

Gramophone Awards 2017



Recording of the Year & Concerto

Mozart Violin Concertos Nos 1-5. Adagio, K261.
Rondos - K269; K373

Isabelle Faust *violin*

Il Giardino Armonico / Giovanni Antonini

Harmonia Mundi

© 2 HMC90 2230/31

Producer **Martin Sauer**

Engineers **Tobias Lehmann, Wolfgang Schiefermann**

Sponsored by

qobuz

A different beauty here, a new way of hearing these deliciously Italianate masterpieces that doesn't so much replace what we know and love as offer, in musical terms, a conceptual supplement. To deal with the accompaniments first, Giovanni Antonini's period-instrument Il Giardino Armonico sport an unusually wide range of dynamics. Take the Fifth Concerto, its decisive opening chord followed by a shimmering *Allegro aperto*, kept tense and quiet aside from some dramatic interjections. The expected lack of vibrato and the tweaking of certain note values in *tutti* passages also arrest attention, such as the opening's second idea: this is swift, buoyant, trimly tailored playing, up and running from the off and with not so much as an ounce of excess weight to hold it back.

Isabelle Faust's first entry is spun silver, gently conspicuous by its chasteness and yet very much of a piece with her musical surroundings. These forces score highest in the exotic 'Turkish' episode of the Fifth's finale, Faust as deft as a dancing devil, Antonini and his band charging the atmosphere with pungent textures and fiery rhythms. It's good that they preceded the Concerto with the *Adagio*, K261, composed because Antonio Brunetti – Mozart's replacement as concertmaster in Salzburg (and a 'thoroughly ill-bred fellow' according to Mozart himself) – found the *Adagio* of the main work too 'artificial'.

Slow movements are given an unusual slant, occasionally in a way that maybe craves adjustment from the listener, especially the listener 'of a certain age'. The Third Concerto's *Adagio* opens to muted first violins which in this instance sound more like period woodwinds, a mellow blend of tones that paves the way for Faust's gleaming first solo entry. Another case in point is the *Andante* from the Fourth Concerto where, after the cadenza (here, as elsewhere, the innovative work of the period keyboard player Andreas Staier), Mozart writes a heart-stopping little coda: in essence, four repeated notes, then an upwards scale that climbs down, dips further and, as traditionally heard, rises back to the initial note on a heartfelt slide. Faust's way is not so much to drift upwards on ethereal wings as to take a notational elevator, then embellish the line. It's an interesting idea but as of the present I still have the likes of Ehnes, Mutter, Szeryng, Heifetz, Grumiaux, Martzy (especially beautiful) and others tugging at my heartstrings, imploring me to stay with

their warmer, more direct approach. Still, Faust's alternative is certainly food for thought.

Mention of Staier's cadenzas prompts me to quote his theories appertaining to the concertos' 'proximity of tone to Italian opera' (his own words), and the idea of opera recitative, which means that some of the cadenzas are unusually complex and/or long. The Third Concerto's first movement provides a striking place to sample. Listen to disc 1, track 8, from 6'49", a top-gear, Locatelli-style unaccompanied showpiece, at least initially, then wittily hesitant, and which come 7'59" summons the orchestra back for dual action. Modern scholarship suggests that the First Concerto predates the other four and listening to it again after a short break I can recognise its stylistic similarity to music from the late Baroque period. Of special note is the flowing, elegantly voiced *Adagio*, Faust's entry here among the most beautiful moments in the entire set. The Second Concerto's first movement is demonstrably operatic in style, true *concerto buffa*, the first movement full of fun, the *Andante* a dead ringer for a Mozart or even a Rossini aria, granted a shapely reading by Faust and her skilled accomplices, delicate and tonally varied.

So a remarkably refreshing collection, the sort that challenges previously held convictions, and a good thing that it does too. The recorded balance is excellent, keeping the soloist in focus while granting the orchestra plenty of presence.

Rob Cowan

