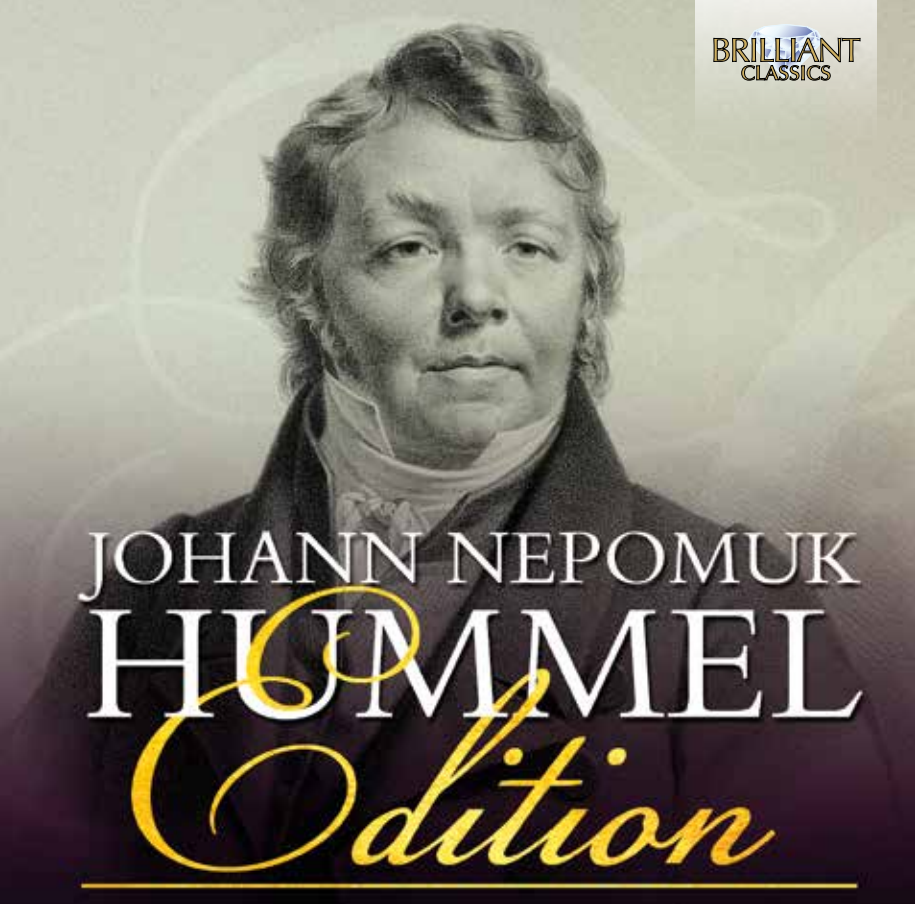


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BRILLIANT
CLASSICS

A portrait of Johann Nepomuk Hummel, a classical composer, shown from the chest up. He has light-colored, wavy hair and is wearing a dark coat over a white cravat. The background is a soft, light greenish-yellow with faint circular patterns.

JOHANN NEPOMUK
HUMMEL
Edition

Johann Nepomuk Hummel

Johann Nepomuk Hummel's musical CV is exemplary – pupil of Mozart, protégé of Haydn, friendly rival of Beethoven, renowned throughout Europe as one of the greatest pianists of his day, a sought-after teacher who instructed some of the most distinguished 19th-century virtuosi and, as author of a massive treatise on the art of pianism, influenced the playing of countless others and not least, composer of over three hundred works covering all musical genres (apart from the symphony). Yet until recently, his music (with the exception of the *Trumpet Concerto*) has been completely neglected and his life relegated to a footnote of musical history. Perhaps it was his status as 'the chief link between Mozart and Chopin' in Gerald Abrahams's words, and thus falling between the two stools of classicism and romanticism, that resulted in his being disregarded as a representative of neither. So this comprehensive and wide ranging collection of his music, drawn from all periods of his life, should do much to assist the recent re-evaluation of the life and work of an extraordinary musician.

He was born on 14 November 1778 in Pressburg (Bratislava) where his father Johannes was violinist in the court orchestra of Count Antal Grassalkovich. When he was very young, the Hummel family moved to Wartberg (Senec) where Johannes became music master at the Military Institute in the town and where Johann soon revealed an early talent both as a pianist and violinist. According to his (often unreliable) biographer Seidel, he decided to devote himself to the piano after being mocked by a boy as he played the violin in the street (he retaliated by smashing the instrument on his tormentor's head), although more prosaically, his choice was probably determined by a realisation that he was potentially a much better pianist than violinist. When the Wartberg Institute closed in 1786, Johannes moved to Vienna to work at the Freihaus Theater (also known as the Theater auf der Weiden) where a few years later Emanuel Schikaneder was to produce *The Magic Flute* (although since he did not assume control of the theatre until 1789 Johannes could not have been engaged by him personally as often stated). Sometime in 1787 he took his seven-year-old son to visit Mozart in the hope that he might become his teacher and despite Mozart's general reluctance to take on pupils, he agreed to do so free of charge, after hearing him play a piece by Bach (probably either JC or CPE) and sight reading one of Mozart's compositions. He insisted that the boy should come and live with him and for two years Hummel seems to have been treated as a member of the family, perhaps filling an emotional void in the lives of Wolfgang and Constanze (they had recently lost an infant boy also called Johann) – certainly after Hummel's death, Constanze, in a rather unseemly attempt

to get money from his widow, claimed he had been in effect her foster son. Apart from his formal lessons in composition and keyboard, the young Hummel would have gained unique and invaluable experience simply by his proximity to Mozart at a time he was producing his greatest works, copying out his music, playing for and with him in private and public and keeping company with the eminent musicians and composers who frequented the Mozart household (although whether he was present when the 18-year-old Beethoven made his brief visit in April 1788 is not known).

At the end of 1788, Mozart declared that nine-year-old Hummel was ready for the concert career that he himself had embarked upon at a slightly younger age. Whether this was a genuinely objective assessment of his pupil's capabilities or he simply no longer had the time or money to continue the free tuition is unknown. However when Mozart heard him perform in Dresden a few months later, playing a concerto (perhaps K503) and the K264 variations, he praised his keyboard technique as superior to his own reputedly telling him 'you will open up a new path for all those who hear you and who want to dedicate themselves to this instrument'. This came at the beginning of what was to be a five-year tour of central and northern Europe and Britain during which Hummel, accompanied by his father, visited more than 30 major cities. In 1790 they sailed from Denmark to Scotland, staying in Edinburgh for three months where, as well as performing, Hummel gave piano lessons (a precocious step for an 11-year old boy). In the autumn of that year, they travelled to London where Hummel proved as big a sensation as Mozart had been 26 years before and where he formed a relationship with Haydn who was also on his first visit to the city (it is possible they had met previously in Vienna as Haydn had been a frequent visitor to the Mozart household). The story of his performing a Haydn sonata at very short notice in March 1791 after the advertised pianist fell ill is probably apocryphal but he certainly played at a Salomon concert of Haydn's music in May of that year and in April 1792 performed the *A flat major Trio* (Hob.XV:14) with Salomon himself on violin, the first concert performance of the work and perhaps the first time any piano trio had been played in public. He became close to Haydn, addressing letters to him 'most beloved papa' and referring to him as his 'great father in music' and the older composer was to prove an invaluable source of support. When in London, he published his first works – the two sets of variations (Opp. 1 and 2) and the three Op.2a works including the Sonata in C, among the subscribers for which was a 'John Field of Bath aged 10' (although there is some doubt as to whether this was indeed the future pianist and composer). Plans to travel on through France and Spain were thwarted by the uncertain military situation in the wake of the French Revolution and the Hummels went to Holland instead, having a narrow escape when their boat was attacked by a French

privateer, before making their way to Vienna where father and son were reunited with Frau Hummel who apparently did not recognise young Johann after his five-year absence.

Back in Vienna, Hummel, who had become used to being the object of all attention wherever he went, discovered he was now one of many talented musicians jostling for position, the most formidable of which was the 23-year-old Beethoven who had returned to the city the previous year. On first hearing him play, Hummel apparently suffered a crisis of confidence, doubting his ability to 'walk in the footsteps of such a genius' but decided on the sensible course of avoiding being drawn into open competition with him (those who did usually regretted it) and resolving to remain true to himself and his own nature both as performer and composer (the symphony is the one major genre which he never attempted, possibly realising that he could never match Beethoven in this area). The supposed rivalry between them existed more in the minds of their respective partisans than in reality, although even the most dedicated supporters of Beethoven admitted that Hummel possessed a dazzlingly brilliant technique characterised by 'cleanness and elegance'. There was however occasionally genuine tension between the two men: Beethoven took the four-hand piano arrangement of the finale to *Fidelio* Hummel had made at his request and ripped it up in front of him, at once banishing him for ever as a 'lying dog' – although he made up with him the following day. While Hummel himself did not suffer fools gladly, whatever friction in their relationship was almost certainly due to Beethoven's irascible nature.

He followed Beethoven's example in studying counterpoint with Albrechtsberger and vocal composition with Salieri but does not seem to have received any formal instruction from Haydn, apart from some lessons on the organ (which Haydn in any case discouraged as potentially detrimental to his piano technique). During the ten years he spent in Vienna, he made few public appearances and concentrated on teaching, spending up to ten hours a day giving lessons and composing mainly at night, and as a result, produced very little at this time. In late 1803, his life changed radically when he was offered the post of Konzertmeister at the court of Prince Esterhazy, on the recommendation of Haydn, who was finally retiring after 42 years' service at Eisenstadt. Haydn's support must have been a crucial factor in Hummel's appointment since he had composed no substantial orchestral works and had no experience of sacred music, which he would be expected to produce on a regular basis. However things did not turn out as Haydn might have hoped for his protégé. Hummel was as temperamentally unsuited to playing the role of liveried court servant at Eisenstadt as Mozart had been at Salzburg: having been used to working independently, he found it difficult to fit into the court regime or observe its rigid protocols, and a lack of refinement in his general behaviour led to his being considered 'boorish'.

On his part he was certainly guilty of high-handed and uncooperative behaviour towards his colleagues, particularly the Vice-Kapellmeister Fuchs with whom he maintained a running feud, and made no secret of the fact that he considered the Prince to lack musical taste. A particular point of friction with his employer was the amount of time he spent composing for the Viennese stage and writing dance music for the Apollo Saal where his father was musical director, to the neglect of more mundane duties such as rehearsing the court choir and orchestra. The unsatisfactory reception of Beethoven's Mass in C performed at Eisenstadt in 1807 under Hummel's direction was partly the result of inadequate preparation, and Beethoven was probably more angered by Hummel's negligence in this respect as at his reportedly amused reaction to the Prince's incomprehension of the work. Things came to a head after a disastrously under-rehearsed performance on Christmas Eve 1808 which led to Hummel's summary dismissal the following day. Although he was reinstated, probably through Haydn's intercession, things did not improve and he was sacked once again, this time irrevocably in May 1811. In a sour postlude, Hummel was accused of stealing a prized set of manuscripts of Haydn's canons from the Prince's collection and arranging their publication: the Prince threatened legal action, Hummel protested his innocence, and the matter, although never resolved, was eventually dropped (in Hummel's defence the most likely explanation is that the publishers had got hold of an unauthorised copy made during Haydn's lifetime). However unsatisfactory his eight years at Eisenstadt may have been professionally, they were very productive, with all his sacred music, the Sonatas Opp. 13, 20 and 25, the Op.17 piano concerto and several dramatic works (including *Mathilde von Guise*) composed during this period.

Faced with a renewed need to earn money, Hummel resumed teaching but made no attempt at this stage to return to the concert platform. In 1813 he married the singer Elizabeth Röckel (whose brother had sung Florestan in *Fidelio*) and there is a suggestion that Hummel had in fact 'snatched her' from Beethoven. The true extent of Beethoven's interest in her is unknown (he was frequently and indiscriminately in love at this period of his life) but his deathbed request to see her again perhaps suggests some genuine feelings on his part. Despite any amorous rivalry between them, Hummel was invited to take part in the star-studded orchestra that performed Beethoven's *Wellington's Victory* in December 1813 – he played the bass drum (representing cannon fire) under the direction of Salieri and conducted the percussion section himself at the repeat performance the following year during the Congress of Vienna. This gathering of dignitaries from all over Europe gave Hummel an ideal opportunity to display his virtuoso skills: he resumed his concert career which had been in abeyance since his youthful grand tour and over the next few years performed, often

in the company of his wife, in Vienna and abroad to great acclaim. However a desire for financial security prompted him to seek permanent employment once more and he applied for the post of Kapellmeister at the Württemberg court (which he had failed to get in 1803). His exacting terms, including a fee of 2000 florins – almost twice what he had been paid by Prince Esterhazy – and two months off between October and March for concert tours, were accepted and he took up the post in October 1816. History however repeated itself and his experience at Stuttgart was if anything worse than his time at Eisenstadt. The theatre director Baron von Wächter made his professional life and that of his wife impossible and after three miserable years he resigned his position unilaterally (with the result that he had trouble getting paid for his final months' work there).

Undeterred by these negative experiences of courtly employment, he sought another Kapellmeistership, this time at Weimar, renowned for its cultured atmosphere and high musical standards. Goethe who was at the time in charge of the court theatre apparently favoured Weber but Hummel's application was supported by Maria Pavlovna, sister of Tsar Alexander and wife of Charles Frederick, son of the duke of Weimar. As an accomplished pianist herself she wished the position to be filled by a virtuoso and she duly became the most socially eminent of the many pupils Hummel taught in his Weimar years, which included the future virtuosos Hiller, Henselt and Thalberg. He was now one of the most sought after teachers in Europe, commanding extremely high fees which were beyond the means of his former Eisenstadt colleague Adam Liszt, who had hoped Hummel might teach his young son Franz (he went to Czerny instead). Even Schumann considered deserting Friedrich Wieck to study with him but thought better of it. His principal professional duties at Weimar consisted of directing performances at the court theatre where he conducted old favourites by Mozart, new works by Spohr, Meyerbeer, Weber and Bellini and a reworking of his own *Mathilde von Guise*. Based on a French *opéra comique*, its plot centres on the love triangle involving the eponymous sister of the Duke of Guise, his secretary Beaufort whose low status prevented his marriage to Mathilde and La Baronne who is encouraged by the Duke to pursue Beaufort (with a *Figaro*-esque subplot concerning the relationship between the Duke's valet Valentin and his fiancée Claudine), the situation finally being resolved when the King of France ennobles Beaufort thus making him an acceptable husband.

Hummel had ensured that his contract at Weimar specified three months of annual leave so that he could undertake foreign tours and he became the first virtuoso to build a career as a regularly touring artist, visiting Germany where he met and possibly gave a few lessons to Mendelssohn

(1821), Russia (1822), Holland and Belgium (1823), Paris (1825 and 1829), Poland where he met Chopin (1828) and England (1830, 1831 and 1833). As well as making him one of the most famous musicians in Europe, his frequent foreign trips brought his music, which he was now producing in great quantities, to an international public and stimulated sales of printed copies, with some new works tailored specifically for the locations he visited (e.g. *Le Retour à Londres* of 1831). Unlike Beethoven, Hummel enjoyed good relations with all his publishers in the major European markets and worked with them to ensure the simultaneous international issue of new works to prevent piracy. He was one of the first creative artists to promote universal copyright protection for artistic works, seeking to replace the chaotic lack of regulation in Germany and Austria with the protections afforded in France and Britain, for which he enlisted the crucial support of Beethoven when he visited him in March 1827 a few days before his death. The two men had not met for over ten years but any past differences were forgotten in a touching reconciliation, Hummel bursting into tears at the sight of the obviously dying Beethoven, Elizabeth wiping the perspiration from his brow with her handkerchief. Hummel was one of the pallbearers at Beethoven's funeral, throwing three laurel wreaths into the grave, and a few days later he fulfilled a deathbed promise to Beethoven to take his place at a charity concert, at which he improvised movingly on the 'Prisoners' Chorus' from *Fidelio* and the Allegretto of the Seventh Symphony. Schindler's allegation that he had tried to get out of playing and had to be cajoled into doing so by his wife is possibly true, but the reasons for his reluctance remain obscure. When not fulfilling his duties at Weimar or engaged in foreign tours, Hummel spent the first five years of the 1820s in the creation of his monumental three-volume treatise *The Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instruction on Playing the Pianoforte from the First Elementary Instruction to a Complete Education*. At almost 500 pages with over 2000 musical examples – Schumann jokingly referred to it as a 'monstrous machine' whose weight no music desk could bear – it was beyond the scope and financial means of the average student, but its analysis of technical and interpretative aspects of pianism was to prove immensely influential. By the early 1830s however there were signs that Hummel's own formidable technique was on the wane and the man who, as Goethe said, treated the piano 'as Napoleon treated the world' began to show signs of fallibility. His famously fluent and 'pearly' style was no longer to the taste of a public craving the emotional intensity of performers such as Liszt and Paganini, and his once universally popular music suddenly came to be seen as old fashioned and after his death in October 1837 quickly disappeared from the repertoire until its recent and welcome rediscovery.

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