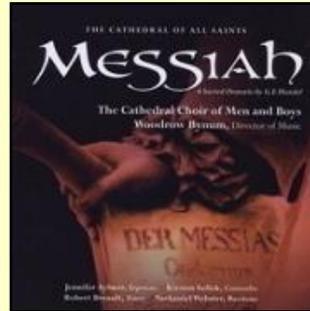


Bach: Complete Partitas, BWV 825-830
Peter Sykes, Harpsichord
Centaur Records

Peter Sykes, longtime harpsichord recitalist and current chair of the historical performance department at Boston University, lends his years of scholarly study and the flexibility of his well-honed keyboard technique to an outstanding account of Johann Sebastian Bach's Six Partitas, BWV 825-830. That technique includes a fine feeling for Bach's rhythmic and contrapuntal complexities, which become more marked as we move through the set.

In fact, the most striking characteristic of the Partitas is their stunning diversity. As opposed to Bach's first efforts in the keyboard suite genre, the so-called "English" Suites of 1715-1720, there is no trace of cookie-cutter uniformity here. Bach worked on the six Partitas over a number of years, bringing them out for publication singly between 1726 and 1730, before collecting them as a set in 1731. As a result, his thoughts on the possibilities of the genre gradually evolved, and his writing became more chromatic, his rhythms more dotted and inclined to daring syncopations and rhythmic suspensions – all in the interest of greater persuasiveness and emotional expression.

The first two Partitas, BWV 825 and 826, are the most conventional, and generations of listeners have found them the most pleasing as well as the best-behaved in the way they deliver the goods. Even so, they aren't *perfectly* conventional: in the former, the concluding *Giga*, or *Gigue* (that is, jig) in duple time, involving a great deal of hand-crossing and generating lots of fun with its perpetual motion, got to be something of a "favorite hit" in Bach's lifetime. And the *Courante* in Partita 2 is more earnestly serious, even agitated, than we generally encounter in the swiftly flowing old French country dance. By the time we get to Partita 3, BWV 827, the diversity becomes more pronounced: the *Sarabande*, normally a slow dance with well-sculpted rhythms and pregnant pauses, acquires a march-like character that is not like a proper *Sarabande* at all. In place of the



Handel: Messiah (Complete)
Woodrow Bynum, Albany, NY Cathedral
Choir of Men and Boys
© 2010 The Friends of the Choir of the Cathedral of
All Saints, Inc.
Swelk Records

This complete recording of Handel's *Messiah* commends itself by the charm and delicacy of phrasing and the vocal timbres these singers employ under the inspired direction of Woodrow Bynum, director of music of the (Episcopal) Cathedral of All Saints, Albany, NY. There is no indication of the exact edition of *Messiah* that Bynum employs, though for sure this is a modern "authentic" version, representing the hard-won victory of smaller choruses and Baroque style instruments over the monumental forces that once were the norm, so that today it is possible to read with amusement the inveighing of *The Register* (London, 1908) against "trumpety little church choirs of twenty voices of so" that had the effrontery to attempt Handel's sacred oratorio.

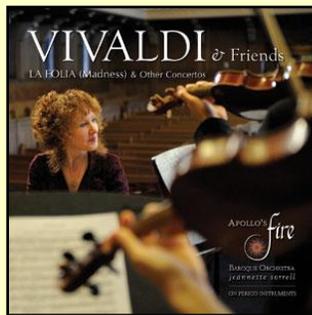
The Cathedral Choir of Men and Boys, heard in this recording, is actually 24 strong, consisting of equal numbers of boy trebles and mature men's voices. Founded in 1872, it is the oldest continuously performing choir of its kind in this country. I find the purity of the boys' voices very easy to listen to, as they can reach their higher ranges without the applications of vibrato necessary for mature women. The softer sound of the Baroque instruments in the 13-member ensemble, especially those of the strings and oboes, means that the singers can make their points more naturally and without undue strain. Bynum generally prefers moderate tempi that flow along with a wonderful freedom of movement.

The four solo vocalists are generally commendable (in particular, their diction is so exceptional one doesn't have to follow this *Messiah* with booklet in hand in order to comprehend the texts). They are as follows: soprano Jennifer Aylmer, contralto Kirsten Solleck, tenor Robert Breault, and baritone Nathaniel Webster. All are in good voice, which is a decided plus as the recorded sound is slightly on the dry side. The assignment of roles (which

“galante” dances such as Minuet or Gavotte that would normally have followed the Sarabande and provided pleasant relief from its seriousness, we have two forms of musical jesting that we can infer from their Italian names, *Burlesca* and *Scherzo* (that is, a burlesque, i.e., exaggeration or caricature, and a joke). And the explosive energy of the relentlessly fugal Gigue rules it out as a dance form, even if your name is Gene Kelly!

If the Allemande in Partita 2 was agitated, the one in Partita 4 is uncharacteristically probing and spiritual; in fact, it contends for pride of place with the equally soulful and searching Sarabande, with which it shares a spiritual kinship, contrary to the way an Allemande usually behaved. Each of the Partitas opens with a different musical form; in 4, it is a stately, affirmative French Overture, while in the spirited Partita 5 it is a “Preambulum,” a high-speed improvisational piece with scales and arpeggios running in both directions.

The final Partita 6 is the boldest of all, and Sykes takes his time traversing its strange beauties and intricacies (41:55, to be exact). It begins with an improvisatory-sounding Toccata with a three-voice fugue that reaches a point of almost unbearable intensity before it is resolved. In Sykes interpretation, it is by far the longest (11:21) of all the opening movements, and the one most subject to intricate exploration that pays off handsomely. In terms of expressive power, it sails into uncharted waters far beyond the seven keyboard toccatas from earlier in Bach’s career. The Corrente, with its jazzy syncopations over a walking bass, the far-ranging Sarabande that harkens back to the mood of the Toccata, and an overpowering Gigue that plays more like a caprice than a dance form, all require, and receive, the utmost in informed nimbleness from Sykes’ artistry.



“Vivaldi & Friends,” *La Folia* and other concertos by Vivaldi, Bach, Duchiffre
Jeannette Sorrell, Apollo’s Fire
Avie Records

Few recordings have ever done a better job capturing the spirit of Antonio Vivaldi than this one. For the way in which the Vivaldi style influenced the greatest composer of the day, to say nothing of the sheer excitement of these performances by Jeannette Sorrell and her fellow members of Apollo’s Fire, this well-packed CD is well worth adding to your listening library.

Handel himself continually tinkered with, re-writing arias and recitatives to accommodate the singers he had at his disposal) is pretty standard for this late in history. For example, Aylmer’s light, gracious soprano seems ideally suited to the arias expressing elation and joyous rapture traditionally associated with it, such as those dealing with the holy birth and the adoration of the shepherds, culminating with a splendid rendition of “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion.” Solleck lends dignity and a firm presence to the prophetic numbers traditionally assigned to the contralto such as “Who may abide the day of his coming?” and “O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion.” Both women give a good account of themselves in the fluid soprano/contralto number “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd.” Breaking somewhat with tradition, Aylmer is assigned the aria “I know that my Redeemer liveth” in Part Three, traditionally described as the Easter portion of the *Messiah*.

Which brings us to the layout of the oratorio itself, which Handel’s librettist Charles Jennens described as follows: Part I: Isaiah’s prophesy of salvation, the coming judgment, the prophesy of Christ’s birth, the annunciation to the shepherds, Christ’s healing and redemption; Part II: Christ’s Passion, Death and Resurrection, Ascension, and reception in Heaven; beginnings of Gospel preaching, the world’s rejection of the Gospel, and God’s ultimate victory; Part III: The promise of eternal life, Day of Judgment, conquest of sin, and acclamation of the Messiah. Breault does a respectable job with those narrative and dramatic numbers traditionally associated with the tenor voice, such as “Comfort ye, my people” and “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.” Likewise, Webster distinguishes himself in such bass arias as “Why do the nations so furiously rage together?” and “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The last named might serve as a metaphor for the present recording of *Messiah*, because of the steady illumination it sheds on Handel’s purpose.



A Treasury of German Baroque Music
The Hanoverian Ensemble
MSR Classics

“A Treasury,” indeed! This engaging program by the Hanoverian Ensemble gives us a glimpse into what an actual concert might have been like in Baroque-era Germany. It was music from which its contemporaries derived pleasure and relaxation, without going so far as

"*La Folia*" (Madness) is Sorrell's own arrangement as a concerto grosso ("So that all of us could join in the fray") of Vivaldi's original trio sonata of that name. Originally a Portuguese dance in which the participants would dance themselves into a state of frenzy, *La Folia* benefits from the performance it receives here, as the players capture its broad emotional range from smoldering passion to full-blown fire.

We get to savor the music of Vivaldi's Concerto in B minor, Op. 10, No. 3 for Four Violins twice, first in Vivaldi's original form, and then in J. S. Bach's sage transcription in A minor for Four Harpsichords. In both, there is so much interplay among the four soloists (actually five, if you count a cello with soloist ambitions) and the supporting string ensemble that you can actually get rather giddy following it all. Certainly, there is nothing else in music to quite match this listening experience!

Vivaldi's familiar "Summer" (*L'Estate*) from The Four Seasons surfaces again, but in different guise, in Sorrell's arrangement for her own instrument, the harpsichord, of Vivaldi's original solo violin. The bold dynamic range, from drowsy somnolence to the feverish intensity of a sudden cloudburst, depicts that torrid season of the year which has, understandably, gathered the fewest bouquets from Italian poets.

The Concerto in G minor for Two Cellos, RV531, shows Vivaldi at his moodiest, in a work in which the interval of an augmented second in the opening movement reveals the sensuous influence of middle eastern music, reminding us of Venice's position at the crossroads of east and west. Dark sonorities in the cellos contrast very effectively with lighter, more lyrical passages in the ensemble violins in this performance, as the roles of soloists and *tutti* are often reversed.

Finally, René Schiffer (b.1961), principal cellist of Apollo's Fire, writing under the pseudonym "René Duchiffre," performs a solo role in his own original Concerto in D minor for Two Violas da Gamba, assisted by fellow gambist Ann Marie Morgan. His avowed purpose is to show that the composers of the Baroque missed the boat by always relegating the lowly gamba, slower and of more limited range than the modern cello, to a supporting role. Employing chords and double-stops to augment the gamba's expressive power, Duchiffre makes his case in the form of a concerto that might well have passed for an original by Vivaldi himself. "Passed," that is, until we get to the final movement, a darkly passionate and rhythmically stunning Tango that post-dates the Italian composer by two centuries- though Vivaldi might well have developed this daring dance in a similar way, if only he'd known of it!

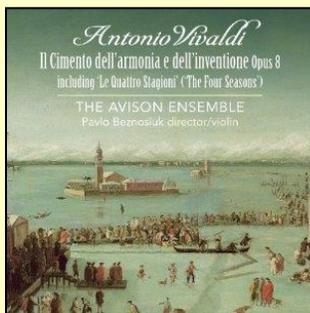
to evoke our modern notion of "easy listening," which it was certainly not. Instead, it provided an ample measure of both mental stimulation and refreshment, which may go a long way toward explaining why it seems so satisfying when we encounter it today.

We meet seven composers here. Besides Johann Sebastian Bach, we have the chance to get acquainted with Dieterich Buxtehude, Johann Friedrich Fasch, Vincent Lübeck, Johann Pachelbel, Johann Joachim Quantz, and Georg Philipp Telemann, most of whom overlapped and influenced one another.

That musical culture is recreated here by a small number of musicians performing on period instruments: John Solum on transverse flute, Nina Stern on recorder, Richard Wynton on both transverse flute and recorder, Arthur Fiacco on cello, and Kent Tritle on organ and harpsichord. These dedicated musicians communicate to us the joy of making music in a program that interleaves delectable duets and trio sonatas for combinations of flutes and recorder with organ works by Buxtehude, Pachelbel, Lübeck and Bach in a way that provokes the intense stimulation and the soothing refreshment we discussed earlier. The duets for 2 transverse flutes by Quantz and Telemann, in particular, seem to invoke musical images of birdsongs and shaded groves. When we encounter the marking *Affettuoso* in any of these works, expect music of exalted beauty!

It is also a pleasure to hear Pachelbel in something other than the famous Canon & Gigue that may have led many listeners to imagine him as little more than a one-trick pony. Here, we have a Fantasia in D minor and an Arietta with Variations in F major, the one a fairly free-form type of composition, the other conformable to certain rules and conventions, and both informed with Pachelbel's creative imagination.

The one Bach selection on the program, the chorale prelude *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* (By the Waters of Babylon) sounds irresistible in Tritle's performance on the instrument used here, the Paul Fritts Organ (2002) at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY. A modern tracker organ designed along Baroque lines and tuned to a temperament known as "Kellner," similar to what Bach himself used, it includes a manual step action and three bellows fitted with pedals for foot pumping. This wonderful instrument complements the golden warmth of the period sound we hear all through the program.



Vivaldi: *Il Cimento*, Op. 8, includes “Four Seasons”
 Pavlo Beznosiuk, Avison Ensemble
 Linn Records (Hybrid SACD)

Or, if you want to give its full name, *il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione*, which may be translated “The Trial (or rather, melding) of both Harmony and Invention,” the idea being that leaps of wild creative inspiration (*invenzione*) are tamed by the disciplined application of artistry (*armonia*) and something good happens as the result. That good thing was Antonio Vivaldi’s pathbreaking set of twelve concerti grossi that were published as his Opus 8 in 1725.

Seven of the twelve concerti have descriptive titles. In addition to the first four, known collectively as “The Four Seasons,” we have Nos 5, “*La Tempesta di Mare*” (Storm at Sea); 6 “*il Piacere*” (Pleasure), and 10, “*La Caccia*” (The Hunt). What distinguished these works from the centuries-old tradition of what we might call “bow-wow music” was Vivaldi’s consummate skill in linking together musical images to create well-defined comprehensive pictures in the listeners imagination, for instance the imitation song of the bullfinch in the first movement of “summer,” the languid, drooping chords representing the oppressiveness of the summer heat in the succeeding movement, or the icy chains of pizzicati notes that represent the falling of frozen rain in the opening movement of “Winter.” And, yes, there is the imitation of a barking canine adding to the frenzy of excitement we feel in the second movement of “Spring.” All of these, and much more, are beautifully characterized in sensitive performances by director/solo violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk and the fifteen members of that fine English organization, the Avison Ensemble.

Greater artistry still is occasioned by the other pathbreaking feature of Vivaldi’s Opus 8, the fact that these concertos were written in “ritornello form” (literally, “little return”) in which the opening theme, always played by the tutti, returns in part and in closely related keys throughout the movement, separated by eloquent commentary by the solo violin. It is here that the Avison Ensemble really distinguish themselves with their crisp attack, beautifully phrasing and deft articulations in company with Beznosiuk’s stunning violin. That, in fact, goes a long way toward explaining why you should consider making *this* recorded version your favorite among the eight competitive offerings of the complete *il Cimento*, and 234 of the Four Seasons(!), that are



Mozart: *Divertimento*, K.334; *Oboe Quartet*, K.370
 Alexander Janiczek, Scottish Chamber Orchestra
 Linn Records (Hybrid SACD)

As performed with panache and style by the select Scottish Chamber Orchestra Ensemble under violinist and director Alexander Janiczek, these two works for small groups by Mozart have a lot to recommend themselves to the listener. The playing of the horns and the solo violin in the *Divertimento* in D Major, K334 are particularly distinguished in a performance characterized by beautiful ensemble work. The same is true of the solo reed in the *Oboe Quartet* in F Major, K370, as it shines forth like an operatic diva in the best sense of the word.

The *Divertimento*, scored like its predecessors K205, 247 and 287 for two violins, viola, double bass, and two natural horns, has in common with them a seemingly endless number of fetching, well-supported melodies. But here, something else has been added in the way of an *Andante* and *Variations* in the minor key, not something one ordinarily expected of music that was customarily written for festive occasions. In this instance, it was to celebrate the completion in 1780 of the university studies in jurisprudence of Sigismund Robinig, son of a prominent Salzburg family to whom the Mozart family had been close friends. Young Mozart always displayed a nice sensibility where the feelings of other people were concerned. So it seems plausible that the darkly expressive writing for the horns in the lower notes of their harmonic range might well have given the Robinigs a moment for reflection on Georg Joseph Robinig (1710-1760), the husband and father they had lost twenty years earlier, and Sigismund himself on the gravity of the profession he was entering.

Elsewhere, the festiveness of the occasion is more pronounced, as Mozart gives us an expansive six-movement structure with room of a rich variety of expressive material which he connects in ingenious ways. That includes two *Minuets*. The first is elegant and flowing. The second is high-spirited with two contrasted *Trios*. The opening *Allegro* movement and the finale, an *Allegro* in *Rondo* form with an abundance of contrasting motifs, both give maximum scope to the role of the principal violin, which often comes across as yet another example of Mozart’s “concertos in disguise.”

Without disparaging the writing for the violin, viola, and cello, which is particularly distinguished in the canonic

currently listed on the net at Arkivmusic.com.

Happy Holidays to All!

Phil Muse

passages and harmonic descents, the oboe is clearly the center of attention in K370. Mozart wrote this work for the oboist Friedrich Ramm, whose bravura playing, remarkable in its day for its purity and agility in the higher range, is replicated here by the SCO's Robin Williams, who adds his own gracious warmth to the sonic picture. The expressive freedom and gaiety of the outer movements are contrasted by a soulful Adagio as the central movement. The oboe writing recalls the arias and cavatinas of such irrepressible Mozart heroines as Susannah and Zerlina. And it's all captured in very attractive multichannel sound of unusual clarity.