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I haven't had the pleasure of encountering the Oslo Kammerakademi before, and on the evidence of this SA-CD, I have been missing some superb wind playing. Formed in 2009, the band comprises some of Scandinavia's leading wind soloists under their Artistic Director and initiator Friedemann Strunk, solo oboist for the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra. Other members come from the Oslo, Bergen and other orchestras, as well as members of the Staff Band of the Norwegian Army (see *La Voie Triomphale*, which I recently reviewed).

The Kammerakademi's aims are to present chamber music for wind instruments based on classical 'Harmonie' music, using period brass and woodwind instruments from baroque, classical and romantic styles. Their ensemble is crisp, with high levels of internal communication and interplay between musicians, and they make a sound which is both transparent and richly toned.

Beethoven's wind music was all produced during his early years in the service of the Elector of Cologne in Bonn, where one of his duties was to compose for the court's Harmonie octet (which also had a 16' bass, either a contrabass or double bassoon). A great fashion for Harmonie Musik was initiated by the Emperor in Vienna, spreading quickly to all the smaller German courts. Pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns provided entertaining music at table and for soirées.

The original title of Beethoven's Octet for Winds was Parthia (a.k.a. Partita) but it was revised in Vienna during the years 1792-93. In addition, the Rondino for the same combination of winds, composed in Vienna in 1793, is believed to have been intended as the new finale. The Parthia was published as Op. 103 in 1830, that is to say, after Beethoven's death in March of 1827.

The Kammerakademi's performance of the Parthia and its orphan Rondino are exemplary, eloquently phrased, stylishly rhythmic and at times with an affecting tongue-in-cheek attitude typical of the unruly and unpredictable young Beethoven. While the natural horns mostly play a concertante role in the Parthia, in the affective slow Rondino they are clearly spotlighted throughout. The hornists here rise to the occasion with some thrillingly fast and nimble articulation, as well as lovely soft, sentimental melody-making.

The big work on this disc is an arrangement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony - for 9 instruments, i.e. the wind octet plus double bass, with added timpani (of the military type, hit with hard sticks, of course).

This symphony was an immediate success for Beethoven, and publishers were demanding arrangements from Beethoven to feed a burgeoning domestic and chamber concert audience. The composer himself did the piano arrangement, but the wind arrangement, Op. 92, may or not be by Beethoven, but whoever it was made a surprisingly good condensation of the Seventh, adding the word 'concert' to indicate this arrangement was above the level of amateur players. The Oslo Kammerakademi use Steiner's original version for winds of 1816, but since Beethoven complained about the errors present in that edition, Steiner's version has been corrected from the modern Bärenreiter "Urtext" edition.

Like me, you might well feel trepidation in listening to Beethoven's orchestra, used so colourfully in the Seventh, reduced to a mere 9 instruments and some drums. But from the first bar, this performance will capture and hold you for all four movements. The richness and depth of sound produced (in a warmly resonant church acoustic) seems to bespeak a much larger group of instruments. The Oslo band makes the Amsterdam Blazer's hollow, diminutive attempt at this work sound feeble indeed. The very well-played timpani contribute greatly towards the illusion of an orchestra, as does a very strong bass line.

Amazingly, without conductor, the Kammerakademi produces a Seventh of bold finesse and controlled power which would grace the recordings of many big orchestras with their "big-named" conductors. Wagner said that this symphony was "The apotheosis of the Dance", and so it is played here, with a first movement which beams with geniality and spirit, never pushed along; an Allegretto which casts us into the darker realms of A minor and builds to marvellous climaxes, a Presto scherzo bubbling along with impious energy and a whirling Finale which blazes forth, yielding nothing to Kleiber's Seventh on DGG.

I confess that the playing of this wind arrangement is so brilliant that I had to "air-conduct" all the way, it being impossible to merely sit still when washed with its vital rhythmic flow. And interestingly enough, this distillation of the Seventh Symphony is revelatory in revealing the Symphony's very bones and sinews, all the more to enjoy the impact of a full orchestral version.

Recorded in a church at Drammen, not far from Oslo, the clear, focussed sound reveals all the interesting tone colours of the period wood winds, and especially the changes of tone in the natural horns' ranges, including some fist-in-bell techniques. According to a photo in the booklet, the ensemble was arranged in a deep horseshoe shape, and the front to rear perspective is very convincing on multichannel. The ambience successfully amplifies the 9 instruments to produce a phantom of a much larger group. You can happily play this disc at considerable volume (hand held horns are towards the back, where they really do need to be), yet there is no muddying of the crisp, well articulated playing.

This is a sizzling seventh symphony, even if only on 9 instruments, supported by two other entertaining and beautifully played items from Beethoven's Harmonie Musik days. Simply do not miss this issue, and look out for more on SACD from the Oslo9 Kammerakademi.

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