

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Baroque/Christmas Edition

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Bach: English Suites, BWV 806-811
Alessandra Artifoni, harpsichord
(Dynamic)

Harpsichordist Alessandra Artifoni shines brilliantly and consistently in performances of J. S. Bach's English Suites, BWV 806-811. As with the Partitas and the Overture in the French Style, these suites require the use of a two-manual harpsichord (i.e., two superimposed keyboards), which is necessary for the numerous challenges in manual-hopping and hands-crossing that will test the mettle of any student of the instrument. That this Italian artist passes them with flying colors is a measure of her understanding of the daring Bach invested in matters of rhythm and counterpoint in these suites as much as in as her own smoothness of execution.

First, a word about the appellation "English Suites." The name derives from Bach's statement, verified by his biographer, that he composed them for "an Englishman of quality," whose identity has remained a mystery down to the present day. There is nothing particularly "English" about these suites in the current Franco-German style. They typically begin with a Prelude, followed by an Allemande, a stately German dance with four beats to the measure, and a quick and flowing French dance known as the Courante. The centerpiece, customarily the deep point of the suite, is the Sarabande, a slow dance of Spanish origin that was frequently very moving. It was followed by one or more Bourées,

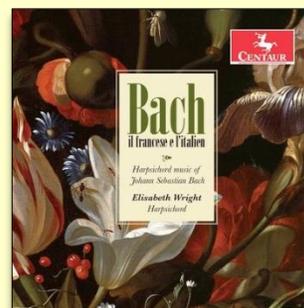


"Ich ruf zu Dir, Herr Jesu Christ," religious and secular works of J.S. Bach – Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, Russian NO (Pentatone SACD)

Hilarion Alfeyev is a man of multiple interests. The graduate of the Gnessin School and the Moscow State Conservatory has followed a priestly vocation since 1987 and currently has the title "Metropolitan." In that capacity, he has chaired the Department of Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate for almost a decade and is widely published in theology, history, and musicology.

It all fits in terms of the present CD program. I can't imagine anyone better equipped to win his fellow countrymen over to the music of J.S. Bach than Metropolitan Alfayev. In Russia, as elsewhere, Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier and Two- and Three-Part Inventions have long been basic to the education of every serious piano student. But I do not recall any Russian conductor who has delved so enthusiastically into the great secular and religious works. (In the bad old days of Soviet Russia, such a preoccupation with the latter genre, infused as it is with Bach's intense religious zeal, might even have been dangerous!)

At the very outset of the program, Alfeyev's symphonic arrangement of the Chorale *Ich ruf zu Dir, Herr Jesus Christ* (I cry unto Thee, Lord Jesus Christ) from the Little Organ Book shows the hand of the master. With its cantus firmus (unusually) in the soprano, a poignant alto melody



Bach: Partita No. 6, Overture in the French Style – Elizabeth Wright, harpsichord (Centaur)

Elizabeth Wright, Professor of the Historical Performance Institute at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music, gives us a veritable clinic in the features that have made the harpsichord endure in spite of having been momentarily eclipsed by the piano during the Romantic Era. The present topic of discussion is J.S. Bach's French Overture, BWV 831; and his Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830 – and, folks, it doesn't get better than that for the venerable plucked-string keyboard instrument.

Historically, the harpsichord went into a period of decline by the end of the 18th century, due in part to advances in piano design and also because the new music of such composers as Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert simply exceeded its capabilities in terms of tonal range and sonority. But even then, it had its amateur aficionados who would rather fight than switch. True, it had no soft pedal capable of sustaining tones. But its quick pluck-and-release action made it ideal for the pulse-quickening pieces, mostly of dance origin, that made the music of the Baroque the joy that it was.

I frequently hear people just getting acquainted with the harpsichord moan that all the notes "sound the same" to them. That is not actually true, though it does take a certain amount of time to adjust one's ears to the older instrument. When we

lively French country dances in double time in which the phrase usually starts after a quarter-bar pickup. The final dance was always a Gigue (or "Jig") in vigorous, foot-stamping rhythm and often in two-part counterpoint.

If the above description sounds like a recipe for cookie-cutting, these English Suites are nothing of the sort. There is a great deal of variety and individuality among them, and Artifoni is most adept in bringing these features out in the course of her performances. For instance, No. 1 in A major, the most elaborate of the suites, possesses two Courantes instead of one, each followed by an imaginatively embellished "double," or variation. The solemn Prelude in No. 2 in A minor is reminiscent of a Passion chorale. The most striking feature of this particular suite is its Sarabande, which impresses the listener by its simplicity and plain eloquence.

By contrast, the Prelude in No. 3, BWV 808 is no mere curtain-raiser but takes on the nature of a full-blown Italian concerto movement with its lively exchange between "solo" and "orchestral" passages that shows Bach's well-known admiration for Vivaldi. The Sarabande in this particular suite is poignant but not unduly so, for its texture is lightened by numerous embellishments. The second of two spirited Gavottes has a drone in the bass that would have recalled a rustic bagpipes or hurdy-gurdy, and the concluding Gigue has the structure of a true fugue, in which the voices are exceptionally well defined in Artifoni's beautifully nuanced performance.

Taken as a set, this is the best account I have heard to date of the English Suites. As opposed to Bach's later Partitas, BWV 825-830, these suites seem more suitable to performance on the harpsichord than on a modern piano, a fact that makes the present recordings all the more recommendable.

reveals the restless spiritual state of the believer: initially withdrawn, and then anxious and pleading.

Cantata BWV 82, *Ich habe genug* (I have enough) has a wonderfully expressive solo baritone (here, Stephan Genz) accompanied in all the arias by a gloriously florid oboe obbligato. In the central aria *Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen* (Close peacefully, your weary eyes), unless my ears deceive me, the uncredited oboist switches at this point to an oboe d'amore, the mellow voice of which perfectly suits the mood of peace and calm acceptance in the Gospel story of Simeon, the old man who received a prophesy that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes.

Next, we have a change of pace: *Orchestral Suite No. 2*, BWV 1067 for solo flute and strings. It begins with a French Overture, in stately dotted rhythms in the outer sections contrasted by a *fast* middle section. Then follows a series of mostly zestful, up-tempo dances: Rondeau, Sarabande, Bouree, Polonaise, and Menuet, with a pulse-quickening Badinerie for a chaser. Inspired playing by flautist Alya Vodovozava adds to the overall impression of relaxation, joy, and pleasure.

In his preface to the booklet notes, Metropolitan Alfeyev declares his opposition to the current "authentic" style of Bach performance, where the tempos are too fast and the orchestra is tuned one tone lower, "which is unbearable for people with perfect pitch." His contention that Bach's music is not a museum piece and that we have the right to use the full means of modern expression in order to translate its timeless beauty to the listener, is most fully realized in his arrangement of the great Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor for Organ, BWV 582, a work that has often impressed him by its grandeur and truly symphonic scale.

The full resources of the Russian National Orchestra fit this work like a glove. The instruments (which even include bells at one point) are deployed according to their various characteristics in a gleaming panoply of sounds that replicate Bach's organ

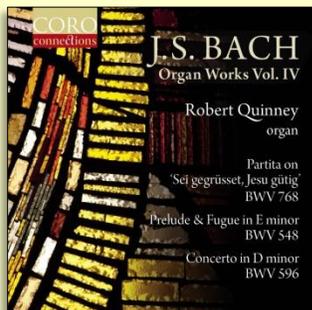
have done so, as Elizabeth Wright shows us very persuasively, a world of musical riches opens to us.

The Overture in the French Style, BWV 831 represents the summit of Bach's art as far as the keyboard suite with an opening *Ouverture* in dotted rhythms is concerned. It sets the stage for the suite of dances that follow it: a Courante. Gavottes I & II, Passepieds I and II, a Sarabande, Bourées I & II, and a Gigue. The Sarabande, the deepest point of a French suite, is given an intimate and poignant interpretation, though not as somber as we often hear it played. As the one slow entry among all these duple- and triple-time dances, it accounts for the notably expansive character of this particular work. One last curiosity is Bach's inclusion of a virtuosic "Echo" as an extra movement at the very end for the purpose of demonstrating the keyboard-leaping possibilities in a double-manual harpsichord.

Partita No. 6 in E minor, like the French Overture, requires the use of a two-manual instrument of the sort we hear in the present recording.¹ Wright takes her time exploring the beauties and intricacies of this last and most artistically demanding of the Partitas. It begins with a Toccata of great expressive power plus a three-voice fugue that reaches a point of almost unbearable intensity before it is resolved. It is followed by an Allemande with a chromatically rising bass and arpeggiated figures, a Corrente with jazzy syncopations over a walking bass, an insouciant Air with wide leaps, a far-ranging Sarabande that harkens back to the mood of the Toccata, and a *Tempo di Gavotta* in a galante style. The concluding Gigue is more disturbing than a fast-tempo dance with a galloping meter in triplets has any conceivable right to be.

All these dances benefit from Wright's feeling for form and color, her sense of spontaneity, and her willingness to take risks when the music requires it.

registers in symphonic terms. You get the feeling of the lithe, living textures as well as the architectural weight of a truly great work of music.

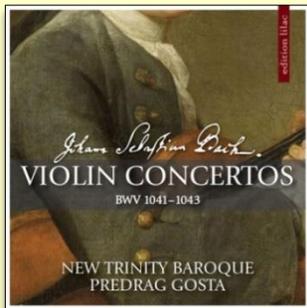


J.S. Bach: Organ Works, Vol. IV
Robert Quinney, organ (Coro)

Robert Quinney, Organist of New College, Oxford and celebrated in concerts at home and abroad, gives a splendid account of himself in an all-Bach recital at the instrument of the Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge. This particular organ, built by the Swiss firm of Metzler Söhne in 1976, is ideally suited in sonic range and disposition to the imaginative and far-ranging program Quinney has chosen.

One thread that runs through this program is the invigorating influence Bach derived from his discovery of Vivaldi-style *ritornello*. The Italian word refers to Vivaldi's practice, made famous in his collection of violin concerti, *L'Estro armonico*, Op. 3, of employing a musical phrase that keeps returning. The orchestra typically states the main theme, which will become the ritornello. Then follows a section by the soloist, leading into a statement of the ritornello theme in a new key. This alternation of soloist and ritornello continues in various keys until the end, when the ritornello theme finishes in the key where it originally started. Sometimes the solo part is based on fragments of the ritornello. At other times it ignores the principal theme and brings in new material.

Applying the ritornello principle to his own organ music was a revelation for J. S. Bach. In his booklet notes, Quinney imagines Bach's excitement at the prospect of opening up new

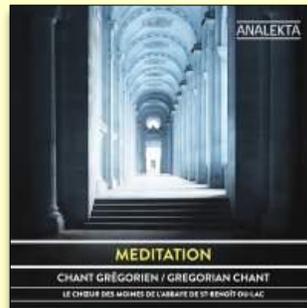


Bach: Violin concertos, BWV 1041-1043 – New Trinity Baroque directed by Predrag Gosta (Edition Lilac)

Predrag Gosta, the founder of the Atlanta-based New Trinity Baroque, directs the ensemble in accounts of J. S. Bach's Violin Concertos that are as utterly charming for the casual listener as they are insightful for the baroque connoisseur. The more-than-capable soloists are Adriane Post (BWV 1041 in A minor) and Carrie Krause (BWV 1042 in E major), and they make beautiful music together in the Double Concerto in D minor, BWV 1043.

These concertos are appealing in more ways than one. The sheer beauty of their slow movements is the first thing that strikes you. When you encounter the serene Andante in the A minor concerto, you might well consider it the most incredibly lovely slow movement you have ever heard – an impression that will last until you hear the Adagio of the E major and the Largo of the D minor.

Technically, the concertos involve considerable use of *ritornello* and *bariolage*. The former is a technique popularized by Vivaldi in which a musical idea is planted in our minds at the outset, and then brought back at regular intervals in slightly different ways so as to deepen its implications and generate a sense of overall coherence. *Bariolage* is a bowing technique involving quick alternation between static and changing notes, where the static note is usually on an open string so that the violinist sounds the same pitch back and



"Meditation," Gregorian Chant sung by the Choir of the Abbey of Saint Benoît du Lac, Quebec (Analekta)

These 1995 / 1996 recordings of Gregorian Chant by the monks of the Benedictine Abbey of St-Benoît-du-Lac in southeastern Quebec are the sort of thing that should never be allowed to vanish from the catalogue, and their present 2016 reissue is to the credit of Analekta Records. The special clarity of the voices of a monastic community in their natural setting is absolutely essential to experiencing this musical genre.

Gregorian chant is the largest body of unaccompanied melody in the world. Its purity of expression and suppleness of line are particularly prized by music lovers. This music, based on modal scales that move by scale steps or intervals of a third, replicates the cadence of human breath itself and helps reduce the stresses of everyday life. For the monks themselves, it is essential to the sense of wholeness and inner peace they need to meet the rigors of cloistered life. The wonderful thing about Gregorian chant is that all the monks participate, with the weaker voices tagging along on the coat tails (or should we say "cassock hems"?) of the stronger, resulting in the feeling of unity and smoothness we hear in these recordings.

If you've never had the chance to experience Gregorian Chant, I recommend the present CD release. Beginning with a moving *Salve Maria misericordiae* (Hail, Mary, Mother of Mercy) the program wends its way

avenues in his own compositions, of dealing with unfamiliar textures and sounds on the organ, stretching the limits of what could be achieved technically.

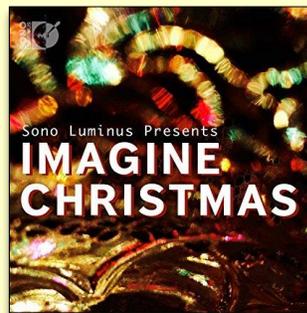
We find the ritornello principle in “*Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*” (Come, Holy Ghost, Lord God), BWV 652, and also in the Fantasia on this same chorale prelude, BWV 651, where the ritornello is in sensational, upward-thrusting arpeggios. We are also given Bach’s own imaginative arrangement, BWV 596, of Vivaldi’s Concerto for 2 Violins and Cello, Op. 3, No. 11, a rare synthesis of two great musical minds in which Bach has a three-part first movement instead of the standard Allegro and increases the contrapuntal density of the fugal movement with the greatest freedom.

We find Bach experimenting, as always, in the chorale prelude “*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*” (By the waters of Babylon), BWV 653, in the form of an ornamented Sarabande. The Psalmist’s lament in the first section comes through very clearly, followed by calm, uplifting hope in the next, though I personally sense the pain of this “Song of Exile” as a bittersweet affect in the oscillating tones at the very end. We are also given Bach’s alternate version, BWV 653b, where a double pedal adds a sensual richness to the texture. Another chorale prelude, “*Schmücke dich, O Liebe Seele*” (Rejoice, O Redeemed Soul) BWV 654, makes its serene presence welcome in this recital.

The Partita on “*Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig*” (I greet Thee, merciful Jesus), BWV 768, is a freely handled set of variations, the most remarkable of which is No. 10, in the style of a noble, unhurried sarabande. Finally, we have the great Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 548 as a fitting conclusion to a program of works using ritornello. Its nickname of the “Wedge” derives from the shape of the opening fugal subject, which starts with one note, followed by two notes on either side, forming a minor triad. It then gradually widens into an octave, an evocation of the Holy Trinity in Bach’s

forth, thus creating a resonant, shimmering effect that listeners can find mesmerizing.

The next thing you notice about these performances is the nice sense of ensemble, particularly in the interaction of the solo violin(s) and the supporting group, here consisting of two violins, viola, and cello, plus a bass line realized by violone” and harpsichord. The two last-mentioned, played here, respectively, by Martha Bishop and Gosta himself, do a yeoman job keeping the momentum continually moving, which helps give a feeling of purposeful wholeness to the music. The clarity of the recorded sound optimally reveals the textures in the music.



“Imagine Christmas” (Dorian Sono Luminus)

“Imagine Christmas” is a romp by various artists and groups in which Christmas chestnuts are not merely transcribed but “re-imagined,” in the sense in which the term is currently used in music. In the process, we are given a fresh and much-needed approach to overly familiar carols, traditionals, and Tin Pan Alley hits that we’ve known all our lives.

The only item on this program that’s played as its composer originally intended is “December: Christmas” from *The Seasons* by Tchaikovsky. Pianist Bruce Levingston probably figured (correctly) that you can’t improve on perfection, beginning with the exhilarating lift-off before the opening measure of the waltz.

Otherwise, it’s “anything goes” in this album! The early music / Celtic Ensemble Galilei lead off with a rousing “Frosty the Snowman,” enlivened by hand-played drums and

with no undue haste through the sorts of hymns, *Alleluias*, canticles, and antiphons that make for the whole life and peaceful coexistence of a monastic community and a means of inspiration and listening pleasure for the rest of us.



“Lo, how a rose e'er blooming”
The Queen’s Six (Resonus)

The Queen’s Six is a vocal ensemble consisting of countertenors Daniel Brittain and Timothy Carleston, tenors Nicholas Madden and Dominic Bland, baritone Andrew Thompson, and bass Simon Whiteley. They are drawn from the Lay Clerks of St. George’s Chapel, and take their name from the fact that they were founded in 2008 on the 450th anniversary of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I. They actually reside within the walls of Windsor Castle and frequently perform for the Royal Family besides taking part in eight weekly services. They also collaborate with no fewer than nine other vocal ensembles at home and abroad.

Well, you get the idea: these guys are singing fools. Their repertoire extends from Tudor polyphony to modern jazz and pop arrangements. Praised for their “seamless blend and balance” (*The Guardian*), they actually favor a blend that is not so close as to be cloying and leaves a lot of space for tasteful timbres, in which they revel just this side of shameless self-indulgence. When assaying the hymns and psalm settings of such Tudor masters as William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, and Christopher Tye, all on the present CD, they handle the following voices in the polyphony with consummate artistry, enriching the harmony.

symbolism. The concluding Fugue is a bold, free, and utterly brilliant conception. "After the long and turbulent journey this extraordinary fugue has undertaken," writes Quinney, "everything is the same as before, yet utterly transformed."

Coming in January . . .



Guess who celebrated his 150th birthday this past year? Though he wasn't available to put in an appearance, much less blow out all the candles on his cake, his *baton* was used in these performances!

rustic pipes. Irina Muresanu and Mattei Varga give their own rendition of Jascha Heifetz' re-imagining in a lush vibrato of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas." "Holly Jolly Christmas" takes a new lease on life with the syncopations and swaying rhythms imparted by the Jasper String Quartet. And Ronn McFarlane's lute adds a refreshing note of serenity to a frenetic season of the year in "Walking in the Air."

I wasn't as keen about Cory Hills' androgynous voice and his off-beat reading over a percussive backdrop of the poem "Twas the Night before Christmas," but I guess you have to do *something* to enliven as hoary a chestnut as this. Kathryn Bates' cello adds new rhythms and syncopations to "Santa Claus is comin' to town." Pianist Caleb Nei refreshes and animates the pace of "Christmas time is here," letting us experience it anew. And the wonderful Cuarteto Latinoamericano, aided by spirited drumming from Lydia Lewis, impart invigorating Latin grooves and rhythms to "Joy to the world."

Finally, we have the spikey tones and syncopations of pianist Stewart Goodyear's take on "Good King Wenceslas," followed by the Skylark Vocal Ensemble's wistful rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," recapturing the mood of the song made famous by Judy Garland. The album concludes with a post-modern re-imagining by the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) of "Silent Night" in which the slow droning in a minimalist impression of a deep wintry white-out enfolds a rendition in soft percussive tones of the melody itself at the very center of the piece.

Besides the above-named Tudor composers, we are treated to a trio of early-music favorites, "*Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*" (Lo, how a rose e'er blooming) in the wonderful old harmonization by Praetorius (1571-1621), the medieval hymn "Adam lay ybounden" in an arrangement by Richard Pinel, who is also heard in the organ accompaniment in this album, and David Willcocks' modern arrangement of the 4th century hymn of Prudentius, "Of the Father's heart begotten." We're also given lullabies appropriate to the Virgin Mary ("Balulalow," "Lullay, my liking") and the ever-popular Coventry Carol (arr. Martin Shaw) in which sensational 15th century dissonances can still make our ears perk up!

What about the "traditionals"? This program has plenty of them, including "O come, all ye faithful," "Away in a manger," "O little town of Bethlehem" (with a gentle pastoral sway in the rhythm), "In the bleak mid-winter," "Hark! The herald angels sing," and "It came upon a midnight clear," with yet another swaying rhythm conjuring up the mood of a procession.

Modern pop favorites with a Christmas theme? You got 'em, in an appropriately breathless account of "Jingle Bells" and an arrangement of Jule Styne's pop classic "Let it snow" that is further jazzed up by some swell syncopations and scats.

Oh, yes! There's "Silent Night." Franz Gruber's enduring Christmas classic is heard in a 1993 arrangement by Keith Roberts that expands its sonority while paying due reverence to the original.



“Bach-Eskelinen 3,” arrangements for Guitar – Ismo Eskelinen (Alba Records Hybrid Multichannel SACD)

Finnish guitarist Ismo Eskelinen gives illuminating performances of three Lute Suites of J.S. Bach that show a fine control of tempo and phrasing and a mastery of Bach’s complex mesh of ornaments and motifs. He adds to our enjoyment with his own program notes, explaining his aims in making each work on this program a part of Bach’s living legacy. As he puts it, “The music must live in the here and now – forever new.”

The so-called “Lute Suites,” BWV 996-998, were probably composed for an instrument known as the Lautenwerk, a cross between a lute and a harpsichord that had the gracious tonal quality of the former but was played with a keyboard – a sort of “lute-harpsichord.” At the time Bach wrote these works, the lute itself had become an outmoded instrument, limited to a tablature notation that did not fit in with the new music of the day. These works addressed the nostalgic need for a keyboard instrument that could replicate the fondly remembered sounds of the lute.

In transcribing these suites for the guitar, Eskelinen preserves the original keys by means of a *capostato*, which works in a different way in each of these pieces. This enables the guitar’s open strings to be transposed to a different pitch without altering the fingerings.ⁱⁱⁱ

Suite in C minor, BWV 997, first up in the program, is a remarkable work. A richly ornamented Prelude is soon followed by an extended Fugue in deliberate and quick-paced sections



Cantabile – the English Quartet, “A Song for Christmas” (Champs Hill Records)

As remarkable for their unique style of vocalism as they are long-lasting, The English Quartet (also known as “Cantabile”) originated as far back as the early 1980’s, when they were students at Cambridge. Their flair for the dramatic keeps them busy in cabaret and theatre, as well as in concert halls and festivals. The present Champs Hill CD gives us Yanks an eye (or is it “ear”?) popping impression of the delicious fare Britons have long been treated to.

Members of The English Quartet are soprano Sarah-Ann Cromwell, tenors Christopher O’Gorman and Mark Fleming, and baritone Michael Steffan. They are very much at home in this program, having been joined by a longtime accompanist on piano, Chris Hatt. The recording project was conceived in a rare moment of leisure after they had just given a Christmas concert in Champs Hill, and as the artists put it, “we thus had ample time to plan and prepare before recording – a luxury one is not always afforded.”

The program is far-ranging, reflecting Christmas itself, a season when Tin Pan Alley rubs shoulders with carols and traditionals going back centuries, and down-to-earth revelry coexists with holy mystery. The pop songs, some of which recall, for the English as well as Americans, the fondly remembered albums of yesteryear by the likes of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, include “I’ll be Home for Christmas,” “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” “Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow,” “What are You doing New Year’s Eve?” and “Wonderful Christmastime.” (In the



Telemandolin, “a sea of colorful flowers” presented by Alon Sariel & Concerto Foscari (Berlin Classics)

In *Telemandolin*, the multi-talented Israeli artist Alon Sariel and his fellow members of Concerto Foscari do what they do best as agents provocateurs for drawing people of all ages, especially children, into the music of the 17th and 18th centuries. They specialize in bringing rare and forgotten works, often of great appeal, to light once again.

The quick, alert sound of the mandolin is featured in most of the items on this program by Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767).^v We hear it in the Sonata de Concert, TWV 44:1, whose three movements are labelled Spirituoso, Largo, and Vivace. Its solemnity marks it as a *sonata di chiesa*, or church sonata (no dancing permitted on these premises). The instrument is also heard in the Mandolin Concerto, TWV 51: fis1 and the gracious Partita No. 2, TWV 41:G2. In the last-named, the charming *Affetuoso* and sprightly *Tempo di Minuetto* call for special attention. Sariel’s instrument in all these recordings is a “mandolin within a mandolin” that has a double resonating chamber and a longer than usual fingerboard.

The delicate tone of the mandolin, long prized as a partner in folk and love songs, is limited in its resonance and ability to harmonize with itself, and thus relies on the deftly applied support of other instruments. The present ensemble includes two violins, plua viola, cello, violone and cembalo (harpsichord).

Sariel, equally accomplished on other baroque instruments, plays the long-necked archlute in one of those

that calls upon the performer's artistry to sustain its various voices. Unusually, this fugue is in da capo form. It introduces its countersubject before the theme itself has ended, creating a feeling of intensity. The opening motif of the Sarabande recalls the final chorus of the St. Matthew Passion with its wondrous opposition of anguish and final peace after suffering. An almost danceable Gigue, with many dissonances on the beat, and its imaginatively ornamented Double, end the suite.

BWV 996 in E minor offers a mix of pleasure and contemplation, from its improvisatory Prelude reminiscent of the keyboard toccatas, and a fugal Presto section, to a Sarabande that derives its effectiveness from a dialogue between static chords, ornaments, and cascading scales. Swift-flowing Courante, brisk Bourée, and lively Gigue provide lightness as an antidote for the blues. Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro in E-flat, BWV 998, has an improvisatory feeling, ending in a jubilant mood.

Finally, the guitarist's arrangement of the chorale "*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*" (Sleepers Awake), BWV 645, with its fantastic texture and glorious harmonies arising from an exquisite interweaving of voices, provides a perfect end to a great recital.

last-named, the Quartet use their voices to re-create the synthesized sounds at the opening of the Paul McCartney song). The American songs sound authentically American, too, a vocal idiom that is not easy for English singers.

Neither do the London Quartet ignore the "holy mystery" I spoke of earlier. Among the earliest texts set to music are those of Metaphysical poets Robert Herrick (What Sweeter Music), George Wither (A Christmas Carol), and John Donne (Nativity). And the sublime beauty of Peter Warlock's wonderful "Bethlehem Down," in the Quartet's own superb arrangement, speaks for itself.

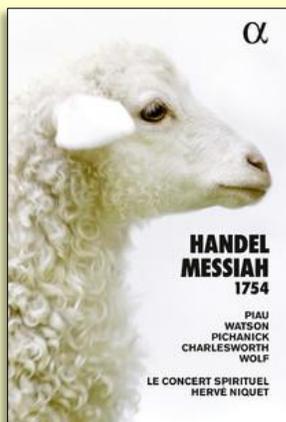
These singers leave traditionals such as "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly" and "The Wexford Carol" in the purity of their well-remembered settings. Elsewhere, they indulge a penchant for madcap virtuosity in "The Twelve Days of Christmas," with outrageous vocal effects, and lively barnyard cacophony in the medley "Old King Wenceslas Had a Farm."^{iv} There's also plenty of room for sheer vocal gymnastics in the ensemble's own "A Festival of Carols in Two Minutes," calling for re-positionings on every line! I've only cited half the program, but you get the idea. To paraphrase the Bard, "There was more foolishness yet, if I could remember it all."

"rare and forgotten works" we mentioned earlier, a moving Piece for Solo Viol by Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787). Another composer in need of friends, Johann Friedrich Fasch (1688-1758) is represented by a Lute Concerto, whose central Andante is every bit as delightful as the popular Largo in Vivaldi's Lute Concerto in D major. Sarel plays it persuasively on a baroque guitar.

Another baroque figure in a diverse program is Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788), represented by his "Hamburger Sonata," Wq 133. Alon Sarel and friends perform this serious work with relish and even a few onions (i.e., "tears") in the subtle harmonies of an emotionally moving *Allegretto* movement. (Sorry for the puns, folks, I couldn't help myself!)

Telemann, who was perhaps history's most prolific composer with a conservatively estimated 3500 compositions to his credit, was a man of boundless energy with many interests outside of music. One of these was gardening, into which he threw himself with enthusiasm, prompting Sarel to refer to his diverse output in music as "a sea of colorful flowers."

And by the way, do you know how you can always "Telemandolin"?^{vi}



Handel: Messiah (1754 Version)

Sandrine Piau (s), Katherine Watson (s), Anthea Pichanick (a), Rupert Charlesworth (t), Andreas Wolf (b)
Herve Niquet, Le Concert Spirituel
(Alpha Classics)

This new recording of George Frideric Handel's evergreen Messiah has a lot of good things going for it. For one, it is directed by Herve Niquet, founder of the Paris-based ensemble Le Concert Spirituel, and it benefits from his well-known passion for equal voices that we noted in the earlier Alpha Classics release of Vivaldi's Gloria and Magnificat (see *Springtime Baroque* 2016 on this website). In addition, the firm foundation provided by the lower strings and the continuo of organ and harpsichord give the polyphonic layers in the melody plenty of opportunity to flourish and bloom. The clarity of all the voices is a decided plus in any oratorio recording, especially one of the Messiah.

There is a nice balance between the 27-voice chorus and the 27 instrumentalists, plus the afore-mentioned harpsichord-organ continuo. The five vocalists, representing three nations (E, F, G) are all in fine mettle. As we know, Handel continually tinkered with performances of Messiah, re-writing and re-assigning various arias and recitatives to accommodate the singers he had at his disposal. This is the 1754 Foundling Home version, and it differs somewhat from the vocal assignments in the 1742 Dublin version that did much to establish the Messiah's enduring reputation. One of the first things you will notice is that Sandrine Piau's lovely soprano voice, in addition to the lyrical arias

traditionally assigned to it such as “How beautiful are the feet,” is heard also in “Who may abide the day of His coming?” and “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” arias usually given to the alto voice which customarily handles the numbers dealing with prophecy and theology. One possible reason for the present re-distribution is to accommodate the presence of an additional soprano, Katherine Watson, who gives a fine account of herself in the memorable Nativity sequence that includes “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion.” In place of the usual soprano-alto duet “He shall feed us flock,” we have the two sopranos apparently alternating verses. I do not find this arrangement as satisfactory as the traditional one because the voices of Piau and Watson are too similar in quality to give this number the variety of timbre it needs.

Contralto Anthea Pichanick is still left with such choice numbers as “O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion” (customarily given to the soprano) and “He was despised and rejected of men” in the moving section in Part II dealing with the betrayal and condemnation of Jesus. Tenor Rupert Charlesworth shines in such key passages as the *accompagnato* “Comfort ye, my people” and its following aria “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted,” and he makes the most of the over-the-top declamation in “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.” Bass-baritone Andreas Wolf gives a superb rendition of “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light,” a striking example of Handel’s use of music for pictorial effect. And he handles the high dramatics in such arias as “Why do the nations so furiously rage together?” and “All nations I’ll shake” with a real sense of authority.

The chorus of *Le Concert Spirituel* (S9:A6:T6:B6) are more than capable of rendering the power and majesty of such numbers as “For unto us a child is born” and “Glory to God in the highest” with smoothness and conviction. In the really big choruses that conclude Parts II and III, “Hallelujah” and “Worthy is the Lamb,” the trumpets, which Handel has used sparingly up to this point, spring into action, and the pounding of the tympani at the very end of the final chorus makes a stunning effect in this recording.

ⁱ In the present recordings, the harpsichord used is a copy of an 18th century Flemish instrument built by David Jacques Way (USA) and Marc Ducomer (France), 1994.

ⁱⁱ The jumbo-sized violone was the baroque precursor of the modern double bass. One is shown in the group photo of NTB in the inlay.

ⁱⁱⁱ These fingerings are complex enough, as Eskelinen explains in his annotation on “Transcribing for the Guitar.”

^{iv} It reminded me of the hayseed hijinks in the “Heavenly Music” number, sung and danced by Gene Kelly and Phil Silvers in the 1950 MGM musical *Summer Stock*.

^v Telemann never actually composed anything specifically for the mandolin. That, of course, created an opportunity for the intelligent transcriptions we hear in this program.

^{vi} By its flat back, of course. (My, but you children are slow today!)