

---

Christian Ernst Graf (1723-1804) is a composer who had difficult times for at least half of his life; not particularly welcome even in his home town because of a personality that was rather impulsive and untamable—qualities not appreciated in the court environment that had long supported his father, admired by the likes of Telemann, and who gave his son a first-rate musical education. The composer had to beg for stipend increases from William V in order to survive, and it wasn't until he landed in The Hague (where there was a decent professional contingent of ten musicians who could be augmented as needed) that he came into his own. But it is interesting to note that he was the director of the orchestra that gave 9-year-old Wolfgang Mozart's debut in this same city, mentioned in Leopold Mozart's concert diaries.

Graf's music does not abide by the style galant concepts of the age so defined by J.C. Bach. His is a way that diverges from many accepted mannerisms, and even though his forms are on the visual level not especially radical or a departure from the norm, the music itself is exceptionally personal and plays to the inner man instead of the crowd. The two concertos here (he penned at least five) give strong examples of this, making use of the instrument in a way that exhausts the potentials of the age, from highest note to lowest with many technical hurdles still found challenging today. The sinfonias are lighter fare though not light; he wrote at least 82 symphonies while at The Hague, and each movement of each work here shows a considered approach that is never predictable or anticipatory.

Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-87) is a much better known composer today, and was then; he is mainly known as the one who established the "Bach and Abel" concerts in London with J.C. Bach, and his music is recognized as some of the finest of the age though woefully under-recorded now except for his Viola da Gamba works, of which he was a specialist. I have to say that I think Abel's concerto tops those of Graf; despite the highly personal nature of the latter it is the former who shows such a mastery of style and ornamentation that I am always listening afresh to his inventive and cheery passages. But I don't want to diss Graf—his works are well-worth the discovery. This is, as far as I can tell, the only recording of Abel's only cello concerto.

To have all of this music recorded in such splendid surround sound is truly a bonus—many companies would not bother, but it shows that earlier music can benefit in miraculous ways from the technology. Brandt, a soloist with a robust educational background specializing in early music performance, and also the solo cellist with Musica Antiqua Köln and founder of the period ensemble Alte Musik Köln, plays two southern German cellos: a 1776 Wolfram and 1764 Buchstetter (Graf No. 1), the former actually much larger than a modern instrument while the latter has a fuller sound richer in overtones. He is obviously quite engaged with the music, jumping Graf's hurdles with considerable ease—and Graf really tests the upper strings—and gets the requisite tonal quality for the slow movements. The conductorless orchestra plays in a spirited and highly competent manner as well. There is really nothing to not like about this recording, fully-loaded time-wise and in every other way. Take a dive into the unknown with this fine album. Steven E. Ritter