

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Celebrating the Baroque

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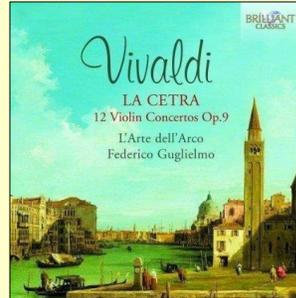
“Concerti Romani,” music of Corelli, Valentini, Locatelli, Castrucci, Geminiani – I Musici (Dynamic Recordings)

“Concerti Romani” celebrates the so-called “Roman School,” students and composers influenced by the pathbreaking musical style of Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713). There is a good deal of variety in this program given by the later-day successors of the original Italian baroque ensemble I Musici, formed in 1951. Sixty-five years later, I Musici’s penchant for smart tempi and brilliant sound seems to be alive and well.

The program begins, appropriately, with Corelli’s forward-looking Concerto Grosso, Op. 6, No. 4 in D major. It is notable for its inspired articulation of ideas and its bold rhythms. A high-energy performance puts this work over in a brisk timing of 9:02 (compared with 9:52 for Ross Pople and The London Festival and 10:35 for Sigiswald Kuijken and La Petite Bande). At that, they are a little slow in the transition between 2: Adagio and 3: Vivace, principally because they treat these items as separate movements, rather than taking the one as a slow prelude to the other. But the bracing pickup in tempi in the final section of the folk dance-flavored Allegro comes across well.

Giuseppe Valentini is represented by a very ambitious Concerto Grosso in A minor, Op. 7, No. 11. It is notable for its expanded concertino of four violins, viola, and cello and the manner in which it rings up contrapuntal effects among them in a stunning Allegro movement that follows the opening Largo. Violin virtuosity and a sometimes bizarre “out of the box” imagination are Valentini’s trademarks in this work.

Pietro Locatelli was so taken with the style of Corelli that he modeled his Op. 11 along the lines of the older composer’s Op. 6, even to the extent of including a “Christmas” Concerto in the eight position. Locatelli’s Concerto Grosso in C minor, No. 11, heard here, opens with a stately Largo in the Corelli style, followed by a suite of lively dances – Allemanda, Sarabanda, Giga – that mark it as a *concerto da camera* (chamber



Vivaldi: “La Cetra,” 12 Violin Concertos, Op. 9
Federico Guglielmo, L’Arte dell’Arco
(Brilliant Classics) 2-CD slimline

In one of the finest fruits in its multi-year collaboration with the Istituto Italiano Antonio Vivaldi, L’Arte dell’Arco presents stunning accounts of Vivaldi’s Opus 9, twelve concertos published as “La Cetra” (The Lyre). The appellation evoked mythological references to Apollo and Orpheus and also the coat of arms of the Hapsburg Emperor Charles VI, to whom the collection was dedicated. But it also seems appropriate to the style of these concertos with their clear distinction between the *concertino*, the main body of strings, and the *ripieno*, the players who create the foundation. The latter include the sounds of plucked instruments (theorbo, baroque guitar, and harp) in addition to a harpsichord or chamber organ, depending on the individual work.

Several things are notable in these well-proportioned performances under the direction of solo violinist Federico Guglielmo. First, that they are “homotonal,” with the central movement in the same key as the outer ones. The layout is almost always the same: Allegro / Largo / Allegro, the only exceptions being No. 5, which begins with an Adagio that leads to a spirited Presto in the opening movement, and No. 11, in which the slow movement is a very moving Adagio. If you think all that formal sameness implies a cookie-cutter approach, you are mistaken. It *does* make for considerable dispatch in Vivaldi’s treatment of music that is highly individualized in terms of specific technique and emotional affect. As opposed to its predecessor, Vivaldi’s Opus 8 (which included “The Seasons”) there is not a single descriptive name for any of these concertos. The emphasis is clearly on style and the demon virtuosity that placed them in the forefront of violin technique, in the same class as similar works by Veracini, Tartini, and Locatelli.

Another thing that distinguishes “La Cetra” is Vivaldi’s use of *scordatura* in No. 6 in A major and No. 12 in B minor. The Italian, which translates as “mis-tuning,” describes a technique whereby one or more of a solo instrument’s string is re-tuned to a different note. Here,

concerto) rather than a more restrained and dignified *concerto da chiesa* (church concerto).

Pietro Castrucci, the only actual Roman on the program, shows, in his Concerto Grosso in A minor, Op. 3, No. 4, the influence of both Corelli and Handel. The influence of the latter is most evident in the spirited second movement, Allegro *ardito* (ardent).

Finally, we have a fine account of the splendid Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op. 5, No. 7, by Francesco Geminiani, taken from his personal arrangements of Corelli's 12 Sonatas for Violin and Basso Continuo. Besides paying homage to Corelli, it was an inspired re-casting of his Op. 5 sonatas for three instruments into a larger form that gave them greater circulation in London, where Geminiani settled. In the present performance the very emotional Largo, in the form of a Sarabande, seems to expire like an open grave, while the final Giga ("jig" to you) ends the program on a rousing note.



"Serpent & Fire," arias and instrumentals from baroque opera – Anna Prohaska, soprano; Il Giardino Armonico under Giovanni Antonini (Alpha Classics)

Sensational florid arias, inflamed passions, and the willingness to die without hesitation when the question is that of love and honor. This is the world which Polish soprano Anna Prohaska has increasingly made her own since her debut at 18. It is a world of cruel (i.e., faithless) lovers and kind enemies (because they do not flatter the heroine, but cause her to see herself as helpless and vulnerable), and the ultimate kindness is death. A world of captive queens and all-powerful slaves (such as the fortunes of love and war). That is the world of baroque opera, and the leading composers of the age wrote some of their greatest music for it.

The present album centers on the legends of those two famous African Queens – Dido of Carthage and Cleopatra of Egypt. In an era when every educated person could be expected to have been familiar with their tales of extravagant all-for-love passion and pitiable death from Plutarch's Lives and Virgil's Aeneid, they were already "pre-sold," as we'd say today, to 18th century audiences. The present program allows Ms. Prohaska to dive in and bathe herself in the gracious waters of recitatives and arias from operas by Henry Purcell, Christoph Graupner, Antonio Sartorio, Daniele da Castrovillari, George Frideric Handel, Johann Adolf

the two concertos are re-tuned A/E/A/E and B/D/B/D. The technique allowed for new possibilities, particularly in double-stopping, where the use of open strings is required. The harmony is also much enriched. Even to the less musically educated listener, there is something immediately distinctive about the sound of the solo violin in these concertos: it is both "wrong" and infinitely rich and expressive.

The slow movements in "La Cetra" are distinctive, each in its own way. In No. 9 in B-flat, it is marked "*Largo e spiccato*," seemingly contrary notions that the present performance bears out. In No. 12, in many ways the most passionate concerto Vivaldi ever wrote, the Largo is extremely poignant, almost confessional in mood, like a voice from the grave. In the final episode of the opening Allegro of his work, a violin from the concertino plays a cantilena over shimmering arpeggio-like figures by the soloist – another memorable moment among many.



Bach: The Four Suites for Lute
Giacomo Copiello, Victor Valisena, Michele Tedesco, and Giacomo Susani, guitars (Stradivarius)

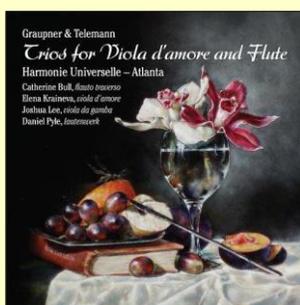
From the Italian label Stradivarius comes a program of finely conceived and executed performances of the so-called "Lute Suites" of J. S. Bach. As there are many more professional guitarists than lutenists on the international scene, these four jewels of Baroque art are usually heard, as they are here, in arrangements for guitar. They have long been part of the repertoire for that instrument. The performers, in Suites BWV 995, 996, 997, and 1006a respectively, are Giacomo Copiello, Victor Valisena, Michele Tedesco, and Giacomo Susani. All of these young artists with careers on the rise have been students of Professor Stefano Grondona at the Conservatory of Vicenza.

In BWV 995 in A minor, actually a transcription from the Solo Cello Suite No. 5, a slow, solemn Prelude gives way to a brisk fugue in a different mood. A rather dispirited Allemande is followed by a livelier Courante, keeping intact the principle of contrasts of tempi and mood. The deep water mark is the Sarabande, whose theme recalls the *Et incarnatus est* in the Mass in B minor. In BWV 996 in E minor, the Sarabande is once again the point of deepest emotion, after which a brisk Bourée and a lively Gigue provide a welcome pick-up.

Hasse, and Francesco Cavalli.

The good news is that the quality of these arias, so graceful, poignant, and passion-consumed, does not dip noticeably when we leave the two composers known to posterity, Handel (Giulio Cesare) and Purcell (Dido and Aeneas) and concern ourselves with the rest of the fraternity in powdered wigs. That brilliant light does not fade after we have bid adieu to Cleopatra's "*Se pietà de me non senti*" (If you feel no pity for me) or Dido's "When I am laid in earth," but shines undiminished in such gems as Graupner's "*Agitato da tempeste*" (Tossed by storms, I am a bark that seeks harbour) or Satrorio's "*Non voglio amar, o voglio amar per sempre*" (I will not love, or else will love forever).

With her seamless voice and ability to soar or plunge effortlessly to the limits of her range, Anna Prohaska would seem to be ideal for the rigors of this particular repertoire. In case the soprano's name strikes a familiar note, she is the grand-daughter of famed conductor Felix Prohaska, whose Bach Guild recordings I enjoyed immensely in the 1960's (Oh, how that dates me!)



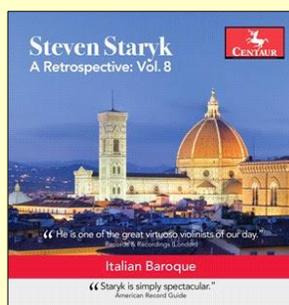
Graupner, Telemann: Trios for Viola d'amore and Flute Harmonie Universelle-Atlanta (ACA Digital)

Johann Christoph Graupner (1683-1760) was a contemporary of Bach and Handel who had remained rather unappreciated until fairly recently in the ongoing Baroque revival. As the members of Harmonie Universelle-Atlanta show us in this CD release, the neglect has been unfortunate, as Graupner's musical style is highly attractive. At the same time, he was also quite progressive in his day, which makes his belated rediscovery a real event.

The present ensemble consists of Catherine Bull, flauto traverso, and Elena Kraineva, viola d'amore, as the melody instruments, with Joshua Lee, viola da gamba, and Daniel Pyle, lautenwerk, taking the bass line. The distinction is not always hard and fast with this composer, as the bass instruments always have something interesting to say and, in four of the nineteen movements in the sonatas and trios heard on this CD, they function as full thematic and melodic partners of the flute and viola d'amore, with the result that the

The Sarabande in A minor, BWV 997 is perhaps the most deeply moving of the entire set, as it seems to recall the mood of a Passion chorale. An altogether remarkable Fugue in contrasted deliberate and quickly paced sections demands much of the performer's ability to sustain the different voices. Happily, a very jolly Gigue and its Double (variation) end matters in high spirits. Finally, BWV 1006a in E major, a transcription of Violin Partita No. 3, presents a more perfect example of a French dance suite: There's no stately allemande or learned fugue here, as the Prelude is simply followed by a succession of dances, the most familiar of which are the luminously tender Loure and a sprightly Gavotte en Rondeau that is often played as a popular encore. Minuets I and II, a boisterous Bourée, and a rollicking Gigue, complete the work.

The artists on this album do a good job characterizing the various baroque genres. Considerable effort has been given to making the four suites seem like items in a homogeneous program. The performances strike a nice balance between academism and the pure enjoyment of a public recital. When I first played this CD on my audio system, the sound seemed a trifle cool and austere, but when I transferred the audition to a more intimate medium, the results were warmer and more satisfying.



Steven Stryk Retrospective, Vol. 8 – Italian Baroque Sonatas and Concerti by Corelli, Tartini, Locatelli, and Vivaldi (Centaur Records)

Steven Stryk, born in Toronto in 1932 of Ukrainian immigrant parents, had an active career for decades as concertmaster of major orchestra on both sides of the Atlantic while chalking up an enviable record as a concert soloist. This is Volume 8 in an ongoing retrospective honoring this great artist. While the performances in this series have been chosen for their artistic merit and not necessarily for sonic quality (and some, admittedly, have to be taken warts and all for that reason), I am happy to report that is not the case here. There is not a single track on this release that does not reveal Stryk's artistry and that of his associates in an optimal manner.

That's important because we have choice selections here from four of the greatest lights of the Italian Baroque: Arcangelo Corelli, Giuseppe Tartini, Pietro Locatelli, and Antonio Vivaldi. While it is unusual for a violinist capable of storming the world's major concert halls with stunning accounts of the big Romantic and 20th century concertos

texture is fully imitative three-voice counterpart.

For all that, Graupner's music doesn't come across as oppressively learned. Quite the contrary, the natural way the voices exchange thematic material is very attractive to the listener. Graupner through-composed most of the movements in these sonatas and trios, typically developing his motives by voice-exchange and modulation and occasionally side-stepping an expected key resolution to avoid predictability. Alert performances by the musicians heard on the present CD bring out these traits to perfection.

Graupner also had a decided preference for the mellower-sounding instruments, particularly the "d'amore" members of the flauto, oboe, and viola families we hear in this program. Also heard here is the *lautenwerk*, or "lute-harpsichord," a gut-strung instrument with a warmer, more other-worldly tone than the silvery tone of the standard harpsichord. The music on this disc is correspondingly very easy to listen to, "accessible" and even "romantic" in the best sense of both words. Graupner's largos are particularly warm and moving, occasionally sad but never depressing.

For variety, we have Georg Philipp Telemann's Trio for transverse flute, viola d'amore and cembalo, TWV42:D15, with its slow movement marked "*con gravitas ma non grave*." Telemann's style is less progressive than Graupner's, favoring binary form over the development of thematic material. The result, light, gracious, and even witty, makes it a pleasure to hear.

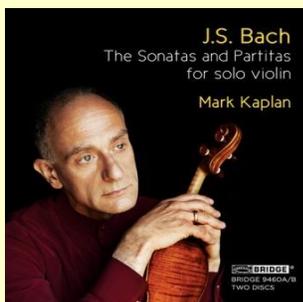
to interest himself in the baroque repertoire with its own styles and conventions, we must remember that Staryk was a different kind of artist. The qualities he invested in the great concertos are equally in evidence in the Italian Baroque, in even greater abundance. They include the ability to make an inanimate object of wood and string seem to pulsate with a vibrant life all its own.

The works heard on the present CD not only benefit from this trait of Staryk's, they demand it. We start with the last of Corelli's twelve Op. 5 sonatas in a recital with Valerie Weeks, harpsichordist. This is the famous set of variations on "*La Follia*" (Madness) that have inspired many composers up to the present day. We are given a demon performance, the very best in my experience, incorporating running scales and audacious leaps in ways that make it apparent that virtuosity is being employed to bring out the immense musical substance of the work and not just for its own sake.

Tartini's Sonata in G minor, "*Didone Abandonata*," follows in another performance with Weeks that invests the lament of the abandoned Queen Dido with a perfect balance of emotion and restraint. (This version of the myth has a happy ending, which he hear in the tripping measures of the Allegro finale.) Locatelli, a master of double trills, harmonics and other innovations, is up next, in a very handsome account of a Sonata in G minor with Kenneth Gilbert, harpsichord. Again with Gilbert, Staryk performs Sonata No. 2 in B-flat, Op. 5 (*not* No. 5 and *not* Op. 2, as the booklet annotation reports in error) with such incredible warmth and conviction that we can easily forgive the misattribution.

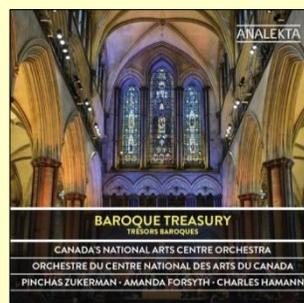
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The album concludes with choice gems selected from concertos by Vivaldi, all with the Baroque Players of Montreal under Vittorio Negri. They include bracing opening movements from RV 230 (from the dazzling collection *L'Estro Armonico*), RV 581 and RV 522, the last with an "echo" violin. Then we have highlights from The Four Seasons, movements 1, "Springtime is upon us again," from Spring; 3, "Thunderstorm," from Summer; and 1, "Peasants celebrate with song and dance," from Autumn. We conclude with a complete account of the final concerto, Winter. In all these performances, Staryk shows us that the last word has *not* been said after all on Vivaldi's venerable masterwork. Allowing us to hear the thrice-told Seasons in a new perspective is one of Staryk's best achievements.



Bach: The Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin
Mark Kaplan, violin
(Bridge Records)

American violinist Mark Kaplan has long been active in classical music, in solo engagements with most of the major U. S. orchestras and many foreign ones as well



Baroque Treasury (*Tresors Baroques*)
Pichas Zukerman, violin and viola, conductor
National Arts Centre Orchestra of Canada (Analekta)

Pichas Zukerman leads Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra in performances of Baroque treasures that are just as beautiful and engaging as the subject requires.

as being a member from 1981-2000 of the famed Golub-Kaplan-Carr Trio. Currently appearing in a trio with pianist Yael Weiss and cellist Peter Stumpf, he brings a lot of solid experience to this, his second recording of the complete sonatas and partitas for solo violin by J. S. Bach (the first was back in 1991, also for Bridge Records). His long experience and incisive scholarship, supporting a technique so incredibly smooth it actually makes some of the most challenging passages in the entire repertoire seem (*almost*) easy, qualify this effort among the very best recordings of the sonatas and partitas I've ever heard.

Kaplan's vision of these works includes the long view as well as the details. The three Sonatas are all in the four-movement Italian form common to the period: namely, introductory slow movement, fugue, slow movement, fast movement. The style and layout of all three Partitas are quite individual, resulting in striking differences in character. In each of the partitas, all the movements are in the same key, whereas the third movements in each of the sonatas (Siciliana, Andante, and Largo, respectively) depart from the home key, largely for expressive purposes.

In Sonata No. 1, the opening Adagio, with its complex runs of 32nd notes, is followed by a Fugue in which Bach meets the challenge of writing polyphonic music for an instrument with just four strings so successfully that we fail to recognize that true polyphony is technically impossible for the instrument. For not the last time in this set, the composer's sleight-of-hand makes the impossible seem plausible. Kaplan justly finds this particular fugue "a model for clarity, brevity, and beauty of form." A gentle Siciliana in dotted rhythm is followed by a fast Presto in which cross-rhythms and changes of phrasing keep the texture, in Kaplan's words, "always slippery and fluid, never static or square."

Interleaving the Sonatas, the Partitas are a diverse mixture of French and Italian influences. The dotted rhythms of the stately Allemanda opening movements of Partitas I-II, clearly reminiscent of the French *Ouverture*, belie the fact that these partitas are built on simple, orderly harmonic language and an organization of phrases that is more in the Italian style than the French. Significantly, Bach uses Italian names for the dances that follow suite: Corrente, Sarabanda, and Tempo di Borea (i.e., Bourée) in Partita I, and Corrente, Sarabanda, Giga, and Ciaccone in II. To complicate matters, Partita I uses an old French device whereby each dance is followed by a variation on it that was known as a "double." (Handel was fond of this device,)

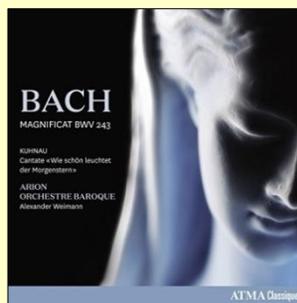
Only in Partita III do we have a more typical suite of dances in the French style following the Prelude: Loure, Gavotte en Rondeaux, Menuets I and II, Bouree, and Gigue. (The lively Gavotte, often arranged for guitar, lute, and other instruments, is one of Bach's best-loved "hits.") Kaplan considers the Loure, a rarely heard item, to be a dance in moderate tempo rather than a slow movement, and he treats it as such (though it still *feels* like a slow movements to me).

Starting with Handel's ever-pleasing "Entrance of the Queen of Sheba" from Solomon as the curtain raiser, we have J.S. Bach's Concerto for Oboe and Violin, BWV 1060 (with Charles Hamann the oboist) and Orchestral suite No. 3, BWV 1068; Giuseppe Tartini's Pastorale for Violin and Orchestra, Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto for Violin and Cello, RV 547 (with Amanda Forsyth, *Mrs. Zukerman*, as cellist); and Georg Philipp Telemann's Viola Concerto in G. If these aren't enough Baroque riches to satisfy you, dear reader, I regret to inform you that you have been spoiled rotten!

The beauties in this program include the glorious cantilena for Hamann's oboe in the Adagio of BWV 1060, with the skilfull way in which the string orchestra slips back in almost inobtrusively at the very end. The Tartini Pastorale, in a concerto arrangement by Ottorino Respighi that elaborated the role of the string orchestra but left the solo violin part untouched, is unusual in that Tartini called for the non-standard "mistuning" known as *scordatura* to create a bagpipes-like effect in the A major chords. That, and the gentle lilt of the strings in a Siciliana in 12/8 in the Largo finale, recall the Adoration of the Shepherds at the Nativity.

In Vivaldi's double concerto, the cello and violin are treated as equal partners in a work characterized by athletic leaps and bouncy rhythms. The Viola Concerto by Telemann is in four movements (Largo/Allegro/Andante/Presto), emphasizing contrasts between gentle melancholy and somberness on the one hand and stylish vivacity, ending in a bouree in double-quick metre, which is taken in a very up-beat manner here.

Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3 contrasts the stately French-style Overture and the heart-stoppingly lovely Air with two livelier dance movements, Gavottes I and II and Bourée. Both are taken briskly with the appropriate upbeat as lift-offs at the beginning of the measure. Rich string and brilliant woodwind playing enhance the festive nature of a work that ends in a gliding Gigue that is more ceremonial in character than usual, in keeping with the general style and mood of the suite.



Bach: Magnificat, BWV 243 + Kuhnau: Cantata "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" – Alexander Weimann, Arion Baroque Orchestra (ATMA Classique)

Alexander Weimann leads the Arion Baroque Orchestra and vocalists in a performance of J. S. Bach's Magnificat in D, BWV 243 with the four *Laudes* from the BWV 243a

Two of the most remarkable movements in the entire set are both examples of accompanied melody: the Andante in Sonata II and the Largo in Sonata III. In the former, the melody is supported by a continuous flow of eighth notes, evoking an Italian aria. In the latter, the accompaniment is based on slowly moving descending and ascending scales. The amazing thing to me is that the accompaniment in both instances seems to be absolutely continuous with the melody. This is no rapid alternation from melody to accompaniment, but a complete and total coexistence. How this can even be possible on a solo instrument with only four strings, much less that it can be executed with the flawless phrasing and articulation that Kaplan displays here, a thing of rarest beauty, is a mystery to me!

Kaplan approaches Partita II as a work unified under the umbrella of its famous last movement, the Ciaccona (*Chaconne* in French), reasoning that “the harmonic basis for the Ciaccona is already subliminally familiar to us from the first four movements, and then it feels only natural to explore it in more depth in this daring final movement.” The difference in emphasis helps give greater credibility to the first four movements, of which the Sarabanda is clearly the dark pearl, though the Ciaccona, a fantastic work with a duration of a quarter of an hour (16:02 in the present account), will probably still be treated as a separate work by many violinists.

This violinist has some of his best moments in the Ciaccona, working slowly and carefully through it in ways that lay out its structure superbly. That includes the surprise that we receive at almost the midpoint of the movement (here 7:40) when the sudden dramatic key-change from D minor to D major occurs. The shock, as Kaplan explains cogently, comes from the realization that we have been listening up to this point to music that doesn't seem as if it were in the minor mode. We get the same feeling to a lesser degree when it reverts to the minor at about 12:20. This sort of minor/major/minor sandwich, Kaplan explains, was unprecedented and perhaps even unique for a baroque Ciaccona, a form that was typically in the major mode throughout. Here, as this artist shows us with his superb artistry, the stunning key-change amounts to nothing less than a revelation.

version. These *Laudes*, also known as “Christmas Interpolations,” were texts appropriate for the Christmas season: “*Von Himmel hoch*” (From Heaven above to earth I come), “*Freut euch und jubiliert*” (Rejoice and celebrate), “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” (Glory to God in the highest), and “*Virga Jesse*” (The branch of Jesse has blossomed). Unlike other recordings I have heard with the *Laudes* inserted, Weimann integrates these texts so smoothly into the performance that we never get that old “Now for a word from our sponsor” feeling whenever one occurs. The sole exception is the “*Gloria*,” which inevitably interrupts the high flow of drama between the chorus punctuated by the brass “*Fecit potentiam*” (He hath shown strength with his arm) and the stirring tenor aria “*Deposuit potentes*” (He hath put down the mighty).

Otherwise, this is an outstanding account of one of Bach's greatest vocal works. The five soloists: Johanna Winkel (S1), Johanette Zomer (S2), James Laing (C/T), Zachary Wilder (T), and Matthew Brook (B/Bart) are all in exceptionally fine voice, especially in the alto/tenor duet “*Et misericordia*” (And his mercy is on them that fear him) and the S1/S2 duet “*Suscepit Israel*” (He hath sustained his servant Israel), verses that carry much of the theological weight of the entire canticle.

A delightful addition to the program is the cantata “*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*” (How brightly shines the morning star) by Bach's predecessor as cantor of St. Thomas in Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722). With its very graceful writing for the same SSATB soloists and chorus as the Bach Magnificat, it makes for a handsome compliment to the same. Kuhnau's skill in writing walking flute and string accompaniments under the arias and his memorable horn passages under the chorus “*Uns ist ein Kind geboren*” (For unto us a child is born) make a fine impression here.