

HE'S NOT BEETHOVEN, AND THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT

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It's almost alarming to hear the music leap off the disc, self-confident and strong: a little Haydnesque, a little Schubertian and, yes, a little Beethovenian but with a character of its own. Who is this guy?

Look up Johann Wilhelm Wilms in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, and you will find two scant paragraphs and a bibliography of two items (one being an entry from another encyclopedia).

There is not even a partial list of works.

Wilms, you will learn, was born near Solingen, Germany, in 1772 and died in Amsterdam in 1847. So he was a near contemporary of Beethoven, a circumstance that amounts, in music histories, to living on the far side of the moon.

In those days, being "one of the most important musicians in the Netherlands," as Grove calls Wilms, got you only so far. (He moved to Amsterdam in 1791, though you won't learn that from Grove.) He wrapped up his career as organist at the United Baptist Church in Amsterdam.

Wilms wrote "the semi-official Dutch hymn of the 19th century," "Wien Neerlandsch Bloed" ("Whose Dutch Blood") — and oh, yes, "The Battle of Waterloo," undoubtedly close kin to Beethoven's potboiler "battle symphony," "Wellington's Victory." For the rest, Wilms wrote works "in an 18th-century style, although some early Romantic traits appear." They include a Symphony in D minor, written in 1823, a year before Beethoven's D minor, the mighty Ninth, appeared.

And that's pretty much it for Grove.

Now listen to the first recording of that Sixth Symphony by Wilms along with his Seventh (and last), in C minor, performed by Werner Ehrhardt and Concerto Köln on Deutsche Grammophon Archiv, and you will know much more than the dictionary does. An ebullient and engaging musical personality springs to life.

Any unfamiliar music has to rely on the commitment and skills of its performers to put it across. And on those counts, Mr. Ehrhardt and company, a central force in the vital early-music scene in Cologne, Germany, score high.

Wilms was not Beethoven, one feels compelled to add. But so what? Shouldn't our orchestras be looking for more really good pieces to play rather than snoozing over a few great ones? And might there be other similarly worthy composers who worked squarely in the shadow of Beethoven, a black hole if ever there was one?