CHRISTIAN BENDA
CONDUCTS ROSSINI

Together with the Prague Sinfonia and the Prague Philharmonic Choir, the conductor Christian Benda has recorded the complete overtures by Gioachino Rossini for Naxos. Here is the highly anticipated first volume of the series.

Gioachino ROSSINI (1792-1868)
Complete Symphonic Overtures, Vol. 1
La gazza ladra • Semiramide • Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra (Il barbiere di Siviglia) • Otello • Le siège de Corinthe • Sinfonia "al conventello" • Ermione *

*Prague Philharmonic Choir **
Prague Sinfonia • Christian Benda

Simultaneously Released on CD and Blu-ray Audio Disc (NBD0028)

Rossini wrote some of music's most masterful and lovable operas. His gift for comic and tragic forms was matched by a relish for characterisation, qualities that are always evident in his overtures. *La gazza ladra* (The Thieving Magpie) is perhaps the most famous, one of the world's most popular concert openers. But in *Otello* he reveals his more complex turns of phrase and in *Le siège de Corinthe* the writing is dramatic and colourful. The overture for *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* was used again a year later by Rossini for *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. This is the first of four discs of the complete Rossini *Overtures*.

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Booklet notes in English
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Listen to an excerpt from *La gazza ladra* Overture: PLAY ▶

About Christian Benda

Christian Benda is descended from a long line of musicians. First guest conductor of the Turin Philharmonic, he appears worldwide with orchestras including the Prague Symphony, Shanghai Philharmonic, Orchestra della Toscana, Polish National Opera, Budapest Concert Orchestra MÁV, Cyprus State, Moscow Virtuosi, Münster Philharmonic, Ulster Orchestra, Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo, and Suisse Romande Orchestra, invited by festivals such as Schwetzingen, Echternach/Luxemburg, Cité de la musique Paris, Prague Spring, George Enescu Bucharest, Hong Kong Arts, Klangbogen Wien, and the Menuhin Festival/Switzerland. Christian Benda is chief conductor and artistic director of the Prague Sinfonia Orchestra with which he has recorded numerous standard classical works, as well as Schubert's and Rossini's complete overtures. Singers such as Renée Fleming, Barbara Hendricks, Cheryl Studer, and Simon Estes have appeared under his baton. In collaboration with the Vienna State Opera he has devised a new introduction to opera for the general public and young people, *High-Lights and Micro-Opera*, based on Goethe's colour theory, with the participation of narrator and dancers.

Christian Benda

Talks to Jeremy Siepmann

Not perhaps since the Bachs, if even then, has there been a musical family more continuous or more far flung than the Bendas of Bohemia. František (Franz) Benda served with C.P.E. Bach, and with comparable distinction, at the court of Frederick the Great, Jiří Antonín Benda's symphonies were as popular in their day as Mozart's and Haydn's at the end of the 18th-century, and since then the line has been virtually unbroken. The foremost contemporary standard bearer is the cellist and conductor Christian Benda, but he is far from alone. Small wonder that when asked about his earliest musical memories he couldn't actually come up with one.

'My first memories are unconscious. When we're very little, in our first three years or so, we're not really that conscious of what happens. But there was a *sonority*. Three days before I was born, my father performed all the Beethoven piano concertos and my mother was in the audience. So my first consciousness was rather of sonority than of music as such. This, of course, was well before I spoke my first words. Music was everywhere in my family. My mother was a music teacher, but not properly an instrumental teacher, even though she'd been a pupil of my father. She studied all the various approaches to pedagogy, and then made her own particular mixture of these. My first instruments were percussion, especially the xylophone. Then I played the recorder, when I was six or seven, and when I was four I had decided that I wanted to play the cello. But we didn't have a cello, so, like in many other musical families, my parents said "You should play the violin. *Those* instruments we *have*." So for seven years I practised the violin, and then when I was 12, my father came with this big present, a huge great box. Inside this was a cello. You can imagine my happiness! I think what most endeared it to me was its likeness to the human voice. (I also liked the fact that cellists, unlike violinists, who often have to stand, can sit down and be comfortable!)'

And who – and what – were the most formative influences on his development as a musician?

'Certainly my father, who was mostly concentrated, when he was a child, on composition. But he reached a very high level on the piano – he performed the Brahms Second Concerto, for instance, he shared a prize with Daniel Barenboim and he performed a lot in the 1950s. He was really the one who formed me, who gave me many of the elements that remain closest to my heart. But of course it was not the approach of the cello. The greatest influence on me as a cellist was Pierre Fournier. Ironically, though, *his* sonority didn't actually come from the cello either. You know that for French string players the bow is more important than the instrument. The focus is more on the attack, the way of speaking, the diction, if you like, than the actual sound. Fournier's concept of sound had to do with the *soul* which is beyond the colour of the instrument. The main thing I got from Fournier was this "diction", this clarity of the right-hand, of the bow, which was more speaking than singing. And this influence marked me very much, not only in my usage of the instrument but also regarding the orchestra. Even though I'm a string player, the sonority I have inside of me, as a conductor, is that of pinched or percussive string instruments, which the cello can only experience through pizzicati. Though of course I appreciate the fantastic range of orchestral tone colours, I always try to make the orchestra sound not like a kind of glorified organ, but rather with the clarity, the transparency, of the piano, or the harpsichord. One cannot *hear* that I am a cellist, but perhaps the rhythmic character of my right (bow) hand and the expressiveness of my left hand reveal it.'

The sound in one's head, or one's heart, as one looks at a score, is already an element of interpretation, and an important one – no less important for being unconscious, even instinctual. Sonority, as we have seen, has always been central to Benda's musical perception. How does he see himself as an interpreter? How, indeed, would he define the interpreter's principal role, in whatever medium? 'To me, the musical work is not an accomplished whole, a separate and complete entity, fixed and unchanging. A musical work is an *open* creation, like a garden. In societies around the world there are many ethnic differences, with different contexts of perception. And these contrasts exist in time as well as place. Music is forever evolving. This is what makes it eternal. The performances of my great grandfather and other ancestors were no more "the truth" than are my performances today. Musical "truth" itself is continually changing. And this is possible – inevitable – precisely because of the interpreter. Music is susceptible to many *different* aspects and approaches. And these perpetuate the *life* of music. Otherwise it becomes fit only for museums.'

As one who plays and conducts 18th-century repertoire, among much else, how if at all has Benda been affected by the musicological revolution that transformed the last third of the last century? What, today, are his views on historical 'authenticity'? 'Oh this is a really important subject, I think. I've been very much influenced by the so-called historical movement. But while I appreciate many of the insights it can afford, I dislike the idea that it's history that makes our art important. Music is so much more than the reflection of its time. It's the reflection of the human spirit, which transcends

considerations of time and period. Even if today we could reproduce the *exact* sonorities that Beethoven heard – or Mozart, or Bach or whoever – the fact is that our own *consciousness* has changed. Precisely because of the historical evolution that humanity has experienced, we cannot truly hear with 18th-century ears; with an 18th-century outlook. For me, *real* history is *today*.'

As well as his natural championing of Czech music – a role to which he was effectively born – Christian Benda has shown a marked (though by no means exclusive) affinity for Italian music (Boccherini, Casella, Malipiero etc – and most notably, perhaps, Rossini). But here, too, he stands in a long tradition. 'The people of the North have always had a great love of the South, and Italy in particular – partly attracted by its beguiling naivety. And for musicians there's the extra resonance of its having been the birthplace of Western music. The North generally represents the serious aspects of music with its harmony and formality, and it's just such a joy to discover this Italian naivety – the naivety of the South in general. I myself moved close to Milan; I live in the Italian part of Switzerland. It may seem very simplistic sometimes, but for me it's an enormous pleasure to play and conduct Italian music. There's such *joy* in it, such vitality and spontaneity – and I mean spontaneity of *feeling*. There's so much *sunshine* in it – like in the country itself. Nor should we forget the enormous influence of Italian music on the North, throughout the ages. In the context of our conversation, it's worth noting, I think, that Rossini had a significant influence on such Germanic composers as Beethoven (particularly in the "Pastoral" Symphony!) and Schubert.'

And what have been the principal rewards of recording all the overtures? 'Just what we've been speaking of, really. Also, the understanding of his huge talent, as a composer – of his combination of the light and the serious. It's interesting that when Rossini wants to express something very serious it often turns out to be rather sarcastic, which isn't something one tends to think of in his case. But the biggest joy for me is that I could really let myself go, immerse myself in his joyful directness, his innocence – like drinking some wonderful orange juice under a blue sky – in his world of sensitivity and sensuality. Not for nothing is he called Monsieur Crescendo! But it's always a *classical* sensuality. He wasn't a voluptuary.'

Did Mr. Benda know all the overtures at the outset of this project, or were there the odd discoveries? 'Some of them I didn't know at all: the first ones, from his youth, for instance, like *Cambiale di matrimonio*. Actually there were *lots* of discoveries. Many of these pieces, some of them very beautiful, are simply never performed. It was a pleasure and a privilege to discover them.'

Not unrelated to Benda's Italian affinities – and especially his Rossinian streak – are his activities in the opera house. How, I wondered, has his work there affected his approach to purely instrumental music, and vice versa? Has his experience of these two media (the opera house and the concert hall) been mutually nourishing? 'Interestingly, our family has generally been opposed to opera. The period of the Enlightenment, with its "pure" thinking (the ideas of Rousseau and so on) favoured the *separation* of music and the spoken word. Ironically, considering how things happened, it was Goethe's expressed wish that his words *not* be set to music! And in opera, of course, we have this great *mixture* of arts – the climax in that respect being Wagner. But the *dis*association of these various arts is also something very interesting. For me, it's like going from one extreme to another, like a pendulum. On the one side there's the *disassociation* of arts, which is like an expiration, and on the other side we have all them being absorbed into one, like a great *inhalation* that amalgamates them all. In my approach to opera today, I try actually to exploit this movement from one side to the other: for instance, in my Micro-Opera project for young people, designed to prevent their going *away* from opera, which often happens because they don't understand what it's all about. They don't understand the text, the libretto. So my idea was to create a form of melodrama, in which the text would be spoken by a narrator, in the native language of the country where the opera is being performed, with the songs, the arias, following the readings of the texts. And the narration would be very rhythmically spoken, as in Goethe's time. As you may know, Goethe actually conducted his actors with a stick. And during these rhythmical narrations, the various characters of the opera would appear on the stage as dancers in a pantomime. So it's like a constant, variegated entertainment – but with the art kept on a very high level.

'As for the influence of opera on instrumental music, for me this lies principally in the creation, enhancement, and sometimes the development of the various "characters" represented by the instruments (Schumann's "Florestan" and "Eusebius" come to mind). In Mozart's instrumental music, for instance, whether it's for orchestra or piano, we frequently have a kind of undercover opera. Characters and dialogue are everywhere! But the music must never become merely *illustrative*. I never want in my interpretations to transform instrumental works into programme music. I firmly believe that music speaks for itself. It needs no explanation.'

Mr. Benda's belief in music's self-sufficiency extends to the recording studio, despite the battery of technological aids and devices just waiting to be exploited. While not spurning technology on principle, he is disinclined to take advantage of the microphone as an interpretative tool. His approach to the recording of Rossini's overtures was a case in point. 'As to up-to-date technology, it's Naxos policy to use a kind of surround sound, which is mostly associated with cinema and multi-track, but for me the only *real* vantage point, the only aural *perspective*, if you like, is from where I stand, conducting the orchestra: what I hear with my ears. In Rossini's music there are very rarely hidden elements like, for instance, in Beethoven's Fifth, where the contrabassoon has a theme which can be revealed by the microphone. So no, I *didn't* use technology to focus on these elements. What I did do – and here I *could* have used technology but chose not to – was to enhance some of Rossini's famous crescendos. In a couple of overtures, when I couldn't raise the level any higher without coarsening the sonority, I used the trombones to double the basses and help sustain the sound. Rossini himself does this in some of the other overtures, so I was applying his own principles. I was faced with two possibilities: either to use the trombones or to keep to the original text and use technological means to augment the sound. I tried both approaches but Rossini's own principles won the day.'

And finally, I asked, what for Mr. Benda is the most rewarding thing about being a musician? 'I think that one of the most precious things about being a musician is that you can live content. A human content, that we can experience alone or all within a group, without needing material elements. The material of music is the most subtle we have on the planet. More subtle even than light. Because it's only the vibration of air. When the vibration ceases, the air remains as it is. And this is a purely spiritual element, in the sense that everything that is born in sound is transient, and quickly disappears. So we can say that music is in one sense a manifestation of death and resurrection. Because it keeps dying, and in order to make it revive, we need to perform it. So for me, music is life itself. Spiritual life. Music is spiritual by its very nature.'

Which is not to say, of course, that it is thereby exclusively devout, contemplative, pious, philosophical, metaphysical, even religious. As Mr. Benda's jubilant survey of Rossini's often very earthy overtures makes plain, it embraces the whole of our conscious, sentient experience. Its scope is boundless.

Jeremy Siepmann is an internationally acclaimed writer, musician, teacher, broadcaster and editor.

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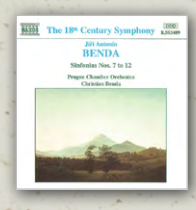

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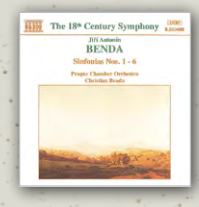

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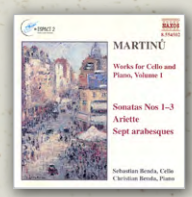

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About the Prague Sinfonia

During the celebrations of the Czech National Day, the former President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel became Honorary President of the Prague Sinfonia Orchestra in a gala concert under Christian Benda at the Czech National House in New York City. After having collaborated with conductors such as Vaclav Neumann, Gerd Albrecht, Charles Mackerras, Trevor Pinnock and, for over ten years with Christian Benda, its chief conductor and artistic director, the Prague Sinfonia Orchestra was established for the symphonic repertoire during Prague Chamber Orchestra's sixteenth tour of North America. The orchestra has toured widely throughout the world, and is a regular participant of Czech musical life, with concert series in Prague and participation in festivals such as Salzburg, Bregenz, Berlin, Dresden, Lucerne, Montreux, Cheltenham, Besançon, and Biarritz with artists including Maxim Vengerov, Arturo Benedetti-Michelangeli, Friedrich Gulda and Christoph Eschenbach. Recordings for companies including EMI, Decca, Sony Classics, Naxos, Polydor, Nippon Columbia, Denon, BMG, Telarc, Ariola, Eurodisc and Supraphon have won a number of prestigious prizes, including the Wiener Flötenuhr, the Grand Prix du Disque Académie Charles Cros twice, and, after having sold one million records, the Golden Disc Award.