

Phil's Classical Reviews

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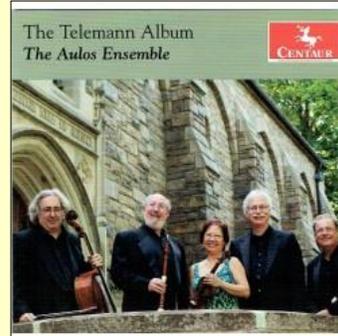


Handel: Concerti Grossi, Op. 6
Kevin Mallon, Aradia Ensemble
Naxos

Normally, you would want to dismiss someone who goes about in interviews proclaiming “I adore Handel” and “I adore making recordings” as something of a lightweight. In the case of Kevin Mallon, you would be dead wrong. For this musical artist of boundless energy and interests who was born in America, grew up in Belfast, was educated in England and now directs the excellent Aradia Ensemble, which he founded in Toronto in 1999, backs up his exuberance with music making that is both solid and joyous. When the subject is George Frideric Handel’s 12 Concerti Grossi, Op. 6, Mallon’s description of the composer’s music as “volatile, vital, boundlessly energetic” might well pass for a self-portrait.

Of course, that’s of no use unless you can communicate this sort of excitement to an audience. Or, as Mallon puts it, “We always try to bring this music forward as though it had been written yesterday.” The Mallon magic begins with Handel’s opening movements. Only two of them, in Concertos 5 and 10, are specifically marked as French Overtures, but most of the others have slow openings – usually marked Largo, Larghetto, or Largo affettuoso – and are followed by much quicker Allegros in fugal form, so that the effect is very much the same. Mallon and the Aradia take special care with the dotted rhythms of these opening movements, emphasizing both their nobility and lightness. Too many Baroque special specialists tend to treat dotted-rhythm passages with too much emphasis on the damned dots, with a result that, rather than expressing Handel’s grandeur, is more reminiscent of a hod carrier laboring to lift a heavy load of bricks. Mallon realizes that “staccato does *not* always mean rough,” and his emphasis in each instance is exactly right.

There are a lot of choice beauties throughout the Opus 6 set. One of the best-loved is the Musette of Concerto No. 6, a quick French dance with echoes of a bagpipes drone that has been popular with audiences from Handel’s day



“The Telemann Album”
Aulos ensemble
Centaur

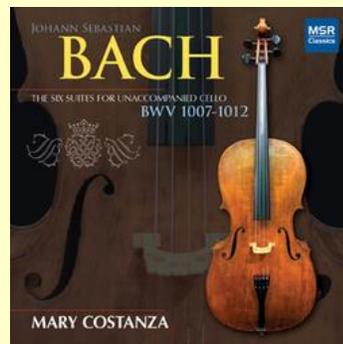
The Aulos Ensemble, consisting of flutist Christopher Krueger, oboist Marc Schachman, violinist Linda Quan, cellist Myron Lutzke, and harpsichordist Arthur Haas, have been in the early music business for some time. Since 1973, to be exact. As this delightful new album reveals on every track, forty years is not too long a time to get the music of Georg Philipp Telemann right. In fact, this is the first really convincing account I have yet heard of any of this composer’s trio sonatas and quartets for an intimate ensemble (loosely referred to as *tafelmusik*, “table music”). The reasons will intrigue you, as they did me.

For one, there’s the conversational tone in Telemann’s music. More than anyone else in Germany, he employed his skill in counterpoint to create a free and fluid relationship among the players that resembles the give and take of a conversation between four or five very eloquent and witty persons. And he understood to a high degree the importance of writing idiomatically in terms of the character of each individual instrument – as he put it, “giving to each instrument what is suitable to it.” Even the cello and harpsichord, instruments normally relegated to just sawing and tinkling away in the background as they realize the bass line or *basso continuo*, step out of their traditional roles in these works. Witness the way the harpsichord takes the stage by itself in the short but very importance *Grave* movement in the Quartet in G major, TWV 43:g2. As a transition, it calls on us to focus our attention just before the *Vivace* finale breaks out in the form of a rollicking Gigue. And the manner in which the cello interacts with the melody instruments in the *Gai* and *Gracieusement* movements of Quartet in E minor TWV 43:e4 serves to keep the music moving right along in fascinating ways.

The members of the Aulos Ensemble understand these subtleties in Telemann better than any other group in

to our own. The slow introduction to the same concerto, marked *Larghetto e affettuoso*, is one of the darkest movements Handel ever wrote, with a tragic pathos that reminds us of an operatic aria. The Siciliana in No. 8, a traditional Sicilian dance in triple meter and dotted rhythm, makes a fine impression here, as do the pulse-quickening Menuets of Nos. 5 and 9, the positively bucolic English Hornpipe of No. 7, and the utterly charming Polonaise of No. 3, combining courtly and rustic elements in a pastoral mood.

And utterly charming is the way Mallon and the Aradia Ensemble approach every single one of these concertos. Logically, we know that these works didn't just sit down one fine day and write themselves. But it *seems* as if they did. For the naturalness and spontaneity that come through in these performances are the last, best attainments of the musical artist.



Bach: The Six Cello suites
Mary Costanza, cellist
MSR Classics

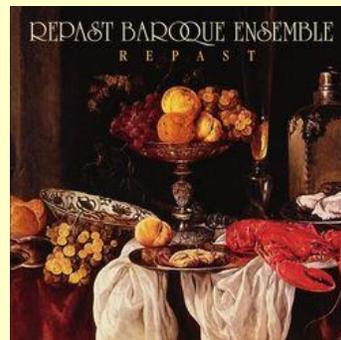
Mary Costanza, Freeport, New York native and prestigious award winner, studied with Zara Nelsova at the Juilliard School and currently maintains a thriving studio in Connecticut for cello students of all ages. In her pursuit of the essential character and inner truth in JS. Bach's 6 Suites for Unaccompanied Cello. BWV1007-1012, she is truly in her element.

As familiar as the cello suites are to us today, there was a period in the years B.C. (before Casals), and for some time afterwards, when they were commonly regarded as "exercises," rather than main performance repertoire. The key to understanding them, which Costanza and other latter-day artists appreciate, is an awareness of rhythm and rhythmic flexibility. Applying that knowledge, Bach's engaging family of dance suites for solo cello can come to immediate, vibrant life under a skilled and insightful interpreter such as Costanza. Lacking it, the results can be depressingly academic.

All the suites are laid out in the same pattern: Prelude, Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, then a "*galanterie*" or a gracious, complimentary dance and its "double" (Menuets in Suites 1-2, Bourées in 3-4, Gavottes in 5-6) with a concluding Gigue, or "jig." The difference in the way Bach treats these movements from one suite to the next has a

my experience as a listener and reviewer. Immersing themselves in the Telemann style helps them bring out the distinguishing features that turn a simple dance or *galanterie* into a character piece. Or witness how skillfully they blend the sounds and colors of the solo instruments, oboe and transverse flute, in the softly expressive *Dolce* movement in the Trio Sonata in E minor, TWV 42:e2. This was a combination of instruments and key (E major) that Baroque composers generally shied away from because of difficulties of balance. But not Telemann! The Aulos musicians show us that the old boy really knew what he was doing.

Did I say "old boy"? Telemann (1681-1767) was one of history's longest-lived composers and its most prolific (more than 3000 compositions). With his amazingly fertile mind, he re-used less of his own material ("re-heating" was the current name for it) than anyone else in his era. The *Vivace* finale to the Concerto a Quattro in A minor, TWV 43:a3 reveals Telemann's brilliant use of Vivaldi-style ritornello to showcase oboe, recorder, and violin (here performed by Aulos with terrific enthusiasm), showing that he could play the other fellow's game, too.



"Repast," Music of Buxtehude, Couperin, Leclair, and Rameau
The Repast Ensemble
MSR Classics

The Repast Baroque Ensemble, consisting of Amelia Roosevelt, baroque violin; John Mark Rozendaal, viola da gamba, and Avi Stein, harpsichord, are really in great form in this program of (mostly) French Baroque music. In fact, this eponymously named album of music by Couperin, Leclair, Rameau and others captures the excitement and verve of the music of this era better than I have ever heard it done by others. By contrast, most performances of French Baroque emphasize the spiritual qualities of the music at the expense of a rather static formality. Not so Repast (the ensemble), and so "Repast" (the album) lives up to its title as a detectable musical feast. But it isn't intuitively easy to play this music as well as they do. You have to understand the style.

French Baroque style is somewhat idiosyncratic. As with Purcell and his English contemporaries, you have to take the French on their own terms (which, come to

lot to do with the essential character of each work. For brevity. I'm going to focus on Suites 1 and 5.

As with his six suites for keyboard, Bach leads off the set with the most typical and most accessible specimen. Suite No. 1 in G major begins auspiciously with a jaunty Prelude in arpeggiated chords. The straightforward, semi-improvisatory character of this movement carries over to the other movements. This is particularly noticeable in the simple happiness of Menuets I and II, a mood which Costanza expresses very well.

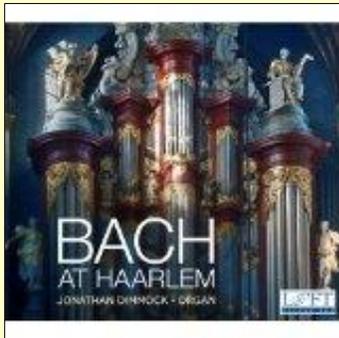
The Prelude of Suite No. 5 in C minor is the darkest, most emotionally charged of the entire set. Costanza really bears down here in order to bring out its essential character in the process of a slow exploration of the cello's deepest range. Concluded by a fast, powerful single-line fugue, it sets the tone for the rest of the suite, beginning with a rather formally constrained Allemande and a Courante that seems more dispirited than any gliding dance in quick triple meter has a right to be. Costanza gives the slow, intimate Sarabande, deep water mark of all the suites, a personal interpretation that underscores its Passion-like pathos. The prevailing mood even casts its shadow on Bourées I and II, normally upbeat dances in quick duple time, and is only dispelled by the alacrity of the concluding Gigue. The overall impression of somberness remains.

The intimate nature of Costanza's performances is superbly underscored by the support she receives in the sound booth by Wayne Hilleman, who recorded, edited and mastered these recordings using Candlewood Digital's Natural Presence™ technology.

think of it, is wise advice no matter what period of history). The French used trills and other ornaments essentially for expressive, emotional purposes. They favored strong down beats. And they played the down-bow notes longer than the weaker up-bow notes, a practice known as *notes inégales* ("unequal notes"), which imparts a smoothly swung, jazzy rhythm to passages where they occur. Together with their absolute clarity of voicing and rhythm, the Repast musicians understand this style so well it has become instinctive with them, informing their performances of every work on the present program.

The heart of the program is decidedly French. We have François Couperin's *La Parnasse*, or The Apotheosis of Corelli, in which guest artist Claire Jolivet takes the violin I part. This programmatic and propagandistic work (Couperin was trying to get French listeners to accept the Italian style by means of a tribute to its most prominent master, Arcangelo Corelli) provides plenty of opportunity for delicate musical effects. Jean-Marie Leclair's Trio sonata in D, op. 2, No. 8 affords much pleasure in its effortless silvery virtuosity for the violin and its interaction with a robust *basse de viole*. And Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Pieces de Clavecin*, 3me Concert ends in a rousing dance, a Tambourin in which everything I said earlier about downbeats goes double!

The other major composer in this Baroque feast, the Danish-born Dietrich Buxtehude, is represented by Trio Sonata No. 3 in G minor. The members of Repast obviously relish this fine work with its Andante in the form of a dreamy Passacaglia and a Gigue that they themselves describe as spinning effortlessly like a top. The bookends of the program are real discoveries: Netherlands composer Carolus Hacquart (1640–1701) whose Sonata No. 6 in D minor is a tasteful mixture of canzone, virtuosic passages and "*bizarre*," and Jacques Morel (ca.1700-1749), whose light fantastic Chaconne en Trio is theatrical in the best French style.



"Bach at Haarlem"

Jonathan Dimmock plays the Organ of the Cathedral of St. Bavo, Haarlem, Netherlands
Loft Recordings

American organist Jonathan Dimmock gives a vitally refreshing Bach recital marked by an unhurried sublimity and clarity of purpose. His approach is ideally suited to the instrument at hand, the 1738 Christian Müller organ at the "*Grote Kerk*" of St. Bavo at Haarlem, Netherlands. The instrument, which this year celebrates the 275th anniversary of its dedication, has an attractive golden quality which together with its clearly defined registration, completely belies its age. Only in the last track, at the conclusion of the blissfully joyful Chorale Prelude BWV 715, *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Her* (To God alone on high be glory) do we have the slightest imperfection in the form of a sticking valve (and *that* may in fact be a repeated note for stylistic purposes). The "great Haarlem organ," as Herman Melville alluded to it in passing in *Moby Dick*, has obviously been lovingly maintained.

The thoughtfully designed program consists of four major works – Preludes and Fugue in E minor, BWV 548 and E major, BWV 566, Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565, and the great Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582 – interspersed with the Chorale Preludes, BWV 709, 715, 720, 731, and 737. It's a beautifully balanced program filled with charm, joyous sublimity, drama, passion, and even a spot of comic relief in the form of the “Jig” Fugue in G major, BWV 577 which dances merrily on its nonchalant way in the present performance.

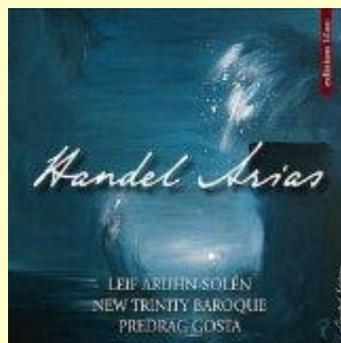
Nor does the all-too familiar Toccata and Fugue in d minor, favorite organ piece of cinematic mad geniuses, dominate the proceedings. With its single-voice flourish in the upper range of the keyboard, doubled at the octave, and then spiraling towards the bottom, the Toccata makes its wonted splash, but no more. The pride of place is reserved for the Passacaglia, with its wide-ranging expression beginning with a noticeable “sigh” of infinite longing, a striking effect, at the very opening, and then pursuing a long journey in search of God, characterized by its arching symmetrical structure. Occurring midway through the program (which is rather symmetrically structured itself) it is the apex of Bach's organ music.

The other major works make a definite impression, too. The restlessly probing Prelude and Fugue, BWV 548. Sometimes known as the “Wedge” because of the shape of its fugal subject, is an excellent choice to lead off the program, and the Prelude and Fugue, BWV 566, with its charming fughetta in the second section, followed by the blissful peace of the afore-mentioned Chorale Prelude *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Her* makes for a perfect ending.

Edition Lilac Makes the Baroque Scene

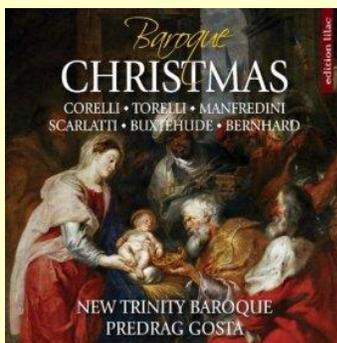
Your intrepid reviewer has journeyed around the world in recent years in search of material from the current Baroque Revival for these Classical Reviews. I've travelled from Canada to New York, New England, the British Isles and the European continent in search of choice morsels from a movement that is truly international in scope and gaining momentum all the time. All this, I must confess, from the security of my comfortable armchair. Little did I dream, until quite recently, of the choice morsels that were closer to home in the form of Edition Lilac.

That's the name of the in-house label of Atlanta's own New Trinity Baroque. Its founder, Belgrade, Serbia native Predrag Gosta, studied at London's Trinity College of Music (hence the ensemble's name) and Georgia State University in Atlanta. Under his artistic direction, NTB offers as much in the way of vocal as it does instrumental delights. From what I hear on the following trio of CDs, these quality recordings have an unusually well-defined presence, making them a pleasure to audition. My only excuse for not noticing this fine ensemble earlier is a medical condition that keeps me from getting about town at night. At any rate, it's time to make amends – as witness below...



Handel: Arias
Leif Ahrun-Solén, Predrag Gosta,
New Trinity Baroque
Edition Lilac

“Handel Arias” showcases the tenor voice of Stockholm native Leif Ahrun-Solén in a program of zestful Handel arias from opera and oratorio. Of course, the selections from the English-language oratorios will have



Baroque Christmas
Kathryn Mueller, Wanda Yang
Temko, Predrag Gosta, New Trinity
Baroque
Edition Lilac

This thoughtfully designed program shows the range of expression that the Baroque masters used to convey the sense of mystery, wonder, and joy in the miracle of Christmas. To that end many of the string passages



Vivaldi: Concertos
Predrag Gosta, New Trinity Baroque
Edition Lilac

This Vivaldi program is designed for maximum listener appeal and also to show the range of the concerto style of Antonio Vivaldi. We have choice examples here of his concertos for string orchestra, for solo violin and

the greatest interest for an American audience (Ahrun-Solén's English diction is, happily, exceptional). But the Italian arias have their charm, as well. Increasingly, as time goes by, they are appealing to broader audiences and not just Baroque aficionados.

These include two arias, "*Forte e lieto*" (Brave and happy) and "*Empio, per fatti Guerra*" (Impious, to make war) from Tamerlano and "*La Gloria in nobil alma*" (Glory in a proud soul) from Partenope, the last-named allowing the artist to display some really sensational Handelian embellishments in the vocal line.

The more familiar fare includes a selection of favorite arias by Handel: "Love in her eyes" from the pastoral play *Acis and Galathea*, "Where're you walk" from *Semele*, "Gentle airs, melodious strains" from *Athalia*, the stirring aria "The enemy said" from *Israel in Egypt*, and the gently consoling "Waft her, angels, through the skies" from *Jephtha*. Best of all is Ahrun-Solén's rendition of the tragic "Total eclipse: no sun, no moon" from *Samson*, occurring at the psychological moment when the hero realizes with horror the full impact of his blindness.

The program, recorded at New Trinity Baroque's favorite venue, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Atlanta, concludes with two "bonus tracks" taken from live performances, the evergreen "Comfort ye, my people / Ev'ry valley" from *Messiah* and Trio Sonata in G minor, HWV 393, in which the languid Largo is the most memorable movement.

Being backed by a small ensemble of 2 violins, viola, cello, plus a continuo of violone and organ, instead of by a larger orchestra, allows the singer to make his points without undue exertion. As with the other albums reviewed in this column, the pacing is so superb I was unaware of the passing of time to the degree that my estimate fell far short of the total playing time.

in the Christmas Concertos of the Italian composers Arcangelo Corelli, Giuseppe Torelli, and Francesco Manfredini are softly expressive, conveying the beauty of an enchanted night.

Only in the "Pastoral" movements do we have heightened music to express the joy of the shepherds – and incidentally allow the composers the chance to engage in delicious musical painting imitating the sounds of traditional rustic instruments, the bagpipes and the hurdy-gurdy, by means of a drone in the bass. Holy mystery and down to earth joy thus meet agreeably in these works.

The vocal music includes two German texts, first the cantata "*Das neugebor'ne Kinderlein*" (the newborn Babe) by Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707), with a vocal quartet comprised of soprano Kathryn Mueller, countertenor Chris Conley, tenor Brian Thorsett, and bass Cameron Beauchamp doing the honors in four-part harmony. Then, we have a solo *Weihnachtskonzert* (Christmas concert) "*Fürchtet euch nicht!*" (Fear not, for behold, I bring you glad tidings) by Christoph Bernhard (1628-1692), highlighted at the end by Mueller's florid *Alleluja*.

Buxtehude's Passacaglia in d minor, a series of continuous variations on a canzona, is masterfully performed by the string ensemble. The sonics, which capture the role of the cello and violone in maintaining a clear underlying bass, are superb.

The crown jewel of the proceedings is Alessandro Scarlatti's *Cantata pastorale per la natività di Nostre Signore* in which the soprano voice of Wanda Yang Temko is employed to best advantage. It is one of the great works of the Baroque era, and this singer conveys its sublimity and the seamless rise and fall of the vocal line to complete perfection.

cello and double instruments, plus a jewel showcasing the lute, all served up on a soundstage that provides ample foil for the abundant beauties on display.

The Concertos for 2 Violins in A minor, RV 522 and 2 Cellos in G minor, RV 531 are the bookends in a symmetrically designed program. The former, with violinists Carrie Krause and Daniela Giulia Pierson, epitomizes the zestful ethos of Vivaldi's Opus 3, *L'Estro Armonico* (Harmonic Inspiration) in which it occurs. The latter, with cellists Andre Laurent O'Neil and Christina Babich Rosser doing the honors, ends the program on a rousing note.

In between, we have O'Neil performing the Cello Concerto in D minor, RV 407, with its spiritually poignant slow movement *Largo e sempre piano* one of the jewels of the Baroque repertoire for that instrument, and Krause shining to good advantage in the Violin Concerto in E minor, RV 273, with its expressive dotted passages in "Lombard rhythm" in the opening Allegro movement calling for special notice. The two Concertos for Strings in F major, RV 141 and G minor, RV 157 have plenty of choice unison and contrapuntal passages that engage the entire ensemble to good effect.

The Concerto for Lute, 2 Violins and Continuo, RV 93 contains another favorite Baroque gem in its pensive and poignant *Largo* movement, which occurs in the exact center of the program, Track 11 of 21 (what did I say about symmetry?) Michael Fields, lutenist and co-producer of the album, gets just the right sonic focus for his delicately voiced instrument, an archlute with a long neck that actually has more in common with the harpsichord than it does the guitar which is so often heard in performances of this work. And Gosta provides subtly unobtrusive support with his organ continuo.