



**Mozart** Complete Keyboard Works  
**Bart van Oort, Ursula Dütschler** (pf)  
 Brilliant Classics 94198, 14 CDs, 890 minutes

In a recent essay on Mozart's keyboard works, W Dean Sutcliffe complains that 'the image of the sonatas seems stuck in a time warp'; more specifically, in the 19th century and its belief that Mozart's music embodies 'order, peace and contentment'. One reason why this notion persists is, he suggests, that today's pianists unwittingly bolster it, 'typically smoothing out articulative and dynamic indications' to make the music more amenable to the modern concert grand. The result is that whereas we now see other Mozart genres – his operas, symphonies, concertos, etc – as seedbeds of modernity, teeming with hints of personal and social turmoil, the piano sonatas are still perceived and played as exercises in 'insipid classicism' and 'lyrical sweetness'.

This tradition is, says Dean Sutcliffe, at last being challenged thanks to the rise of historically informed performance and, in particular, to the revival of the fortepiano as the keyboard of choice for playing Mozart (and Haydn and Beethoven); a practice initiated by pioneers such as Malcolm Bilson and Robert Levin. The Dutch pianist Bart van Oort, a former student of Bilson, has extended that challenge to the limits, giving us the most comprehensive set of Mozart's keyboard music currently on disc.

Between 1997 and 2005, Van Oort recorded all of the solo works – sonatas, variations, fantasies, dances, miscellaneous adagios, andantes, fugues and rondos (including juvenilia, fragments and transcriptions) – and, together with Ursula Dütschler, also recorded the pieces for four hands and two keyboards: 14 CDs of music, newly reissued in a budget-priced boxed set and all performed on fortepiano.

Van Oort plays the majority of the music on a copy of a Viennese Walter fortepiano from around 1795, perhaps a few years later than ideal (Mozart owned a circa 1780 Walter) but close enough to Mozart's lifetime to highlight the differences between his sound world and ours. Van Oort's essay *Performing Mozart* and Sylvia Berry's outline of *Mozart's*

*Keyboard Aesthetics* (both part of the extensive notes included on an accompanying CD-Rom) explore these differences in detail; they provide a fascinating account of the interlocking changes in keyboard technology, playing style and aesthetic taste that began to gather pace towards the close of the 18th century.

As these changes accelerated, performers often struggled to adapt earlier music to the demands of the latest instruments. To quote Van Oort, once transferred from the small (five-octave) Viennese fortepianos, with their light action, fast decay and clear articulation, to the larger, more powerful English pianos that superseded them, Mozart's 'highly complex' textures, 'a delicate balance between treble, inner voices and bass', were reduced to the 'melody with subdued accompaniment' that we still hear today.

Are he and Dean Sutcliffe overstating the case? Listening to these 14 discs has convinced me that a different keyboard not only alters the music's timbral palette but can also change its very character. It was disconcerting listening at first, the sound brittle and attenuated compared with the plush tones and cantabile style that the modern piano encourages. But as I immersed myself in this other sound world and grew accustomed to the transparent textures and delicate colours of the fortepiano, an intriguing new Mozartean music began to take shape: volatile, mercurial, urgent, intimate; lacking the polished suavity of later incarnations, perhaps, but freshly engaging and intensely alive.

It helps that Van Oort is a lively, sympathetic interpreter, cognisant of those aspects of performance that Mozart most admired: light, flowing touch; expression of feeling; eschewal of mechanistic virtuosity.

He is attuned to Mozart's deeper currents, too, delineating a gamut of emotions: from the grief-stricken A minor Sonata K310 to the ebullient D major Sonata for two keyboards K448; or from the flamboyant, operatic gestures of the

D minor Fantasy K397 to the searching introspection of the A minor Rondo K511. The four-hands pieces, in particular, are a joy, with Van Oort and Dütschler alert to Mozart's keen sense of fun in K358 and K381 before rising to the expansive grandeur of K497 and K521 (although they don't handle the latter's quirky Allegretto with quite the élan of George Malcolm and András Schiff).

I was curious that the CD notes make no mention of tuning systems, though it is now thought likely that Mozart employed an irregular 18th-century temperament. When I asked Van Oort about this, he confirmed he had opted for modern equal temperament, but added that, given a second chance, 'this is one of the things I would do differently'. He agreed that equal temperament had not helped his attempts to 'bring out the characteristics embedded in the harmonies and various keys the pieces go through', yet felt confident that neither had it prevented him 'from expressing what needed to be expressed'. He is an expressive player, although the use of equal temperament is clearly an anomaly in his efforts to approximate Mozart's sound world; it also means those harmonies and keys (and their Affekts) almost certainly sound less tangy than Mozart intended.

Mozart, of course, was a brilliant improviser, happy to embellish on the spur of the moment when playing live. So, I wondered, did Van Oort improvise his ornaments? In concert, yes, he replied; but not on these discs. 'I believe that for a recording my ornaments must be fully appropriate, expressive, stylish and perfectly executed': to improvise them while recording was, therefore, 'out of the question'. As a result, Van Oort's ornamentation sounds correct, but also comes across as more diffident and restrained than one imagines Mozart ever being; trying to blend in where Mozart, presumably, was intent on standing out.

This lack of improvisation and the use of equal temperament might be seen as further examples of the 'smoothing out' of the music, vestiges of the same 'insipid classicism' that Dean Sutcliffe deplored. Even so, this set remains a hugely impressive achievement that will afford the listener many pleasures. At the very least, Van Oort gives us a rare opportunity to reappraise how we listen to and think about Mozart's music; a chance to hear it, and love it, anew. GRAHAM LOCK

international  
**Piano**  
 CHOICE