

Arts & Leisure

Section 2

RECORDING VIEW

Revealing
Mozart's
Brassiness

By NANCY RAABE

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE WHERE HORN PLAYERS — or Western civilization, for that matter — would be without Mozart. His four horn concertos form the core of the solo repertory for amateurs and professionals alike. Try as the touring soloist might to explore new domains, in the end all roads lead back to the venerable body of work Mozart wrote in the last decade of his life for the hornist and cheesemonger Joseph Ignaz Leutgeb.

As with any standard repertory, familiarity can breed complacency. So it takes someone like the brilliant young American horn player Eric Ruske to discover the subtle artistic means to reinvent this music. Mr. Ruske's new CD of the Mozart concertos and shorter works for horn and orchestra (Telarc CD-80367) forges not only a lively partnership with Charles Mackerras and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra but also a link with the composer's irrepressible humor, evident on the manuscript pages of several of these works as affectionate jokes directed at Leutgeb, an old friend.

Across the top of the Second Concerto (K. 417) he wrote, "Wolfgang Amadé Mozart has taken pity of Leitgeb [sic] — ass, ox and fool — in Vienna, 27 May 1783." Parts of the Fourth (K. 495), dating from 1786 and earmarked "for Leitgeb," are written in a festive combination of red, blue, green and black. And the Rondo of the First (K. 412) contains a run-

Some unbridled humor aimed at a friend marks the pages of four horn concertos.

ning commentary above the horn line bristling with ram-bunctious invective.

Mr. Ruske's approach, firmly positioned within the boundaries of balance, coherence and good taste that govern the Classical style, enchants by virtue of its confidence, imagination and ebullient virtuosity (although one listens in vain for the poetic soul that illuminated the English superstar Dennis Brain's Mozart). Tempos are brisk but never self-serving; Mr. Ruske's flowing pace in the Larghetto of the Third Concerto (K. 447), for instance, affords a warm lyricism that is difficult to obtain at the stodgier conventional calibration, and never has the exhilaration of the hunt been captured on disk with greater authenticity — valve horn notwithstanding — than in Mr. Ruske's romp through the work's finale.

Mr. Ruske's consummate attention to details of phrasing and articulation is concerned less with clarity for clarity's sake than with the music's communicative potential. Interestingly, he does not always strive for crispness and separation: in one telling episode in the Rondo of the Second, he brings out latent qualities of yearning and wistfulness through his unusual application of lyrical legato. And Mr. Mackerras astutely matches him step for step.

But it is in his original cadenzas that Mr. Ruske permits his impetuous free spirits their fullest expression. Although horn players tend to specialize in high or low register, he shows uncommon command of the instrument's full compass, nonchalantly skipping between high and low extremes in the cadenza of the Third, and concocting a dazzling technical tour de force in the cadenza to the Concert Rondo (K. 371).

Telarc's new release is noteworthy for its scholarship as well. The Concert Rondo, apparently the final movement of a concerto Mozart planned for Leutgeb in 1781 but never finished, is offered for the first time on disk in a completion by the English scholar John Humphries. The reconstruction incorporates four pages discovered only in 1989 and sets right what had always seemed an unbalanced structure.

For the First, Mr. Ruske uses Mr. Humphries's 1981 orchestration of Mozart's Rondo rather than a discredited completion by Mozart's pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr, long accepted as authentic. Mr. Humphries's orchestrations are richly textured and graced with imaginative touches.

Sharp ears may notice brief repeated passages in the Fourth — one in the slow movement, another in the Rondo — that are not found in the standard published editions. Mr. Humphries believes they were mistakenly omitted from an influential early printed source.

As valuable as the practice of reconstruction has been, at times it is better to leave well enough alone. Such is the case with the haunting 91-measure E-major fragment (K. Anh. 98a) that Mozart apparently intended as the opening of a formidable full-length concerto. Would that more hornists, Mr. Ruske included, took their cue from Barry Tuckwell's three recordings and let the horn line trail off into nothingness, as it does in the manuscript. An added orchestral and harmonic accompaniment only distracts the listener from contemplating what Lionel Salter, in notes to a Tuckwell recording, called "one of the saddest might-have-beens in music."

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