

Phil's Classical Reviews

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Springtime Baroque

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Bach: The Goldberg Variations, BWV 988
Lori Sims, piano
(Two Pianists Records)

I've loved American pianist Lori Sims ever since I reviewed American Classics, her debut on the Two Pianists label (see *Phil's Classical Reviews*, May 2013). At the time, I noted "her feeling for the style, rhythm, and contour of the music she plays, and ... the utter precision with which she sounds each note boldly and with the utmost clarity." Well, that goes double for her new album of the Goldberg Variations. The daring she displayed in the earlier CD, together with the vibrant color and fluidity of movement, pays even handsomer dividends in the present instance.

Everyone has heard the story by Bach's early biographer J. N. Forkel of how he wrote the Variations for a gifted pupil, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to be played at night in order to bring his patron, Count Kayserling, relief from insomnia. If it didn't actually happen that way, it should have, for the music Bach wrote had the perfect combination of intellectual content and sensual beauty to relieve that condition from which most of us have suffered at one time or another. What is not as widely known is that they do not really deserve to be called "variations" at all!

It seems that, initially, Bach was not enthusiastic about Goldberg's request. He regarded variations on a theme as an inferior art form because it restricted the harmony to similar repeated patterns. He got around that restriction by basing his variations on chord progressions on the notes of the bass line, rather than on the florid Aria da capo itself, attractive as it undoubtedly is (a certain descending passage, beautifully realized here, never fails to give me goose bumps!) So what we really have is something very like a Chaconne, a musical form in which Bach was more comfortable and felt himself freer to be creative.

As Sims shows us, that expression can be bracing, exuberant, deeply moving, and imaginative, often in unexpected ways that thrill and delight us. Bach wrote



Telemann: The Recorder Sonatas
Erik Bosgraaf, recorder; Francesco Corti, harpsichord
(Brilliant Classics)

Dutch recorder virtuoso Erik Bosgraaf, capably assisted by Italian harpsichordist Francesco Corti, gives us absolutely stunning accounts of nine sonatas by Georg Philipp Telemann. These are all drawn from Volume 41 of the composer's complete works (TWV 41), in which there are numerous indications as to choice of instrumentation. By common agreement, they are generally considered to be Telemann's "Recorder Sonatas," as they seem best-suited to that end-blown instrument with fingered holes rather than the traverse flute that was becoming popular in his day.

These performances make for intelligent comparison with those of Pamela Thorby (Linn Records) that I reviewed in my November 2015 column. Five of Thorby's performances find counterparts in the present Bosgraaf album. Without straining the point, I would say that Bosgraaf impresses me more with the breakneck daring of his virtuosity in the very fast Allegro and Presto movements, while Thorby scores many of her best points in the softly expressive movements such as the Affetuoso of the D minor sonata, TWV 41:d4. That is not to say that Thorby slights us on zestful virtuosity, or that Bosgraaf's playing is oblivious of the softer, more gracious moments. It is all a matter of degree.

Bosgraaf certainly has a flair for these sonatas, and he backs it up with sensational tonguing and utterly brilliant slurring, to say nothing of the sharply phrased "sign-off" notes at the very ends of the Vivace in the C-minor Sonata, TWV 41: c2 and the corresponding movement in the C major Sonata, TWV 41:C5. He is also keenly aware of the mixture of national styles that give Telemann's music its distinctive character. Besides the German, French, and Italian influences, he was unique in exploiting elements of the Polish style, with its rapid-fire Lombard rhythms, syncopations, and repeated notes that add so much to the flavor of the Presto in the D minor sonata, TWV 41:d4 and the Gigue of the F minor sonata, TWV 41:f2. Warmly recommended.

the Goldbergs for a 2-manual harpsichord, and some of the 30 variations (Var. 8 is a good example) require the artist to superimpose the hands on the keyboards in a way that is easier to perform on harpsichord than on a modern piano (No matter, Lori takes this difficulty as she does all the others, in stride). Bach's overall structure, in which every third variation is a canon between the two voices following an ascending pattern and the variations following each canon are genre pieces, usually baroque dances, provides for variety within an engaging, predictable pattern which helps make this work so immensely satisfying.

There's more. The second variations after each canon are typically what has been termed "arabesques," in lively tempo and involving lot of hand-crossings. The skittish display of dazzling arpeggios and scales in Var. 17 is but one example. It makes the most vivid contrast with the Passion-like gravity of Var.15, a canon that ends with a wonderful effect in which the hands move away from each other and the right is suspended in air on an open fifth (as someone who is so ill-coordinated that I can barely manage a knife and fork, this sort of thing really compels my admiration!)

I haven't said anything about Var. 25, an Adagio that Wanda Landowska famously called the "Black Pearl" of the Variations. Sims plays this great moment, the emotional deep-water mark of the Goldbergs, with all the world-weary passion it deserves. Var. 30, by contrast, is a *quodlibet*, a juxtaposition of various folk songs that don't fit harmonically. It is clearly intended for comic relief.

At the end, after the repeat of the Aria da Capo, we are startled, for the first and only time, by audience applause, the first indication that we've been listening to a live recital. Normally, you record a work of music in a studio for the sake of perfection. In this case, given the delight and precision of Sims' performance, the precaution was hardly necessary.



D'Anglebert: Pièces de Clavecin
Charlotte Mattax Moersch, harpsichord
(Centaur)

At last: here's music of a very engaging and highly accessible figure you've never heard of! French composer Jean-Henri d'Anglebert (1629-1691) wrote music almost exclusively for the harpsichord and



The Bach Project, Volume 2
Todd Fickley, organist
(MSR Classics)

It seems I need to apologize to Todd Fickley for the reservations I raised about his use of a technological breakthrough known as Hauptwerk in my February 2015 review of the first volume of his multi-year Bach Project. At the time, I did not understand the relation of the sampling technique employed by Hauptwerk to the complete package, including the organist's performance and the sound of the instrument itself. As Fickley stresses in his notes to the release of Volume 2, all the sounds we hear are those of the actual organ and not a simulation or a digital enhancement. What we have is as optimal an account of the music as artistry and science can give us.

In the present release, the organ on which Fickley performs, the Marcussen & Son Organ (1973) of the Laurenskerk, Rotterdam, Netherlands, is an easy instrument for organ fanciers and organists to fall in love with. The exceptional smoothness throughout its entire registration is due in large measure to its multi-rank principal stops and many ranks of gently voiced pipework that give it an attractive sound that will immediately strike the listener. What is said to be the largest purely mechanical organ in Europe does not come across as a monster, but rather a gentle giant that gives the impression of having plenty of sonority in reserve.

On this Volume 2, Fickley presents an unusually well-balanced program, with fugal works as the bookends and two zestful Italianate works in the body, spaced by choice selections from Bach's large body of chorale preludes. We begin with Prelude and Fugue in C major, BWV 545, which opens up with the lowest and highest notes possible on an organ, a reflection of the fact that Bach was often called-upon to test a new organ and give its dedication performance. Fickley cites the Vivaldian qualities of this sparkling work, an influence also found in the Concerto in A minor, BWV 593, which was in fact a transcription of the Italian master's Op. 3, No. 8 for two violins. Bach made so many changes to this work that it qualifies as much his as Vivaldi's, although it still preserves the spirited interplay between solo and ripieno voices.

Trio Sonata No 2 in C minor, BWV 526, like the five other works in this genre, was written by Bach for the education of his eldest son, W. F. Bach. As Fickley demonstrates, this very attractive work in fast-slow-fast form, ending with a

organ. His principal claim to fame are his four sets of suites for keyboard which appeared in 1689 as *Pièces de Clavecin*. The composer was perhaps prompted to publish music, for the first and only time in his life, by either advancing years or declining health. At any rate, the exceptionally fine engravings (which were not always the case in the Baroque era and were printed at his own expense) were supplemented by a table of ornaments that influenced many of the next generation of composers, including François Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and J. S. Bach.

That table of ornaments, which provide a valuable tool in interpreting d'Anglebert's notation of the broken style (*style brisé*) that gives so much of this composer's arpeggios their distinctive character, is taken into account by American harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax Moersch in preparing and executing the tastefully conceived music we hear on this program. Her touch and her intelligent use of ornamentation bring d'Anglebert's music to life with a lightness and charm of which the composer would surely have approved. The performances are perfectly proportioned, with nothing in excess. As a result, 79 minutes of exalted music-making flow past us gracefully with a sense of spiritual refreshment that the French *Clavecinists* strived to achieve.

The *Pièces* in D minor may serve to exemplify d'Anglebert's music. An arresting Prelude, to some degree free and unmeasured, prepares us for the suite of dances that follow: an Allemande that is more decorous than one usually expects of that venerable old German dance, succeeded by a flowing Courante, a Sarabande marked *grave* and with appropriate sonority, a Gigue requiring much suppleness of hand position and movement to negotiate its lively rhythms, and then – surprise! – a Galliard. D'Anglebert was passionately fond of this formalized 16th century dance that was executed with a series of leaps, jumps, and hops. It was considered decidedly old-fashioned by his day. Perhaps he relished its very slowness and complexity. At any rate, his Galliards, and this one in particular, tend to have a depth of seriousness that belie their use of the measures of a light social dance of earlier times.



Vivaldi: Bassoon Concertos – Gustavo Núñez, bassoon; Academy of St Martin in the Fields (Pentatone) Hybrid SACD, DSD

rollicking fugue, involves the whole artist, for it relies as heavily on the pedals as it does the manuals for its expressiveness and rhythmic impetuosity. Toccata and Fugue in F major, BWV 540, which ends the program, has technical challenges enough to engage any organist, including a bravura running section with a positive swing in the opening movement and a concluding double fugue with counter-subjects in an uninterrupted succession of subjects and answers. In all, it is as challenging technically as it is delightful for the listener.

No fewer than nine chorale preludes serve as spacers between the major works besides having great artistic merit of their own. They include the ever-popular "*Ein feste Berg ist unser Gott*" (A Mighty Fortress is our God), BWV 720, and the six Schübler Chorales, BWV 645-650, of which the most famous is the first, "*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimmen*" (Zion hears the watchman). The last two Schübler chorales, particularly, are marked by a light and cheerful spirit, almost amounting to gentle laughter, which Martin Luther affirmed to be appropriate for the believer when contemplating the joys of salvation.



Bach: Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin
Hlíf Sigurjónsdóttir, violin
(MSR Classics)

Hlíf Sigurjónsdóttir, born in Denmark, grew up in Iceland where she received some of her earliest musical instruction. After graduating from the Reykjavik College of Music, she furthered her violin studies at the Universities of Indiana and Toronto and privately with some of the best teachers in North America. All that is beside the point. These days, everybody's résumé looks good, and it doesn't begin to describe the qualities that make her playing so uniquely wonderful to hear.

Happily, her studies from the earliest years have always included the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin by J. S. Bach. She has a definite affinity for the qualities in these works: the strong, supple lines, the purity of statement, the feeling of movement and rhythm that she communicates to us without undue grandiosity. You get the feeling that she has gotten to the bare bones of Bach's music, aided by her choice of modern instruments that lend themselves admirably to the requirements of that quintessential master of the baroque – a violin by Christophe Landon for the sonatas and one by G. Sgarabotto for the partitas. This lady knows her tools and uses them well.

Antonio Vivaldi, 275 years after his death, remains by far the most important composer to write concertos for the bassoon. That's remarkable when you consider it had begun to evolve into its present-day form only a generation or so before his day. Always precocious, Vivaldi was the first composer of note to recognize the possibilities of an instrument that had previously been relegated to the group of 2-3 instruments assigned the humble task of realizing the supporting bass line for an instrumental trio or quartet. Since the "basso continuo," as it was called, was extemporized, the bassoon part was seldom written-out, even for publication.

Amazingly, Vivaldi's solo writing for the bassoon in these concertos is every bit as virtuosic as the solo writing in his violin concerti. Over the years, there has been a lot of confusion about very sound of the instrument itself. "Dost hear the loud bassoon?" urges the wedding guest in Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Or maybe you will recall the line in The Music Man about "Each bassoon having his big, fat say"? Despite the bad rap, this dark, warm sounding instrument actually has a rather soft tone and relies on its distinctive woody timbre to make its way through a body of other instruments. Often characterized as a "slow" instrument, it can actually scamper through a scale with surprising alacrity.

Vivaldi was aware of all these characteristics of the bassoon and one more besides: its remarkable ability to play a cantabile passage with the warmth and eloquence of a human baritone. We hear this in the slow movements of the six concertos on the present program, particularly the Largo movements in the Concertos in C, RV 474; F, RV 488; and C, RV 477, but also in the strange beauty of the Andante molto in the A minor Concerto, RV 497.

The best-known of Vivaldi's bassoon concertos is the B-flat, RV 501, known "*La Notte*" (The Night). It is the only one on this program to depart from the fast-slow-fast format, as its four movements (slow-fast-slow-fast) corresponding to its evocative purpose. It is not to be confused with the Op. 10 flute concerto that has a similar appellation. It follows the same general layout, but is musically different. The four movements are a Largo with an evocation of the night, a lively Presto titled "*I Fantasm*" (Ghosts), an Andante titled "*Il Sonno*" (Sleep), and a gracious "*Sorge l'Aurora*" (Daybreak) that returns us to renewed life and activity.

Gustavo Núñez, born in Montevideo, Uruguay and currently the principle bassoonist of Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, is widely acclaimed as one of the world's premiere bassoonists. On the evidence of the vital, full-blooded performances he gives us here in collaboration of the Academy of St. Martin's, I will not gainsay his reputation. I'll say more: you are not likely to hear better accounts of these Vivaldi concertos anywhere, on any recordings.

What can I say about the Sonatas and Partitas that you won't find abundantly available elsewhere? On just one instrument with four strings, Bach created a vibrant, exciting world of music. Along the way, he did some outrageous things. The slow stacking up of notes that we get in the Adagio of Sonata No. 3 (which Sigurjónsdóttir plays with consummate skill) had been thought impossible for the violin before Bach. And the complexity of the Fugue in the same sonata (14:05 in this account) calls for intense concentration in order for the artist to bring out its complex beauties that include many examples of strettis, inversion, and double counterpoint, all of which Sigurjónsdóttir's unhurried approach makes not merely plausible, but beautiful.

She does beautifully in the moving and enchanting moments in the Partitas, too. A good example would be the exuberant Tempo di Borea in No. 1, a *Bourée* with a quick quarter-bar pick-up before we get into the measure (incidentally, the name is also a pun on Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind). Other very expressive moments would include the poignant Loure in No. 3 and the charming *Gavotte en Rondeau* that follows it, refreshing our spirits.

The Mount Everest of these Himalayas, the great *Ciaccona* (Chaconne) in Partita No. 3, receives particular care from Sigurjónsdóttir as she explores all the great features in this long (15:48) work in ways that make it continually engaging for the listener. Her pacing here is absolutely perfect as she forms what is initially a rather square-toed conception into a thing of exquisite beauty. Without sacrificing any of its fluidity, she employs discrete variations in tempo, as in the passages of increasing urgency that set the stage for the wonderful moment of relaxation that steals upon us at just about the midpoint of the Chaconne. You don't have to be terribly learned musically to realize that something wonderful has transpired in Bach's monumental set of variations on a ground bass. Sigurjónsdóttir does the hard work for you, so just sit back and enjoy!



Vivaldi: *Il Cimento dell'Armonia e dell'invenzione*, Op. 8
Federico Guglielmo, violin and concertmaster l'Arte dell'Arco (Brilliant Classics)

It's comparatively unusual to have the entire 12 concertos in Vivaldi's *il Cimento* . . . (translated "The Contest between Harmony and Inspiration") in the same double-CD set, though of course Nos. 1-4, The Four Seasons, are among the most recorded in the entire baroque repertoire. But the unusual aspects of this latest release in a multi-year Vivaldi project by L'Arte dell'Arco don't end there.



“Winter Harmonies,” intimate cantatas of the French Baroque – Harmonie Universelle (USA) (aca Digital)

Harmonie Universelle USA is an ensemble dedicated to performing 17th and 18th century music on Baroque instruments. The group, which now considers Atlanta its home base, consists of Catherine Bull, flute; Gesa Kordes, violin; Gail Ann Schroeder, viola da gamba; and Daniel Pyle, harpsichord, they perform in the present program with aplomb, affection, and a gently swinging style that does justice to the three French baroque composers heard here, for whom elegant expression, good taste, and spiritual refreshment were the most desirable qualities in music.

The fifth member of Harmonie Universelle adds the mark of distinction that really makes this ensemble special. She is soprano Francisca Vanherle, who was born in Argentina, grew up in Belgium, and completed her education in the United States. The freelance soloist now lives in Atlanta, where she teaches voice in her private studio and at Agnes Scott College. In these settings of French texts based on the fables of Greek mythology, she shows a sensitivity to emotional nuances from joy to sorrow, and from bright elation to momentary overcast and gentle melancholy.

Seldom do we have the opportunity to hear so perfect a wedding of musical text with a truly gorgeous voice as we have in this program of cantatas by Michel Pignolet de Montéclair (1667-1737), Louis-Nicolas Clément (1676-1749), and Joseph Bodin de Boismortier (1689-1755). None is a household name today, but all three contributed to the unique vocal and instrumental blending that made the music of their era what it was to become.

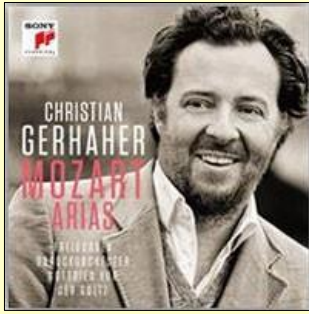
Winter Harmonies was recorded by aca Digital in live concert at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, Decatur, GA on February 9, 2013. Mastering and editing are so perfect we are completely unaware of a live audience until we are shocked to hear applause at the end of each of the works. This recording is currently only available as a download, and may be purchased at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/winter-harmonies/id961001892>. Here's hoping it will also be released as a physical CD in the near future!

As solo violinist and concertmaster Federico Guglielmo expresses it, “The decision to perform ‘in real parts’ (with no doubling of instruments)... has helped us recover the desired simplicity of gesture and transparency of sound, thereby revealing the underlying structure so long buried beneath a heavy load of ornamentation and excess.” He goes on to cite No. 5, “*La Tempeste di Mare*” (Storm at Sea) as an example of a concerto thus restored to its pristine innocence – an unhappy choice, as it turns out, since the elemental forces of nature thus depicted seem more like a tempest in a teapot. It is, in fact, a rare instance in the present program in which the results are anything less than completely satisfactory, not to say enthralling.

One big advantage of eliminating part doubling in these performances is that it really clarifies, to an extent I have not heard elsewhere, the relationship between the *concertino*, the small body of soloists including the solo violin, and the *ripieno*, the supporting players whose job it is to realize the underlying bass line. In these performances, we have a solo violin, four players (violins I and II, viola, and cello) in the *concertino* and three in the *ripieno* (violone/double bass, harpsichord/chamber organ, and theorbo/baroque guitar). The *ripieno* are not just passive observers, either. As they demonstrate in the Largo of No. 1, “*La Primavera*” (Spring) with its special effect of a barking dog by moonlight, and the opening movement of No. 2, “*L'estate*” (Summer) evoking the languid atmosphere of a midsummer day, they can be very active in evoking the brooding, ominous mood of a movement as well as its underlying pulse. And in the Largo movement of No. 3, “*L'autunno*,” (Autumn) they even create a drone bass to replicate the snoring sounds of drowsy harvest celebrants sleeping off their revels!

Despite what I said earlier about “Storm at Sea,” this ensemble is capable of reaching exalted heights and pulse-quickenings finales, as they show us all through the Opus 8 set. The thrilling conclusion of “Summer,” with its depiction of a furious thunderstorm, is but one example. Another is the charming evocation of snow lightly falling and dripping from the eaves in No. 4, “*L'inverno*” (Winter) and the windswept conclusion of the final Allegro in the same concerto. Guglielmo's violin, a magnificent instrument by Tommaso Balestrieri (Mantua, ca.1760) adds immeasurably to the luminous color, charm, and incisive point-making in all the violin concertos, but especially 1-4, The Seasons. And as Guglielmo correctly observes, some of the most virtuosic solo passages are to be found in Concertos 7, 8 and 11, the ones without descriptive names. He does not ignore the possibilities for brilliant expression in these “no name” concerti.

A special feature of these recording is the replacement of the solo violin by an oboe, played by Pier Luigi Fabretti, in Concertos 12 and 9, which conclude the program in that succession. These two concertos allow the option of either instrument. L'Arte dell'Arco decided to entrust them to the oboe because they fit its tessitura like a glove and do not possess the extreme virtuosity that would have made the violin necessary. The results are gratifying for the listener.

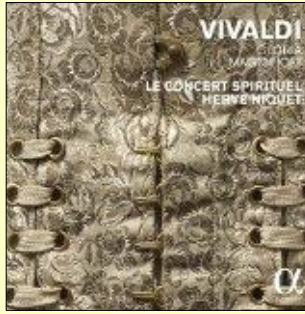


Mozart: Arias - Christian Gerhaer, baritone
Gottfried von der Goltz, Freiburg Baroque Orchestra
(Sony Classical)

This program of arias from Mozart operas was for me a source of renewed pleasure with each succeeding audition – a sure sign of its rightness. German baritone Christian Gerhaer (b. Straubing, Bavaria, 1969) has actually gotten more attention in the past for his lieder and his work in choral music, but on the basis of this album I'd say praise is overdue for his operatic work. We have here the great baritone arias from *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), and *Così fan tutte*. Gerhaer is right on the money in all these roles, added by his intelligent grasp of nuances in the text. Credit also his superb diction, so important for all those trilled *r*'s and other fricatives used to convey the various motions of anger, jealousy, and fear (usually of being exposed and publically ridiculed) in Mozart's amorous lovers and scheming scoundrels.

Contrary to the impression given by Mozart's baritones, the entire male population of Vienna did not spend all their time in illicit love intrigues (It must have been only about 90 percent or so). But love-passion is the mainspring of all these plots, whether it be the amorous serenade to his latest mistress, "*Deh vieni alla finestra*" of *Don Giovanni* (known to history and legend as Don Juan), or the famous Catalogue Aria "*Madamina, il catalogo e questo*" of his servant Leporello as he salaciously –and perhaps enviously – details a hyped-up estimate of his master's conquests. Or take the degrees of hope and dark despair in the lovelorn bird-catcher Papageno in *The Magic Flute* as he contemplates hanging himself if he can't find his soul-mate in "*Papagena! Papagena! Papagena!*" – finally consigning himself to unkind fate unless some compassionate lady in the audience will marry him. He counts one-two-three, lapsing resignedly into prose at the end when there are no takers (Never fear: those familiar with the opera know help is on the way!)

In terms of the vital energy he invests in his portrayals of Mozart's *inamorati*, I'd characterize his Figaro as the very best, followed in approximate order by Leporello, Guglielmo (*Così fan tutte*), *Don Giovanni*, and Papageno. In the extremes of naïve adoration of one's ideal (Papageno) and cold-blooded cynicism



Vivaldi: Gloria, Magnificat, Laetatus Sum, Lauda Jerusalem
Herve Niquet, Le Concert Spirituel
(Alpha Classics)

These performances of choral works by Antonio Vivaldi are unlike any you are likely to hear elsewhere. The current project, in the words of Herve Niquet, founder and director of the Paris-based Concert Spirituel, is the fulfillment of his longstanding interest in music for equal voices and harkens back to a common practice in the 17th and 18th centuries. The first thing you will notice about these performances, in fact, is that there are no male voices. That corresponds to the historical evidence that Vivaldi's choral works were intended to be performed by girls and women at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, a church institution that was a convent as well as a school for foundlings.

Niquet makes his case with eloquence in the present performances by 20 voices, consisting of five each of sopranos I and II and altos I and II. Once you get used to the unusual sonic mix, the beauty and persuasiveness of this design begins to make its impression. As Niquet puts it, there is a discernible pattern in Vivaldi's scheme in which he "succeeds in producing the sweetest possible sound one moment, followed by a thundering passage and, just when we think we have reached the summit, an even more explosive choral sequence, followed an ineffable tenderness sung by two voices, and so on." That pattern corresponds, in fact, to the sequence *Laudamus Te / Gratias Agimus / Propter Magnam Gloriam / Domine Deus* in the ever-popular Gloria, RN 589 that opens the program.

Vivaldi's Magnificat, RV 610a is heard in its revised setting that made it particularly amenable for a double choir. The music is lush and highly expressive, animating the text of the popular canticle of the Blessed Virgin that was sung at every Vespers service. The emotional depth of the *Et Misericordia* (And his mercy is upon them that fear him) is particularly striking. Of special interest is the similarity of the settings of *Fecit potentiam* (He hath scattered the proud in their conceit) and *Deposuit potentes* (He hath put down the mighty from their seat) to those in J. S. Bach's Magnificat in D, BWV 243 that was performed in Leipzig in 1733 for the Feast of the Visitation. It is not known when Vivaldi prepared the version of his Magnificat that we have here as RV 610a, but my guess is that Bach was paying ultimate tribute to an older contemporary with whose work he was quite familiar.

The shorter works on this program include a fine account of

(Guglielmo) these roles run the gamut of lovers, with the pathological skirt-chaser Giovanni in a class of his own.

A welcome extra in this CD is a fine account of Mozart's "Linz" Symphony (No. 36), presented by the orchestra on widely spaced tracks and programmed to suit the mood of the surrounding arias. It is not in apple-pie order, with Movements IV, II, III, and I on Tracks 4:9:13:18, respectively, so you will need to program your system's remote if you want to access them in sequence.

the Psalm 121, *Laetatus sum* (I was glad when they said unto me "We shall go into the House of the Lord"), as lovely as it is unpretentious, and an impressive one of Psalm 147, *Lauda Jerusalem* (Praise the Lord, Jerusalem). I especially liked the verses sung by the solo sopranos from each of the choirs. Antiphonal effects between the choirs are not lacking in this setting of verses that are rich in literary imagery (the scattering of ashes, the melting of frost, the flowing of waters as the Lord sends out his breath) that simply cry out for musical settings. The concluding verse, "*Sicut erat in principio*" (As it was in the beginning) provides a splendid opportunity for the double chorus heard here.



Bach: Violin Concertos – Cecelia Bernardini, violin; Huw Daniel, Violin II (BWV1043); Alfredo Bernardini, oboe – John Butt, Dunedin Consort (Linn Records hybrid SACD)

In one of the most beautiful-sounding releases Linn has ever given us (and that's saying a *lot*) John Butt directs the Dunedin Consort in accounts of the violin concertos of J.S. Bach that crave your attention even in a field that has been gleamed many times before. Relaxed motion, a nice feeling of swing, and the really beautiful sound of the baroque instruments played by the soloists, all contribute to the overall impression of charm allied with sensual beauty.

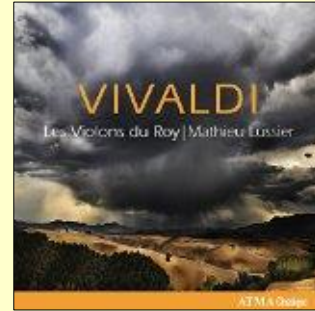
Besides Butt's sure-handed direction, I am also indebted to him as booklet annotator. The influence of Vivaldi's epoch-making *L'Estro Armonico*, particularly in his use of *ritornello*, had never made the impression on me it does here. The purpose of this characteristic Vivaldi device really struck me for the first time in Butt's analogy from the art of rhetoric, where "an idea is fully seeded in the opening utterance, which is brought back at regular intervals in slightly different ways, so as to deepen the implications of the main idea and also to generate a sense of overall coherence." Bach does this



Scarlatti: 18 Sonatas
Yevgeny Sudbin, piano
(Bis hybrid SACD, Surround)

Yevgeny Sudbin, a native of St. Petersburg, Russia who has lived in the UK since 1997, does a fabulous job playing his own arrangements of 18 keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757). Did I say "arrangements"? As Sudbin explains in his program notes, it isn't simply a matter of transferring the sonatas note-for-note from Scarlatti's own instrument, the harpsichord, to a modern piano like the Steinway he plays here. "The music *has* to be transformed and adjusted to the modern instrument," says Sudbin, "and one has to make conscious decisions about how to do this without distorting the original idea."

As the latest entrant in a two centuries-old quest by pianists and editors to achieve that goal and enshrine Scarlatti firmly in the piano repertoire, Sudbin's efforts are, to my mind, the most satisfactory to date. There is a great deal of variety in these pithy masterpieces, ranging from "head-spinning" dances (Sudbin's own expression) such as K9 in D minor, and K425 in G major to the genuine sadness of K32 in D minor. On the other hand, Sudbin identifies K69 in F minor and K213 in



"Vivaldi," concertos for diverse instruments – Mathieu Lussier, Les Violons du Roy (ATMA Classique)

Les Violons du Roy, based in the old city of Quebec, give sumptuous performances, recorded in 24 bit / 96 kHz sound, of a program of works that show the range and richness of Antonio Vivaldi's art of the concerto. Here is a variety of dishes in which all the members of Les Violons get a spot in the limelight – including the hunting horns!

On the menu, we are given some of Vivaldi's best known concertos, including the Concerto in C major for 2 Trumpets with its spirited interplay of voices that would have been ideally showcased by the spacious acoustics of San Marco in Venice. We also have two Concertos for 4 Violins from Op. 3, *L'Estro Armonico*, "Harmonic Radiance, or Inspiration," (The Italian word *estro* is rich in other connotations, including "Boss" or "leader" and "sexual heat!") In these Concertos, No. 10 in B minor and No.3 in E minor, the fast virtuoso passages get tossed from one solo violin to another with aplomb and absolute brilliance.

Three other concertos, in G minor, RV 577; F major, RV 569; and F major, RV 574 were written for the

supremely well, as the present performances bear out.

The program starts with the Concerto in C minor for Oboe and Violin, BWV 1060R, in which Cecilia Bernardini makes beautiful music with her oboist father Alfredo in the gorgeous Adagio movement, which has always struck me as comparable to the exalted lyricism of the famous Largo in Bach's Harpsichord Concerto in F minor, BWV 1056. It is matched by the long lyrical lines of the Adagio in Violin Concerto in E major, BWV 1042, which ends in a rondo finale in the style of a joyous peasant dance. In the middle of the program we have the Sinfonia to Cantata BWV 21, of which the most memorable feature is the languid oboe melody whose poignancy is the perfect correlative for the cantata's text, "*Ich hatte viel bekümmernis*" (I had much sorrow).

The Violin Concerto in A minor, BWV 1041 follows next. In the Andante, Bach uses an ostinato pattern in the bass to focus the harmonic relationships. Then he really cuts loose in the finale, whose rhythm and meter are those of a Gigue ("jig" to you). Here, Bernardini distinguishes herself in the *bariolage* figures, the alternation between melody and static notes that lends a decided swing to the music. In the Concerto for Two Violins in D minor, BWV 1043, the most dazzling moments are reserved for the finale, its dramatic incidents and textures bound up by an irresistible, forward-driving momentum. *That*, too, shows Vivaldi's influence on Bach.

D minor as sonatas that transport us marvelously from the activity of everyday life into a realm "where expression comes from harmony rather than melody and is implied rather than explicit."

Sudbin's sensually beautiful tone captures such moments ideally. Other sonatas such as K141 in D minor, with its vibrant rhythms and key-rattling repeated notes, celebrate the noise and bustle of everyday life in Spain: the clicking of castanets, the strumming of guitars, the pulse-quickening dance rhythms, and the sound of muffled drums. Sudbin even claims to hear evocations of church bells and gunshots (K119 in D major), street cries and stamping of feet (K479 in D major), and distant trumpets (K159 in C major).

Finally, there are sonatas that call for extreme virtuosity or exude *bel canto* lyricism. Sudbin cites K29 in D major for its risk-taking (and wrist-breaking) scales across the keyboard as an example of the former, while the cantabile qualities of K208 in A major and K318 in the exotic key of F-sharp major speak for themselves. There is even a rare example of a fugue in K417 in D minor, which this artist considers one of Scarlatti's most taxing works because of its ever-increasing intensity.

Yevgeny Sudbin evidently does not intend to make Scarlatti his sole field of activity by any means, but he *could* if he wanted. Consider this: the 18 choice sonatas on the present disc represent barely 3 percent of all those Scarlatti penned – 555 at latest estimate, and counting!

Court of Dresden and reflect the abundance of top-notch wind soloists that were available there in addition to the solo violin of Vivaldi's pupil, Georg Pisendel. The charm of a dialog between oboe and bassoon, a pleasant patch of sunlight in which a pair of recorders are heard against the quiet backdrop of a bassoon, or the distinctive rousing sound of a pair of hunting horns all enhance the aural pleasure of these works.

Finally, we have the Sinfonia from one of Vivaldi's operas, RV 739, an example of a smartly-paced string genre for which Vivaldi was justly famous.