

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

April, 2012



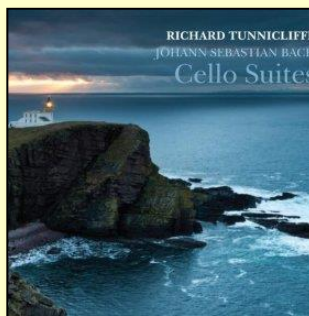
Venetian Oboe Concerti  
Marc Schachman, baroque oboe  
Thomas Crawford, American Classical Orchestra  
Centaur Records

For sheer glorious sound, this program is hard to beat. The title "Venetian Oboe Concert" does need to be taken with a small grain of salt, as the inclusion of George Friedric Handel is based on the slight justification that his earliest operatic success was premiered in Venice. Of significance is the fact that of the four baroque composers represented here – Handel, Vivaldi, Albinoni, and Alessandro Marcello – all but the last-named, a gentleman of private means who did not need to make his way in the public arena, were operatic composers. For the oboe, with its broad singing register and penetrating timbre, was the obligato instrument par excellent when accompanying soulful operatic arias.

Oboist Marc Schachman shows a decided affinity for the music presented here, though he admits a minor frustration with the fact that Vivaldi, in his Concerto in a minor, RV 461 and Marcello, in his Concerto in D minor, wrote out their ornamentation so thoroughly that the performer is left little room to improvise. Indeed, Schachman was obliged to confess, after studying and analyzing the latter, that "any improvised accounts on my part seemed to pale in comparison."

No such restrictions on the performer exist in the two works from the *Concerti a Cinque*, Op. 9 of Tomaso Albinoni, particularly in the Adagio of Concerto No. 2 in D minor, which invites the oboist's participation in the way of inspired decoration. This Adagio has earned a special place as a purple patch in collections of "Baroque Favorite Hits" for its unforgettably haunting beauty, which makes it a standout even in the present extremely fast company. In Schachman's ornamentation, the languid melody emerges even more soulful than before.

The Handel Concerto in G minor, a product of the early Italianate phase of his career, allows plenty of room for decoration, too, particularly in the third movement, a Sarabande that provides the performer abundant



Bach: The 6 Suites for Solo Cello  
Richard Tunnicliffe, cellist  
Linn Records

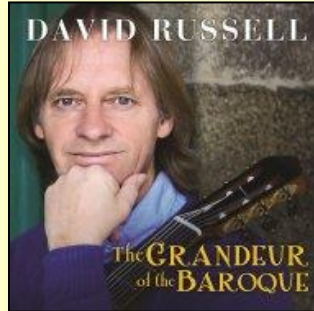
British cellist Richard Tunnicliffe combines scholarship, deep feeling, and technique in a consistent, unified vision as he gives memorable accounts of J. S. Bach's Suites for Solo Cello, BWV 1007-1012. The prevailing mood is sober, though not always somber, as he explores the depths of these Bach masterpieces. In the process, he does a good job characterizing six unruly siblings from the same parental stock.

To a cursory glance at the table of contents, the Bach suites look much the same. They all have an identical formal layout: a prelude, and then a suite of dances consisting of Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, a pair of "galanteries," popular dances to the measures of which folks actually tripped in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Menuetts in Suites 1 & 2, Bourées in 3, 4; Gavottes in 5, 6), and then finally a Gigue, continental cousin to the familiar Irish jig. The difference, as usual, was in the details. The Preludes, for instance, range from the straightforward comparative simplicity of Suite 1, with its graceful arpeggiated chords that flow forth in semi-improvisatory manner, to the complexities of the Prelude in 5, the most fully developed example of a French Overture in the set, complete with a lively and challenging fugue.

The Allemandes range from the up-beat, extroverted one in 3, with its quick little runs and jumps across the strings, to the decidedly somber one in 2 which strays far from the expected mood of the venerable old dance form. Perhaps the most famous Sarabande in the set is the one in 5, one of the few movements in the entire set that doesn't contain any chords, just a pure outpouring of lyricism that inhabits a world beyond suffering and pain. (Listeners who may have been unaware of its origin will recognize it as the music Yo-Yo Ma played in New York during a televised tribute to the bombing victims on the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.)

Perhaps the most striking example of Tunnicliffe's ability

opportunity at the end of each repeated section for the sort of baroque ornaments that were considered essential to give a piece of music its characteristic beauty. Here, as elsewhere, Schachman makes his points. With the support of the string orchestra, which is particularly sturdy in its bass lies, it all makes for a memorable program.



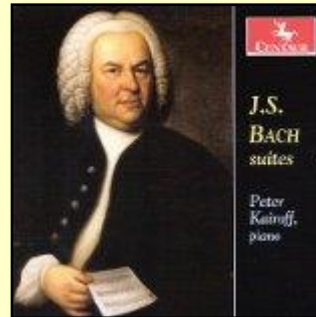
“The Grandeur of the Baroque,”  
Music of Bach, Handel, Couperin, Weiss  
David Russell, guitar  
Telarc

This aptly-named guitar program consists mostly of guitar transcriptions of baroque suites originally designed for harpsichord. The “grandeur” of these suites was largely a result of their far-ranging design, typically beginning with something like the stately French *ouverture* in dotted rhythms that opens Handel’s Suite No. 7 in G minor, HWV 432, and then going on to include a varied spectrum of dance-inspired movements, including the Sarabande, a dance movement of markedly poignant or contemplative nature, in addition to livelier dances (Courante, Minuet, Gigue, etc). The Handel entry, one of the composer’s “eight great suites,” is remarkable for the majestic quality of its *Ouverture* with a spirited fugal passage in markedly quicker time, the unusually moving character of its *Allemande*, and the fact that it ends with a *Pasacaille*, a set of increasingly intricate variations on a repeating chord pattern above a ground bass.

Here, as elsewhere in the program, David Russell’s performance is unfailingly high-profile and scintillatingly precise. For that reason, you might wish to cut down the volume gain from your usual listening level in order not to harm the delicate interrelationships in a work such as the 26<sup>th</sup> *Ordre* (i.e., suite) of French composer Francois Couperin. Elegantly phrased, expressive sentiments are the rule in Couperin. As in other works of this composer, we are provided with fanciful descriptive titles for the movements, which may be merely personal associations or a matter of whimsy on Couperin’s part, but often provide a key to interpretation. “*La Convelescente*” undoubtedly refers to Couperin himself, in a period of declining health, delicately expressed and deftly captured here by Russell’s performance. “*La Sophie*” is probably a corruption of *Sufi*, the dervishes of Persia whose whirling motions are reflected in the music.

Sylvius Leopold Weiss, the greatest lutenist of his day, is represented by a very handsome Suite in D major which

to define the prevailing character of a suite occurs in No. 2 in D minor, in which the powerful chords that conclude the Prelude’s scale-based cadenza and the strikingly subdued, even tragic, mood of the Sarabande cast a pall over all the subsequent dance movements. That includes even the markedly dispirited Menuett 1 (which is *not* what we usually think of as characteristic of this dance) and a Gigue in which the alacrity seems forced, rather than spontaneous. Compare these to the simple happiness of the Menuetts in Suite 1 and the sprightly Gigue in dotted notes in 6, and you will hear what I mean.



Bach: Suites  
Peter Kairiff, piano  
Centaur Records

Los Angeles-born pianist Peter Kairiff knows what the music of J. S. Bach is all about, to judge from this program of three of the master’s best known keyboard suites. Included here are the French Suite in G major, BWV 816; English Suite in G minor, BWV 808; and Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826. In all these performances, Kairiff shows a keen understanding of the sheer daring in terms of rhythmic and contrapuntal values that make Bach’s music what it is. As a plus for the home listener, these performances are even very attractive in purely sensual terms, making them a joy to re-audition again and again.

As you may gather from the titles, these are three examples of Baroque keyboard suites, though attempting to define the precise differences between “French” or “English” Suite and “Partita” can, and has, driven scholars somewhat squirrely. For example, not one of the French suites begins with a French *ouverture*; Partita No. 2 does, though it is described as a “sinfonia,” which it not – at least in the Italian sense. (Go chase your tail, puppy!) Regardless of what you call them, each of these works has its own distinctive style, which Kairiff is at pains to communicate to us.

In the French Suite BWV 816, Kairiff expresses the music’s sunny nature and clarity. The *Allemande*, a German dance, has a surprisingly deep, expressive character, rivaling the tenderly intimate Sarabande for pride of place as the deep water mark of this suite. Following this are three *galenteries*, pieces in dance tempo that might actually have been adaptable for dancing, with some minor adjustments of which any

includes some surprises in addition to what one usually expected of a baroque suite. In addition to its noble Allemande, lively (indeed, rather jumpy) Courante, dignified if restrained Sarabande, and quick-paced Minuet, we are given an unusual item in the Angloise, an English country dance whose footfalls are echoed in its vigorous downbeats. As with Handel, Weiss concludes matters with a spacious Pasacaille that manages to wear its learning lightly, at least in the present performance.

One of the most memorable items in the entire program occurs at the its very outset in the form of J. S. Bach's Toccata from Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830, combining semi-improvisational figurations with deeply expressive moods that would do justice to one of Bach's Passion arias. In Russell's hands, this is truly a great musical moment. The guitarist devotes an equal degree of care to the four transcriptions of keyboard Sinfonias (otherwise known as "Three-Part Inventions") that conclude the Bach section of the program. These polished miniatures are further proof of the truism one often observes in music, that it's the size of the musical ideas, not their brief duration, which matters.

good keyboard player of Bach's day was capable. The Gavotte and Bourée are both in quick double time, the main difference being the placement of the upbeat. The Loure was much slower; the one presented here is remarkable for its melancholy beauty, and was probably better heard as a purely instrumental piece than actually danced to. A Gigue (that is, "jig") in perpetual motion concludes the suite. Kairoff characterizes this rouser well, especially in the exciting moment when Bach inverts the melody, turning it upside-down and landing on the dominant with a vengeance!

The English Suite, BWV 808 begins with a "Prelude" that is actually a full-blown Italian concerto movement, rather than a mere curtain raiser. The lively exchange between "solo" and "orchestral" passages shows Bach had taken his study to Vivaldi to heart. There are a lot of attractive features here, including a poignant Sarabande and two spirited Gavottes, the second of which has a drone in the bass that would have recalled a rustic bagpipes or hurdy-gurdy. Kairoff understands the dynamics of this work so well that, given the paucity of really convincing accounts of the six English suites, one hopes that this artist will honor us at some future date with the complete set.

In the Partita BWV 826, Kairoff captures all the variety and drama of the opening Sinfonia, which is in three sections: a stately French Overture in dotted-note rhythms, a brief but lovely lyrical interlude, and a really thrilling, muscular fugue in two voices. Of particular interest here are the Courante, a lively triple-meter dance in two parts, and a "capriciously" playful Capriccio in which the melody leaps back and forth between the two hands, in place of the expected Gigue. This particular Courante has its moments of pleasant rhythmic peril in the transitions between sections, so much so that I've never heard a performance on piano where these moments didn't sound a bit awkward. (Like a soldier crossing through a minefield, the object is survival, not style points.) Kairoff, to his credit, accomplishes this Courante with as little discomfort as I've heard it done.

## Canada's Tafelmusik Launches New Label



In keeping with the trend of musical organizations to guide their own musical destinies, at least as far as audiovisual recordings are concerned, the Toronto-based Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra has rolled out its own in-house label, Tafelmusik Media. I can't think of a better way for the internationally famed organization to celebrate its 30th anniversary than it has with *The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres*. Since 2011 was the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of yet another significant event, the first public demonstration of the newly perfected telescope of the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, the concept for this staged multi-media program combining glorious music, inspired narration by actor Shaun Smyth, and beautiful high-definition images derived from the Hubble telescope and the efforts of Canadian and NASA astronomers, seemed a natural. We see director Jeanne Lamon and the members of Tafelmusik moving and swaying in time to a banquet of music by Monteverdi, Lully, Purcell, Rameau, Vivaldi, Bach, and Leopold Sylvius Weiss (*Who dat last name?* He won't be a stranger once you've heard the Allegro from his Concerto in C, played by Tafelmusik member Lucas Harris on a fantastic-sounding Baroque lute!)

The program, designed by Alison Mackay, Tafelmusik's bassist, and executed with the resources of the Banff Centre in Alberta, traces the relations of astronomy, music, and scientific speculation in the time-honored concept of "The Music of the Spheres," through the experiences of Galileo, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton, culminating in an imaginary re-creation of a Festival of the Planets, in which both Bach and Telemann participated, that was held in conjunction with a wedding in at the royal court of Dresden in September 1719. The most telling chapters, in terms of human drama, concern the story of Galileo. We experience the excitement and ecstasy he felt at being able to view the cosmos clearly for the first time through his telescope, his trial and house arrest, his sadness at the tragic death of his beloved daughter through the stress of that time, and the resilient spirit of his final years, living in solitude and playing the lute for consolation. A great story, movingly related here.

The total package includes an 86:47 DVD plus a 56:54 CD compilation of the music heard in the program. Two bonus tracks on the DVD feature stunning special effects, culminating with an account of the Chaconne from Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Phaeton* in which splendid Baroque court settings and performing images of the members of Tafelmusik emerge and disappear suddenly like figures in a children's pop-up book, with a verve that will take your breath away. How do they do that? (Here's the straight inside dope: it's magic!)



Vivaldi: The Four Seasons  
Jeanne Lamon, director  
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra

Just when we thought we knew everything there was to know about The Four Seasons, along comes this quality 20-bit remastering of the recording originally released by Sony in 1992 to prove how mistaken we were. Tafelmusik's account of Vivaldi's masterwork is distinguished for more than one reason. There's a real sense of the vital rhythms in these performances, especially in the dance-inspired measures that open "Spring" and "Autumn," when you can almost feel, as well as hear, the tread of the footfalls.

These are strongly characterized performances in which we get a distinct impression of the effects Vivaldi was aiming for in his musical picture-painting: the oddly dissonant call of the turtle dove in "Summer," for example, or the slurred and staccato quarter-notes in the finale of "Winter," allowing us to virtually *feel* the discomfort of someone trying to walk on slippery ice. And let's not forget the barking of the dog on a moonlit night, as realized by the



Bach: Brandenburg Concertos  
Jeanne Lamon, director  
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra

The thing about J. S. Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos, which the strongly inflected, beautifully characterized performances by Jeanne Lamon and the members of Tafelmusik bring out, is just how wildly heterogeneous this restless family of six fractious concertos are. As opposed to the Opus 6 collections of concerti grossi by Corelli and Handel, there is no concept of a "proper" concerto at work here. Brandenburg No. 4 comes closest, and even then Bach deliberately sets problems of balance between the needs of virtuosity and fugal form in the final (which he resolves admirably, by the way). They are really closer to Handel's Opus 2 set of concerto grossi, and even more extreme in their wild diversity.

Tafelmusik pulls off one of the most satisfying accounts of the six Brandenburgs I've ever heard on record because of the traits that inform all their performances in general: absolutely clarity, particularly in the bass; clearly



Vivaldi: Concertos for Strings  
Jeanne Lamon, director  
Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra

Although only the Concerto in D major, Op. 3, no. 1, RV 549, is actually taken from the collection known as *L'Estro Armonico* (Harmonic Ecstasy), all nine of the concerti appearing on this breathlessly paced 66-minute program might just as well bear that appellation, as they all reflect, in various ways, Vivaldi's ever restless experimentation.

Four of these works are, in fact, carefully crafted examples of "concerti for strings" (concerti ripieni), where there are no solo instruments as such. Averaging less than five and a half minutes each, they tend to have sparkling, effervescent outer movements and short middle ones that are often little more than extended bridge passages. Of special interest is the fugue that permeates the opening of the F minor concerto, RV 143.

The two Concertos for Cello, in A minor, RV 418 and G major, RV 413, are the most memorable on the

rasping staccato of the violas, a sound booklet annotator H.C. Robbins Landon describes as “genuinely lonely . . . with a deep sense of sadness.”

Jeanne Lamon really gives us an impression of the dominant role the principal violin plays in these concerti, more than I've customarily heard in other versions. It's not just in the dazzlingly virtuosic figurations in the upper range that create an indelible impression of the fury of a sudden thunderstorm in “Summer” or the double stops that relate to the chattering teeth of a wayfarer in “Winter.” We hear it also in the thirds, fourths and sixths with which the solo violin imitates the calls of the hunting horns in “Autumn” and the wonderful moment when it passes the enchanting song of the cuckoo to the whole string orchestra in “Summer.”

Vivaldian magic continues in the two other items on this compact disc, the powerfully dissonant *Sinfonia al Santo Sepolcro* (for the Holy sepulcher), with its anguished chromatic harmonies appropriate to a work intended for performance during Holy week, and the Concerto for Four Violins, Op. 3, No. 10, with its indescribable rhythmic brilliance epitomizing the collection whose title, *l'Estro armonico* (Harmonic Ecstasy) says it all.

articulated melodic lines, and the way solo instruments emerge from the ensemble naturally, with just the right amount of presence. If you observe first principles as these musicians do, you can afford to be as audacious as they are.

Case in point: the spontaneous way in which the three groups each of violins, violas, and cellos combine, separate, and exchange motifs in Brandenburg 3, sometimes with a single instrument setting itself up as a solo for a while and then merging back into the group. Or the way the harpsichord gradually moves into its epoch-making cadenza in 5 in after first mildly affirming its role by being the first of the three solo instruments to handle the theme in the opening movement. The fast movements crackle with excitement, while the slow ones, such as the *Andante* for oboe and recorder in 2 and the aptly titled *Affettuoso* in 5, are often unexpectedly poignant, revealing the depths and the bare, yawning landscapes this composer is capable of exploring.

The eminently social nature of 18<sup>th</sup> century life comes through here, too, particularly in the dance-inflected lilt to the finales in concertos 1 and 6. Great sound, in 20-bit remasterings of 1993-1994 recordings originally released by Sony, captures all this and much more in optimal sonic perspective.

program in many ways. Both feature the distinguished presence of the guest artist, Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma, the eloquent tone of whose instrument (Matteo Goffriller 1669) adds immeasurably to our enjoyment of the darkly lyrical beauty of the slow movements in both works. Typically, Vivaldi trades on the contrast between the cello's rich bass register and its songlike tenor.

Bylsma is also heard in the double concerto for violin and cello, RV 547, and the “double double” concerto for 2 violins and 2 celli, RV 575. In the latter, there is a surprising episode in the middle of the final movement in which the tempo slows as the violins engage in a charming duet over figurations based on broken chords in the celli – more evidence of Vivaldi's hectic creative ingenuity.

The music on this CD is extremely attractive. Some of the moments are evanescent, as well as effervescent, in the sense that they tend to pass quickly from memory once they have been heard. This is particularly true of the *ripieno* concerti, though I found they retained their freshness on repeated auditions. All the works heard here benefit from the spirited, dedicated playing of the members of the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, a group that never fails to satisfy.