

# Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Special Baroque Issue

Spring, 2014



## Italian and Spanish Music Massimo Marchese, Vihuela de mano Centaur Records

Alonso Mudarra. Luis Milan. Francesco da Milano. Luys de Narvaez. Joan Ambrosio Dalza, Migeul de Fuellana. Their names are not exactly household words today. But in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain and Italy they were in the vanguard of the new composers writing persuasive, eloquently phrased music for a courtly setting, on an instrument that has been rediscovered and is finding admiring audiences in our own time.

That instrument was a flat-backed guitar-shaped instrument, the *vihuela de mano*. The appellation *de mano* indicates that, like the guitar, it was held in the arms of the performer rather than played with a plectrum or bowed, as were its nearest relatives. With its courses of strings, the vihuela actually bore a closer kinship to the lute, rather than the Renaissance guitar, and it was notated in lute tablature, the predecessor of present-day guitar "tabs." It typically had 12 strings, gut-strung and chromatically fretted, in common with the lute, and usually in paired courses.

The sound, as the present recording by the Italian vihuelist Massimo Marchese bears out, was soft and sweet. For best results when playing this recording on your sound system, be careful to leave the volume at a low enough level so as not to distort the delicate sound of the instrument. The task of modern performers such as Marchese is made somewhat easier by the fact that most of their 16<sup>th</sup> century predecessors published music collections for the vihuela with the tones (*primero*, *segundo*, *quarto*, etc) carefully annotated in the tablature. That is both a help and a challenge, as contemporary accounts of these vihuelist-composers attest to their facility in improvising in, say, four parts upon a four-part *villancico*, or madrigal, something that can't be notated.

In parting, there is a charming story of the great Spanish mystical poet St. John of the Cross, who was accustomed to taking up the figure of the infant Jesus from a cradle scene and dancing about with it in his arms while he ecstatically intoned the old Spanish song *Si amores me han de matar* (roughly, "If I would die for love") which Fuellana set to music. It is a striking



## Vivaldi: Concerti per Archi: II Rinaldo Alessandrini, Concerto Italiano Naïve Classique

Rinaldo Alessandrini and the members of Concerto Italiano once again score high marks in this latest release in The Vivaldi Edition. The players, who approach their favorite composer with such dedication and zest, are Mauro Lopez Ferreira and Nicholas Robinson, violins; Ettore Belli, viola; Diego Roncalli, cello; Luca Cola, contrabass; Craig Marchitelli, tiorba (a long necked lute with a second pegbox for tuning, otherwise known as a theorbo) and Alessandrini himself on harpsichord.

Finding the right box to peg these *Concerti per Archi*, on the other hand, has always been something of a conundrum for baroque scholars. They bear a kinship with the *Sonate a Quattro* genre of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but are clearly not to be considered chamber music, as they incorporate the latest developments in string technique in Vivaldi's day. They are actually *ripieno* concerti, intended for a string ensemble, with a close affinity to the three-movement operatic overture. In fact, we have all the elements present for a full-blown solo concerto except the solo violin itself. That this was a very attractive popular genre is shown by the fact that it persisted in Italy well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see my review of Rossini's String Sonatas in this column for January 2014).

Missing the over-the-top drama that would have been imparted by a violin soloist, one would think that these *Concerti per Archi* would be lacking in listener appeal, but that is far from the case. As Alessandrini and his cohorts show us, these string concerti are highly imaginative in their seemingly endless flow of fresh ideas and instrumental variety. They are also short enough that we never weary of listening to them. All of the 33 movements are under three minutes' duration, and a handful are under a minute. In their spirited performances

example of how close the sacred and the secular were in the music of the Renaissance, something that would change dramatically in the following centuries.



Vivaldi: Bassoon concertos, Vol. 1  
Nadina Mackie Jackson, bassoon  
Thomas McGegan, director  
MSR Classics

When you think about it, the bassoon has gotten a bad rap. People who have never bothered to listen attentively to it may be prejudiced by the wedding guest's retort to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*: "Dost hear the loud bassoon?" Or they will remember the line in the song "76 Trombones" from Meredith Wilson's hit musical *The Music Man* about "Each bassoon having its big, fat say!" They would be surprised to know that the long double reed actually has a rather soft voice and makes its impression in an ensemble through its unique baritone timbre and the penetrating effect it imparts.

In Vivaldi Bassoon Concerti, Vol. 1, British Columbia native Nadina Mackie Jackson takes full advantage of the beautiful voice of the bassoon, which British novelist E. M. Forster once described in *Howard's End* as the most romantic-sounding of all musical instruments. Playing in a choice ensemble composed of Aislinn Nosky and Julia Wedman, violins; David Rose, viola; Raphael Dubé, cello; Dominic Girard, bass; Lucas Harris, lute and guitar; and with the celebrated Nicholas McGegan as director and keyboard player, Jackson's brilliant artistry shines out like a jewel in a perfect setting. Her sound is bold and full, and she isn't afraid of risk-taking as she takes her instrument scampering nimbly up and down scales throughout its range. Without overstating the bassoon's capabilities, she explores them with a gleeful abandon that infects the entire group with her zestful excitement. She plays with deeply expressive feeling in the languorous slow movements, mostly marked *Largo* or *Larghetto*, of the eight concerti she has selected for this first release in a projected series.

You may be surprised to know that Vivaldi composed more concerti for the bassoon (37) than any solo instrument other than the violin. Considering that nobody else had forseen the possibilities inherent in the solo bassoon before Vivaldi's day (and all too few have done so since) it is remarkable that he did not hesitate to pay it the compliment of writing the sort of arpeggios, rapid scales and register leaps normally reserved for the violin. In the outer movements of the Concerto in E minor, RV 484, we hear music of a Vivaldian élan we normally associate with his concerti for flute or violin. In the Presto opening movement of the Concerto in E-flat major, RV 483, we

that emphasize Vivaldi's constantly alert rhythms, the members of Concerto Italiano give us an insight into the genre's long-lasting appeal.



Corelli: Violin Sonatas, Op. 5, Vol. I  
Enrico Onofri, Imaginarium Ensemble  
Passacaille

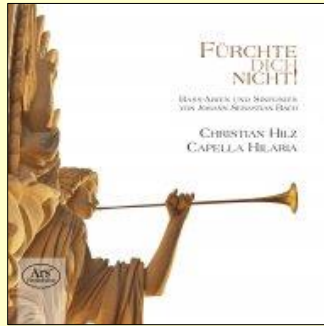
The Imaginarium Ensemble, founded and directed by violinist Enrico Onofri, brings together baroque artists for what (at least from the evidence of the present release on the Halle, Belgium-based label Passacaille) amounts to exalted music making. The members heard on this present release of Corelli's Violin sonatas, Opus 5 include, besides Onofri, Alessandro Palmeri, cello; Margaret Köll, harp; Alessandro Tampieri, archlute; and Riccardo Doni, harpsichord and organ. This is a solid ensemble, with just the right flexibility to account for the shifting continuo forces. Most important, they are temperamentally attuned to the style needed for Corelli, with the dynamic rhythms and the ornamentation within a florid musical line that this composer requires.

Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713) created the first major school of violin playing. His 12 Sonatas, Opus 5, first published in 1700, ran to 50 editions by the end of the century, making his influence incalculable. His emphasis was on extremely melodious violin playing. Contemporary observers described the sound of his instrument as like to that of a "sweet trumpet" or a human voice. Others described Corelli himself as utterly transformed in his countenance, like one possessed by furies, whenever he performed. His style, combed serene dignity with passionate expression. It crystallized in his Opus 5 Sonatas, and involved such elements as the use of double and triple stops, fast runs, rapid arpeggios, and brilliant cadenzas.

Corelli was not so carried away by his work that he did not take pains to describe the *agrèemens* (i.e., embellishments) that he recommended for correct performance of his slow movements when the set was published by Estienne Roger (Amsterdam 1710). Using these *agrèemens* as a guide but not feeling the need to follow them slavishly, Onofri has used his discretion in adding "restrained

have her undertaking fast rapid-fire passages with a machine-gun intensity that is, nevertheless, far from mechanical in feeling. The ensemble participate in the happy spirit of the occasion in the very light-hearted opening Allegros of the Concerti in C minor, RV 480 and F major, RV 491.

All of this has been recorded optimally by producer/engineer David Bowles at the Glenn Gould Studio of the CBC in Toronto. It is an auspicious beginning to what promises to be a complete series of the bassoon concerti in five volumes.



*Fürchte dich nicht!* Bach arias for bass  
Christian Hilz, Capella Hilaria  
Ars Produktion

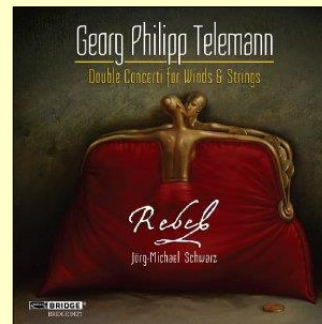
From Ars Produktion, a music label located in the charming German town of Ratingen in North Rhine-Westphalia comes a very attractive program of bass arias and sinfonias by J. S. Bach. Christian Hilz, the baritone heard in this program, has the perfect range and the interpretive insight, to do justice to these arias from Bach's cantatas and Passions that deal with the longing for salvation, acceptance of God's will, and the ultimate joy of the believer when the reality comes to pass. He gets first class support from the members of the Capella Hilaria, in particular the trumpet, flute, violin, and oboe da caccia players who help underscore and illuminate the meaning of the various vocal texts.

Hilz has made his choice of arias, plus the sinfonias from the Cantatas BWV 21, 42, and 196, with the view of following the highlights of the church year and the moods and themes that are associated with them. It begins with the aria "*Willkommen, werter Schatz*" (welcome, worthy treasure) from the Advent Cantata BWV 36, *Schwingt freudig euch empor* (Raise yourself up joyfully) and concludes with *Es ist's der ganz allein* (It is He who completely alone [has trod upon the winepress full of sorrow, torment and pain, to save the lost ones]) from the Ascension Cantata BWV 43, *Gott fahret auf mit Jauchen* (God goes up with jubilation).

Of the three sinfonias heard in this CD, the one most familiar in Bach programs is that from Cantata BWV 21, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* (My heart was deeply troubled) in which the poignant oboe solo sets the mood for the transition into Lent, a season of fasting and patient expectation. Elsewhere, the virtuosic aria "*Doch weichet, ihr tollen, vergeblichen Sorgen*" (Hence, you foolish, useless worries) from Cantata BWV 8, *Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben?* (Dearest God, when shall I die?) is echoed by a gorgeous flute solo, as challenging

ornaments and cadences of my own" and taking a moderate approach to the arpeggios in such places as the vivace section of the Preludio in Sonata VII. In every instance, Onofri's decisions come off as stylishly and beautifully accomplished.

As stated, this is Vol. 1 of Corelli's complete Opus 5. Imaginarium (their name means "hall of images") have evidently selected Sonatas I, VII, III, IX, V, and X, in that order, for balance and contrast, rather than follow apple-pie order. I can hardly wait to hear Vol. II, which will include the famous *La Follia* variations that have inspired generations of composers for the past 300 years!



Telemann: Double Concerti for Wind & Strings  
Jörg Michael Schwarz, REBEL  
Bridge Records

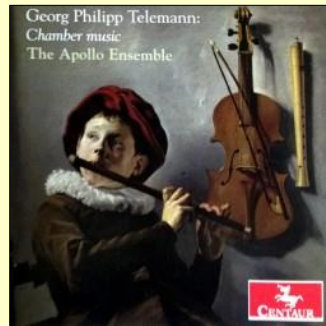
Georg Philipp Telemann was phenomenal. In his long lifetime (1681-1767) he composed perhaps four thousand works of music. And he had little recourse to the "re-heating" that most Baroque composers practiced as a matter of practical necessity. His mind was so amazingly fertile that he found it easier to compose an entirely new work that re-work an existing one. In his day, he was celebrated for combining the different national styles: German, French, Italian, and Polish, in music of universal appeal.

How well Telemann achieved this can be heard in the present offering of six concertos for various instruments by the baroque ensemble REBEL (pronounced re-BEL). The engaging performances feature the typical sound favored by this group: extremely bright and colorful, based on original-instrument timbres that you can almost taste and smell, though sometimes with an edge to them that contrasts with the smoothness cultivated by other ensembles. Their attack is sudden and decisive, sometimes startlingly so. All of this is in the interest of bringing out the character of each work they perform.

Actually, these works reveal an uneasy amalgam of styles, in that they are concertos, basically an Italian genre, with considerable elements that



for the instrumentalist as the aria is for the singer. The words may be of the greatest urgency, but the solace conveyed by the flute melody reassures us that comfort is close at hand.



Telemann: Chamber Music  
The Apollo Ensemble  
Centaur Records

More from the treasure trove of music by Georg Philipp Telemann. This time, it's from the Netherlands-based Apollo Ensemble, and they pay their Telemann with verve and authority, bringing out the distinctive color and beauty of the composer's music. That's important because Telemann gives the lie to the myth you may have heard that "it doesn't matter what instruments you employ" when the subject is music of the Baroque. On the contrary, the choice of instruments for a given work was most important to Telemann because the colors and harmonies he derived from them lend character to the music.

Like Bach in his 6<sup>th</sup> Brandenburg Concerto, Telemann also did not subscribe to the conventional wisdom that it was unwise to mix ancient and modern instruments in the same ensemble. Hence the presence of the viola da gamba in a non-traditional role as a melody instrument in the sonata in B minor for Violin, Viola da Gamba and Basso Continuo, TWV 42:h6 and the Concerto in B minor for Transverse Flute (*traverso*), Viola da Gamba, Bassoon, and Continuo, TWV 43:h3. Normally considered a slow, quiet voiced instrument, the gamba shines by virtue of its warm, gracious sound in movements such as the beautifully moving Largo that opens the former, while in the latter it keeps up with the prevailing traffic amid flute and bassoon as well as it can, then drops down to serve as an intermediary between the solo instruments and the basso continuo. Its timbre compliments the violin to perfection in the afore-mentioned sonata, creating the balance of soprano and bass voices that helps to make this music so very attractive.

Besides the two works mentioned above, we are given a Sonata in G minor and a Trio in E major from the collection *Essercizzi Musici* (musical exercises) and a Quartet in G major for Violin, Bassoon, and Continuo, TWV 43:G11. In all of these works, you can taste the various sounds of the solo violin, oboe, or flute. Idiomatic writing, "giving to each instrument what is suitable to it", was another Telemann preoccupation. Finally, the rhythmic characteristics of all these works are superbly realized by the players of the Apollo Ensemble, and never more than in the superb French-style Overture à 5 for Viola da Gamba, Strings and Continuo, TWV 55:D6 where Telemann excels in melodic inventiveness and requires smoothly

recall the earlier French *ouverture* and dance suite. The Concerto in d major for Trumpet, Violin and Strings, TWV 53:D5, for instance, is basically a violin concerto, originally written for the Bavarian virtuoso Georg Pisendel and here performed by REBEL director Jörg Michael Schwarz. The writing for solo violin, particularly in the gracious Adagio, reveals the sort of virtuosity that Telemann usually shunned. Even here, he added a trumpet in the outer movements to provide color and brilliance, and a cello to provide a secure foundation for the violin line (no Vivaldi, this guy!)

Perhaps the best-realized work on the program is the Concerto in E minor for 2 Transverse Flutes (*traversi*), Bassoon, and Strings, TWV 52:e2. Here, flautists Matthias Maute and Sophie Larivière revel in the elegant blends and gracious sounds that Telemann loved to exploit in his flute duets. In the Concerto in e minor for Recorder, Traverso and Strings, TWV 52:e1, Maute and Larivière easily give the lie to the hoary dictum of 18<sup>th</sup> century music authorities that one shouldn't combine the two "incompatible" instruments in the same work. The final movement reveals Telemann's lusty Polish style, an early and lasting influence in his career. Though not titled *Polonois* per se, it is clearly an energetic folk dance in that national style, complete with a rustic-sounding drone bass.



Bach: Magnificat, BWV243, Cantata, BWV147  
"Munich Bach Choir 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Oehms Classics

This Oehms release coincides with the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Munich Bach Choir and Bach Orchestra, originally founded by Karl Richter in 1954 and now under the direction of Hansjörg Albrecht. For the occasion, they have chosen two of their Bach standards, Cantata BWV 147 and the great Magnificat in D, BWV 243.

The cantata, whose title *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* can be translated "Heart and mouth and deed and life [must bear witness to Christ]" was written for a joyous occasion, the Feast of the Visitation of Mary. Accordingly, it is one of Bach's most festive works and is scored for four soloists and a four-part choir, plus trumpet, two oboes

executed changes in texture. Just listen to the way the *Bourée* lifts off smartly on the upbeat, imparting a zestful character to the venerable French country dance, and you will hear what I mean about the Apollo's attention to choice details.



### “House of Dreams”

Jeanne Lamon, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra  
Tafelmusik Media (DVD +CD)

Tafelmusik, under violinist and music director Jeanne Lamon, presents another magic carpet journey through the world of the Baroque, to compliment their stunning 2012 release “The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres.” Once again, this highly imaginative DVD was created, programmed and scripted by Tafelmusik bassist Alison Mackay, with technical support from the Banff Centre, where the program was first produced.

“Men see largely what they expect to see, and they record what seems to them important.” That sentence from the preface to the single-volume edition of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1960) is pretty sobering if you follow it to its conclusion: how can we hope to understand an era different from our own? In the Baroque period, the Greek and Latin classics were a vital part of education, hence the major part that the myth of the House of Dreams, from whence the gods send out Morpheus to visit our unconscious minds as we sleep, plays in the present program. It provides the framework for the program in general. We also have the myth of Alcyone, whose husband Ceyx was drowned at sea. To assuage her grief, the gods changed both into seabirds, termed “Halcyons” (*Kingfishers* to you) after her. Aeolus, god of the winds, now calms the wind and seas for a short period every winter so they might mate in safety.

These fanciful legends may seem slight, but they furnish the twin concepts that unite the present program. The Alcyone myth is echoed most closely by French composer Marin Marais' suite from the opera *Alcyone*, with its lively Tambourin and stirring Marches and its really sensational evocation of a storm-tossed Tempest, accompanied by hair-raising percussion slaps for the sound of thunder. The program of other music by Handel, Bach, and Vivaldi provides the Tafelmusik musicians with plenty of opportunity to display their characteristic audience-pleasing virtuosity, moving about and swaying in time to the music and interacting in close rapport when they bear down on the “hot licks” (*my* term, not theirs!)

The theme of a “house of dreams” permits us to travel on a grand tour into the glories of the past as we visit four 18<sup>th</sup> century homes – and one palace – in London, Venice, Paris, Delft, and Leipzig. The London home is that of George Frideric

(oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia), two violins, viola and a basso continuo that includes bassoon. With its stirring ritornellos and florid melismas, it is one of Bach's most instantly appealing cantatas.

The present recording features the splendid voices of soprano Andrea Lauren Brown, alto Olivia Vermeulen, tenor Julian Pégardien, and baritone Sebastian Noack. The solo arias for alto and soprano are accompanied by the rich sounds of oboe d'amore and violin, respectively, and the bass aria *Ich will von Jesu Wundern singen* (I will sing of the miracles of Jesus) by the full orchestra. It's a shame we don't hear this work more often, with the exception of the richly scored chorales that end both parts of the cantata and feature the enchanting melody that is often performed by itself as “Jesus, Joy of Man's Desiring.”

The Magnificat, the famous canticle of Mary, *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* (My soul doth magnify the Lord) is also appropriate for the Feast of the Visitation and is even more impressive in its instrumentation, consisting of three trumpets, timpani, traverse flute, two oboes (one an oboe d'amore), two violins, viola, and continuo. Bach used a five-part chorus for one of the few times in his career, and he added a Soprano II soloist (here, Lydia Teuscher) for the aria *Et exultavit spiritus meus* (and my spirit has exulted) and the terzett with Soprano I and Alto *Suscepit Israel puerum suum* (He has protected Israel his child).

Considering the stature of the Magnificat and the importance it has assumed over the years in programs of the Munich Bach Choir, the present account is less impressive than that of the cantata, and is slightly disappointing. It compensates for a certain lack of substance by its smoothness and transparency. That is attractive enough, certainly. But more brilliance, and even militancy, is required in such stirring moments as the choruses *Omnes generationes* (All generations) and *Fecit potentiam* (He hath made known the power of his arm), the tenor aria *Deposuit potentes* (He hath put down the mighty) and the bass aria *Quia fecit mihi magna* (He hath done great things for me). The bass voices, in particular, seem to be lacking in presence in these moments.

Well, everyone is entitled to an occasional sub-par day, even the Munich Bach choir, who have given better performances of the Magnificat in concert and on record. The present offering is still quite treasurable for the glorious account of BWV 147, one of the finest cantatas in the entire Bach canon.

Handel at 25 Brook Street, adjacent to present-day Mayfair. It is complete with the harpsichord at which Handel sat when he composed his *Messiah* and the room where he previewed his operas and oratorios to select audiences of no more than fifty persons. In his day Handel was an avid art collector who numbered Vermeer, Watteau and Canaletto among some 80 paintings. Handel House director Sarah Baldwin, in a bonus interview included with the DVD, describes its beautiful features. (Curiously, she leaves out the interesting fact that Handel's next-door "neighbor" at 23 Brook Street was no less than Jimi Hendrix. They just missed getting acquainted by two centuries or so...)

The CD repeats the music soundtrack from the DVD. Besides Marais' *Alcyone*, we have selections from concerti grossi of Handel and concertos by Vivaldi, including the famous Largo from the Lute Concerto, RV93; Purcell selections that include the tune from Act III of *The Indian Queen*, Bach's pulse-quickening Allegro from the Concerto for Two Violins, the Overture from Telemann's *Wassermusik*, and much else besides. All are done in Tafelmusik's inimitable style.