

Franz Ignaz  
**BECK**

# Symphonies

Op. 4, Nos. 4–6 • Op. 3, No. 5

Czech Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra Pardubice  
Marek Štilec



## Franz Ignaz Beck (1734–1809) Symphonies: Op. 4, Nos 4–6 • Op. 3, No. 5

When Franz Beck composed his first symphonies – sometime around the mid 1750s – the genre was in its infancy but it was by no means primitive. The most famous exponent of the symphony, Beck’s teacher Johann Stamitz, Director of the celebrated Mannheim court orchestra, had not only raised it to new levels of technical sophistication but, together with a number of his gifted colleagues, had also evolved a new and distinctive style of writing for orchestra. Stamitz’s symphonies were immensely popular, particularly in France. They circulated in both printed editions and in manuscript parts exerting a profound if localized influence on the development of the symphony. The presence of Stamitz, Richter, Holzbauer, Filtz and others at the Mannheim court created a unique musical environment that must have been intoxicating to a young and ambitious composer such as Beck.

Beck began his musical studies with his father, Johann Aloys, Rektor of the Choral School at the Palatinate Court in Mannheim. He studied violin, double bass and organ, among other instruments, and displayed such impressive talents that the Elector Carl Theodor undertook responsibility for his education. If the account of Beck’s pupil Blanchard is to be believed, the young musician had to flee Mannheim after fighting a duel with a jealous rival and believing that he had killed the man. Many years later, the story goes, he learned that he had been the victim of a hoax: his opponent had only feigned death. This version of events is not universally accepted and it has also been claimed that Beck left Mannheim in rather less sensational fashion in order to study with Baldassare Galuppi in Venice. Whatever the circumstances of his departure, Beck certainly did live in Venice for several years for it was from there that he eloped to Naples with Anna Oniga, his employer’s daughter. After his eventful sojourn in Italy Beck moved to Marseille and became leader of a theatre orchestra. Although the date of his arrival in France is uncertain, he must have been well-known by reputation at least by the late 1750s since four sets of symphonies were published in rapid succession by Parisian firms beginning in 1758 with the six Op. 1 symphonies (*Sei Overture*) on the title page of which Beck is described as “Chamber Virtuoso to the Elector Palatine

and pupil of Johann Stamitz.” By the time the Op. 3 symphonies appeared (1762) Beck’s publisher Venier no longer felt it was necessary to link his name with Stamitz; he does, however, retain Beck’s court position at Mannheim and adds that he is “first violin of the Concert in Marseille”.

Beck moved from Marseille to Bordeaux where he was appointed conductor of the Grand Théâtre. His theatre duties were combined with composing and teaching. Among his most prominent pupils were Pierre Gaveaux, Blanchard and Boscha. In October 1774 he was appointed organist at St Seurin, Bordeaux, where his improvisations were widely admired. Among the most important works of the pre-Revolutionary period is the magnificent *Stabat mater* which was given its first performance at Versailles. Like a number of other prominent composers Beck appears to have had little difficulty adjusting to the new regime and produced a substantial number of patriotic works including a *Hymne à l’être suprême*. In 1803 he was appointed correspondent of music composition for the Institute of France.

Beck’s symphonies have long been regarded as among the most striking works of their kind from the mid-eighteenth century. Their quality makes it all the more puzzling that Beck apparently lost interest in the genre as early as c. 1766. Had he brought his formidable talents to bear on the symphony for another twenty years or so he might have left a body of work equal in stature to that of Wanzhal or Kraus. Even the earliest of his symphonies are remarkable for their dramatic flair, rich harmonic language and fluid, inventive part writing.

No more than four years separate the publication of Beck’s Op. 3 symphonies from the *Sei Overture, Op. 1*, but the works are significantly broader in scope and more advanced in terms of their compositional technique. Although they still share many common stylistic features with the symphonies of Stamitz and Richter, a new and distinctive voice can be heard in these works particularly in the use of exposed writing for the winds in several of the symphonies. Beck was to explore this technique more fully in his final set of symphonies – *Six Sinfonies à plusieurs Instruments, Op. 4* (La Chevardière, 1766) – all of which include pairs of oboes and horns in the instrumentation.

The most obvious point of difference between the symphonies of Opp. 3 and 4 and those of Opp. 1 and 2 is the adoption in the majority of them of the four-movement ground plan. Although the four-movement symphony was already becoming increasingly common in the 1750s, many composers, both in Mannheim and elsewhere, continued to favour the traditional three-movement pattern. Beck's inclusion of the Minuet is an interesting development but one that is open to different interpretations. Since he must have been well aware of the existence of four-movement symphonies from his years in Mannheim (Stamitz composed many symphonies of this type), it might be more relevant to consider why the earlier works were composed in three movements rather than four. One possible explanation is that these symphonies reflect Beck's recent experiences in Italy where the three-movement symphony reigned supreme; those of Opp. 3 and 4, however, were composed predominantly for audiences for whom four-movement symphonies were becoming the norm.

Although the inclusion of the Minuet increases the length of the work and materially changes its dramatic flow, it does not necessarily follow that four-movement symphonies are automatically more sophisticated works than their three-movement counterparts; that quality is determined by the internal organization and musical interest of each individual movement. One of the most important structural characteristics of Opp. 3 and 4 is Beck's avoidance of internal repeats in all of the first movements and, in Op. 3, all of the remaining movements bar the pairs of Minuets. Although these movements unfold as a continuous whole, major internal divisions are demarcated by changes in tonality and the use of contrasting thematic material. It is quite clear where the middle section of the movement begins since Beck launches it in the conventional manner with a statement of the opening theme in the dominant: what is surprising to the listener familiar with the symphonies of Beck's Viennese contemporaries is the treatment of the final section of the movement. In Op. 3, the opening theme does not reappear in the tonic to signal the beginning of the recapitulation. There is no 'double return' – the reappearance of both thematic groups in the tonic in the last part of the movement that constitutes one of the hallmarks of the mature classical style – but Beck's musical thinking is anything but primitive. Some distinctive thematic material

returns in the tonic but much of the second half of the movement represents a kind of exploration of the musical consequences of the tightly organized first half. The Op. 4 symphonies are more orthodox in some respects than their immediate predecessors. Beck continues to avoid the internal repeat in the first movement but there is a growing emphasis upon the 'double return' even in Op. 4, No. 1 which has a 'mirror' recapitulation that sees the opening theme return at the very end of the movement. This device is often encountered in symphonies of composers who worked at the Mannheim court.

Contrast and drama are essential elements in Beck's symphonic style. He favours the use of strongly contrasted thematic material particularly in the outer movements. The first movements of all of the Opp. 3 and 4 symphonies have a breadth and sweep about them that immediately grips the listener. Beck achieves this in part through his skilful handling of the orchestra but mainly by virtue of the strong harmonic direction of the music and his capacity for writing rhythmically vital themes. In the Op. 4 symphonies the secondary theme is typically entrusted to the wind instruments with a delicately scored accompaniment in the strings. These gentle, thinly scored and harmonically simple ideas are generally followed by further vigorous outbursts from the full orchestra. These are characterized by the use of tremolo upper strings or rushing figures in the violins, driving bass lines, harmonic filling from the horns and frequent use of chromatic inflections to enrich the tonal palette. Slow movements provide contrast rather than repose. Like their counterparts in Beck's earlier symphonies, these movements frequently feature intricate webs of interlocking string parts, employment of startling harmonic progressions and occasional use of unsettling rhythmic disruptions. The seriousness of expressive purpose encountered in these movements, perhaps more than in the others, is a tribute to Richter's influence on Beck's development as a composer. The last of the Op. 4 set remarkably includes the wind instruments in the slow movement. This is a very progressive idea and one that only slowly gained acceptance in the following decade.

Like Richter, Beck makes frequent use of sequential patterns built around the contrapuntal interplay of voices. There is a good deal of imitative writing in the symphonies but little or nothing in the way of strict counterpoint. The

rhythmic independence of the voices serves both to animate the texture and to provide another level of contrast. In this it is analogous to Beck's handling of the orchestra in which he makes frequent use of antiphonal effects between the wind choir and the strings. This is also encountered on the structural level in the Minuet movements where Minuet II (the 'Trio') often has its thematic material assigned to the

winds with the strings relegated to a simple accompanying role.

The symphonies of Opp. 3 and 4 display a rare level of compositional finish and an expressive intensity that elevates them above all but the finest symphonies of their time.

**Allan Badley**

*The orchestral parts and scores of the following works are available from:*

**www.artaria.com**

*Sources*

The sources upon which the editions used in this recording have been made are:

**Sinfonia in D major, Op. 4 No. 4** (Callen 22)  
Edited by Allan Badley - Artaria Editions AE229  
Oxford, Bodleian Library (La Chevardière, 1766)

**Sinfonia in G major, Op. 4 No. 5** (Callen 23)  
Edited by Allan Badley - Artaria Editions AE230  
Oxford, Bodleian Library (La Chevardière, 1766)

**Sinfonia in E flat major, Op. 4 No. 6** (Callen 24)  
Edited by Allan Badley - Artaria Editions AE231  
Oxford, Bodleian Library (La Chevardière, 1766)

**Sinfonia in D minor, Op. 3 No. 5** (Callen 17)  
Edited by Allan Badley - Artaria Editions AE187  
Oxford, Bodleian Library (Venier, 1762)





### **Marek Štílec**

Marek Štílec was born in Prague in 1985 and began his studies at the Prague Conservatoire in the violin class of Dana Vlachová. He studied conducting with Leoš Svárovský, graduating from the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. He works regularly with a number of orchestras, including the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra, Czech National Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of the Swan, Prague Symphony Orchestra, Prague Chamber Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, Czech Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra Pardubice, Kammerphilharmonie Graz, the Berlin Camerata and the Ulster Orchestra. He founded the Chamber Orchestra Quattro with which he has given dozens of concerts and has made a number of internationally successful recordings. He works with Czech Television and Czech Radio and his recordings have also been broadcast by the BBC. In March 2010 he undertook a study visit with the San Francisco Symphony and in January 2014 he conducted the New World Symphony under the mentorship of Michael Tilson Thomas. He has attended the Leonid Grin master-class at the Neeme Järvi Academy for Conductors, and has also taken part in master-classes with Jorma Panula, Vladimir Kiradijev, Gerd Albrecht and Achim Holub.

*Photo: Ondřej Klíma*

### **Czech Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra Pardubice**

The Czech Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra Pardubice has been a leading orchestra ever since its beginnings in 1969. Its high artistic standard was set by its first principal conductor, Libor Pešek, whose successors and guest conductors have continued to contribute to its development, among them Josef Vlach, Petr Altrichter, Leoš Svárovský, Peter Feranec and Douglas Bostock. The orchestra specialises in classical and contemporary music, but its programmes also present works of the romantic period and stylistically informed interpretations of Baroque music. The orchestra has visited a number of European countries, the United States and Japan, playing in prestigious halls such as the Vienna Musikverein, Salzburg Festspielhaus, both halls in Munich, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Tonhalle in Zurich. At home it gives its subscription concerts in Pardubice and regularly plays in Prague and other places in the Czech Republic and at prestigious festivals. It has recorded dozens of LPs and CDs.



*Photo: František Renza*

The court at Mannheim, one of Europe's great eighteenth-century musical centres, provided myriad opportunities for creative development. Having absorbed the ideas of his teacher, Johann Stamitz, and of other luminaries, Beck wrote a series of symphonies notable for their dramatic contrasts, breadth and sweep, the progressive inclusion of woodwinds and a willingness to explore expressive intensity. Further Beck Symphonies may be heard on Naxos 8.553790, 8.554071, 8.570799 and 8.573248.



**Franz Ignaz  
BECK**  
(1734–1809)

<b>Sinfonia in D major, Op. 4, No. 4 (Callen 22)</b>		<b>12:40</b>	<b>Sinfonia in E flat major, Op. 4, No. 6 (Callen 24)</b>		<b>16:24</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Allegro maestoso</b>	<b>5:31</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Allegro moderato</b>	<b>4:04</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Andante</b>	<b>4:41</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>Adagio</b>	<b>4:15</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Presto</b>	<b>2:24</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Minuetto</b>	<b>4:06</b>
<b>Sinfonia in G major, Op. 4, No. 5 (Callen 23)</b>		<b>17:58</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Presto</b>	<b>3:52</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Allegro con brio</b>	<b>5:05</b>	<b>Sinfonia in D minor, Op. 3, No. 5 (Callen 17)</b>		<b>19:35</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Largo con sordini</b>	<b>5:44</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Allegro moderato</b>	<b>6:40</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Minuetto I, II</b>	<b>3:26</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>Andantino</b>	<b>4:23</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Presto</b>	<b>3:34</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Minuetto I – Grazioso, Minuetto II</b>	<b>3:31</b>
			<b>15</b>	<b>Presto</b>	<b>4:53</b>

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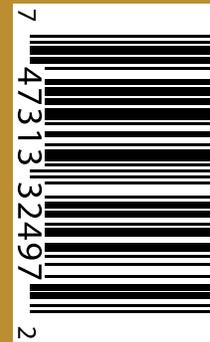
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Playing Time  
66:57



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