

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Summer Baroque Special

Summer, 2015



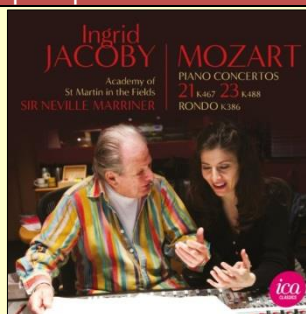
Bach: Sonatas & Partitas for Solo Violin  
Gil Shaham, violin  
(Canary Classics)

Israeli-American violinist Gil Shaham has done it again. This time, he applies his dazzling technique to what have been termed, in a quotation attributed to Georges Enescu, “the Himalayas of Violinists,” the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin by Johann Sebastian Bach. All the great violinists of the past 100 years have accepted the challenge of these daunting works. The rewards have often been commensurate with the difficulties encountered. And despite what you may have heard about the great Jascha Heifetz (one of Shaham’s personal heroes), there is no “definitive” recording by any of them. There couldn’t be. There are just too many elements in these works for any one performance to be totally and completely satisfying for all time. The object for each artist to put his own unique stamp on them.

Gil Shaham certainly does just that. An inveterate risk-taker, he challenges the music head-on with a choice of tempi that constantly flirts with danger – from which he always recovers admirably. His zestful virtuosity is just what the *Kapellmeister* ordered. These works – three in the Italian “church sonata” style and three in the form of the popular French dance suite – are loaded with technical difficulties. These include multiple stops, arpeggios over several strings, opposing tonal ranges, and a slow stacking and accumulation of notes that had previously been considered impossible for the violin.

Shaham obviously has a lot of fun with the Sonatas and Partitas, and his spirited playing communicates to the listener. He takes the Presto finale of Sonata No. 1 and the final movement of Partita No. 1, *Tempo di Borea* (in the time of a Bourée) with an appropriate whirlwind intensity. The lilting Siciliana in Sonata 1 requires, and receives, a different kind of emphasis and rhythm in bowing. All three sonatas follow their preludes with fugues, something that is not perfectly intuitive for a single, 5-string melody instrument and requires the infinite amount of skill and focus from the performer that Shaham gives them.

The solemnity of the Allemande and Sarabande of



Mozart: Piano Concertos 21, 23; Rondo, K386  
Ingrid Jacoby, piano; Sir Neville Marriner, Academy of St Martin in the Fields (ICA Classics)

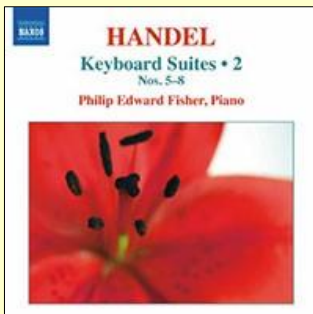
Okay, so I know that Mozart doesn’t belong in a feature dedicated to the Baroque Era? The truth is, I found this latest ICA Classics release by Ingrid Jacoby so compelling that I had to get out a review of it and didn’t want to wait another month. The St. Louis (MO) native, who now resides in the U.K. where she has become very much a part of the London concert scene, gives another fine performance of Mozart concertos in close collaboration with Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy, adding to the renown she achieved last year with Concertos 14 and 27 (see my *Reviews* June 2014).

Here, Piano Concertos No. 21 in C, K467 and 23 in A, K488 are the main fare, with the very lyrical Rondo in A, K386 as a delectable chaser. Never virtuosic without a purpose, Jacoby delivers finely textured, poised performances that are beautifully integrated with Sir Neville and the ASMF. Her technique is so assured it does not call undue attention to itself, and she is quite confident in moments when the pianist is called upon to take the lead as the music moves into a new section.

Such a moment occurs in the well-known Andante of Concerto 21 in which, after a hazy, dreamlike melody is heard in the second violins and violas over arpeggios in the bass, the piano enters and begins playing what seems at first to be a variant on what we’ve just heard but soon veers off into different keys. It opens a world of harmonic imagination into which no composer had ever ventured at this point in history, and few since. Jacoby’s tone is everything the composer requires, warm and substantial or delicately pellucid as the situation warrants. The joyous Rondo, invoking noticeable “call and response” between soloist and orchestra, is likewise just the sort of excitement a Mozart finale needs.

Concerto 23, which Mozart wrote about the time he premiered *The Marriage of Figaro*, has the same degree of endless variety as characterizes the opera. There is much delicious interaction between pianist and orchestra in both the exuberant opening movement and the *opera buffa*-like finale in which we are exposed to sudden

Partita No. 2 set us up for the famous Chaconne. Shaham takes the challenges of this form, which consists of variations on a harmonic progression, with such apparent effortless that when we reach a moment of repose and reflection late in the movement, it takes us by surprise. Partita No. 3 concludes the set with a full-blown dance suite in which all the movements after the prelude are in graciously flowing dance tempo, although, with the exception of the ever-popular Gavotte en Rondeau, none of them could conceivably be danceable. It makes for a popularly flavored conclusion to a very satisfying program.



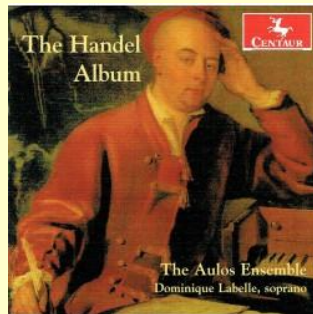
Handel: Keyboard Suites 5-8  
Philip Edward Fisher, piano  
(Naxos)

With this Naxos release, English pianist Philip Edward Fisher completes his survey of the “Eight Great Suites” of George Frideric Handel. Fisher plays these attractive works with brilliance and style, plus a keen awareness of the rhythmic values that are so important in this composer. Some writers have criticized his Handel performances for being unduly “romanticized.” I beg to disagree. Playing Handel with the noticeable “swing” and dramatic flair that Fisher brings to the music is very much in keeping with the composer’s intention. To ignore these qualities would have led to “correct” but stultifying performances.

Keyboard Suite No. 5 in E major is the best known of the Big Eight, if for no other reason than the concluding movement, Air and Doubles (i.e., variations). Someone a century after Handel’s death nicknamed it “The Harmonic Blacksmith,” probably for the sensational sound produced by the smartly struck top notes in the melody, which is exposed to five variations that increase in virtuosity and tension as the note values decrease from eighth notes in the theme to sixteenth notes in the right hand; sixteenth notes in the left; sixteenth note triplets in the right and left hands; and finally thirty-second notes in both hands. Another highlight of this suite is its lively Courante, a French country dance.

Suite No. 6 in F-sharp minor opens with a sonorous, dignified Prelude, followed by a solemn Largo in “major-minor” mode, an alert Allegro, and an almost danceable Gigue. No. 7 in G minor is the most serious in mood of the suites in this program, beginning with a declamatory French Overture, later featuring a rather bittersweet

changes in point-of-view with the intrusion of a clarinet melody. In between, we are given another supremely beautiful, sun-dappled Mozart slow movement, an Adagio in which the piano seems to roam through a verdant meadow of woodwinds lush enough to furnish a serenade. There’s also a strain of melancholy in this, Mozart’s only movement in F-sharp minor, requiring Jacoby to show alertness to what she herself terms “constant mood changes within a tiny span.” Perspective, plus spirit, brings it off to perfection.



“The Handel Album”  
The Aulos Ensemble with Dominique Labelle, soprano  
(Centaur Records)

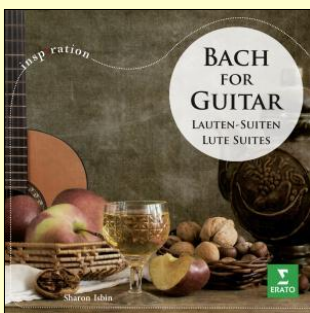
The Aulos Ensemble, founded by five Juilliard graduates in 1973, continues to ride the crest of the baroque revival after more than four decades. Now consisting of Christopher Krueger, flauto traverso; Marc Schachman, oboe; Linda Quan; violin; Myron Lutzke, cello; and Arthur Haas, harpsichord, they specialize in flavorful, winning performances in which listeners can savor the timbres of the baroque instruments and the gracious style of the music. That goes double for the present release of music by George Frideric Handel.

For many listeners, Handel is the quintessential baroque composer. German born, Italian educated, and English by adoption, he combined all the musical currents of his day. Bach and Telemann did as much, but Handel went further. He wrote such immensely popular oratorios and theatre music that his fame, at least in English-speaking countries, never fell into eclipse, nor would his music need to be revived. In particular, he had the genius for taking music he had written in various times and places and making new compositions from it that came up fresh as new paint. (Needless to say, the “audit trail” for these works has bedeviled scholars up to the present day!)

In compiling this program, the Aulos Ensemble have selected music from all periods of Handel’s life in order to show his versatility in both vocal and instrumental forms. A special feature of this musical menu is that the instrumental selections have been interpolated among the arias (sung with discrete charm and eloquence by Dominique Labelle) with a special sensitivity to key relationships and changes in mood. The result is a vibrant, living program in which one glorious or poignant

Sarabande, and concluding with a classic variation form, the Passacaille, which grows livelier as it progresses.

No. 8 in F minor, on the other hand, finishes the evening's entertainment on a decidedly popular note, including a spirited fugue in the Allegro movement and a Gigue with alert rhythms, wide leaps, and repeated notes in the bass that generate lots of excitement. At least they do in *this* performance!



Bach for Guitar: Lute Suites, BWV 1006a, 995-997  
Sharon Isbin, guitar  
(Erato)

Sharon Isbin's finely nuanced performances of guitar works by J. S. Bach actually appeared on the Virgin Classics label in 1988. At the time, I was on Virgin's reviewer list, but somehow I missed out on this one. Now, more than 25 years later, it comes as a pleasant surprise, all the more welcome for its rare vintage.

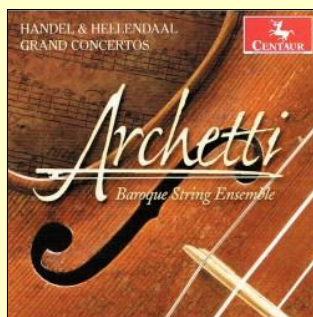
This re-release appears on Erato's Inspiration series, a new budget-label series of offerings for people getting acquainted with the classics or in need of music for relaxation (aren't we all?) Unlike most of the items in the series, this CD offers four complete Bach suites, rather than just purple patches. That is by far the better way to savor these delightful works. Known as the "Lute suites," they are often transcribed, as here, for guitar, where they enjoy a broader public exposure. Whether or not they are as idiomatic for guitar as for lute is a matter for ongoing debate. I've enjoyed them in both versions.

BWV1006a in E major was actually a transcription by Bach of his solo violin Partita No. 3. This is an expansive "dance suite" in which all of the six movements following the Prelude are in dance time, and it was obviously intended for wide popularity. The jaunty Gavotte *en rondeau* is a favorite here, as is the tenderly plaintive Loure, another French country dance. Likewise, BWV

moment seems to yield naturally to the next.

Thus, the Trio Sonatas, Op. 2, Nos. 1 and 8 and the Concerto a Quattro in D minor occur here in pairs of movements, interspersing choice Italian and English arias from *Radamisto*, *Teseo*, *Admeto*, *Acis and Galatea*, and *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*. If you want to hear a given instrumental work in apple-pie sequence, say Trio sonata Op. 2, No. 8, and you have a programmable CD player, just select Tracks 5:6:12:13.

However you choose to listen to it, there's lots of choice Handel on this CD, culminating with a fine account of the Chaconne from the ballet *Terpsichore* in which the Aulos are joined by other artists. The performances throughout this program are done with a winning combination of affection and spirit, making it a worthy companion to the Ensemble's earlier Telemann Album (see Midsummer Baroque 2013).



Handel & Hellendaal: Grand Concertos  
Archetti Baroque String Ensemble  
(Centaur Records)

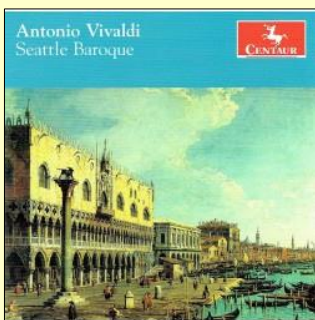
Two composers, familiar and unfamiliar, provide the menu for a musical feast by the Bay Area-based Archetti Baroque String Ensemble from California. This engaging group, founded as recently as 2010, consists of Carla Moore, Jolie Einem, David Wilson, and Alicia Yang, violins; Anthony Martin, viola; Tanya Tomkins, cello; John Dornenburg, violone; and Davitt Moroney, organ and harpsichord. That works very well in terms of baroque repertoire because it corresponds to the eight part-books printed for concertos by Vivaldi, Corelli, and Handel. So perhaps we can look upon this attractive offering, which is apparently Archetti's debut recording, as an earnest of more delectable music to come?

The Handel works are two of his classic Opus 6 set of Concerti Grossi: No. 5 in D major and No. 11 in A major. This is Handel at his best, and the Archetti know how to savor it. They take the grandeur-inspiring French Overture of No. 5 with appropriate style and feeling, and do a beautiful job characterizing the free-spirited Presto and the second Allegro with its rollicking first subject. They experience a slight difficulty with the tricky dotted-note opening, marked *Andante larghetto e staccato*, of No.11, but they do well in the simple yet moving Andante and the ingenious final Allegro with its virtuoso episodes for violin.



995 in G minor (performed here in A minor) was transcribed from the Solo Cello Suite No. 5. A laconic Prelude gives way to a brisk fugue, in which the difference in mood is immediately noticeable, to say nothing of inspiring. An Allemande that is a lot moodier than that stately old German dance has a right to be is one highlight of the suite. Another is the Sarabande, which recalls the solemn *Et incarnatus est* (and was made man) in the Mass in B minor.

BWV 996 in A minor offers more food for rest and contemplation in Isbin's performance, particularly in the remarkable Sarabande movement, for which a brisk Bourée and a lively Gigue provide an antidote for the blues. BWV 997 in C minor (which Isbin plays in A minor for better compatibility) is an altogether remarkable work. An extended Fugue in deliberate and quick-paced sections calls upon the performer's artistry to sustain the different voices. A jolly Gigue and its lively Double (variation) end the recital in high spirits.



Vivaldi: String Sonatas, Lute Concerto in D  
Seattle Baroque  
(Centaur Records)

Seattle Baroque was founded in 1994 by violinist Ingrid Matthews and harpsichordist Byron Schenkman. Their avowed purpose, reflected in both their live programs and their extensive discography, is to introduce audiences to the richness of the baroque era in works familiar and unfamiliar. Such is the present Vivaldi menu they offer here on their most recent release. Besides those mentioned above, the personnel on this CD include Tekla Cunningham, violin; Jack Lenti, theorbo; and Nathan Whittaker, cello. Their style of performance, supported by the bright sonics of the present offering, is energetic, with no holding back. It figures: if Vivaldi never failed to give it all he had, why should they?

We get an example of the verve of Seattle Baroque right from the start in two splendid Sonatas for Violin, in D, RV 10 and B-flat, RV 34, both of which have particularly catchy and vivacious Allegro finales. In between, we are given a special treat in the form of the Sonata, Op 1, No. 12, which consists solely of Vivaldi's highly imaginative and virtuosic variations on the popular "*La Folia*" theme that has proved irresistibly fascinating to composers up

An unexpected discovery here is the inclusion of three "Grand Concerti" by Pieter Hellendaal: Opus 3, Nos. 1 in G minor, No. 2 in D minor, and No. 5 in D major. Hellendaal (1721-1799) was a native of the Netherlands who emigrated to England at the age of thirty in search of greater opportunity as a professional musician. His style will remind the listener of Handel and Francesco Geminiani, both of whom were established in London at the time. From the former he derived the formal layout of his concertos, and from the latter the practice of adding a viola to the *concertino*, the main body of soloists in a concerto grosso. Though his style was derivative, he had good antecedents. He also was not afraid to add his own innovations, such as giving his audience a "bonus" in the form of an extra dance movement at the end when a work seemed to have already concluded with a bracing Allegro or Presto. Thus we have a Minuet in 1, a Bourée in 2, and a March in 5. The thrilling Allegro and drooping Affetuoso in 2 show this violinist/composer at his best. The present CD is our best chance to date to hear the music of a figure who is still in the process of being re-discovered.



Bach: Orchestral Suites 1-4  
Virtuosi Saxoniae under Ludwig Güttler  
(Brilliant Classics)

Trumpeter Ludwig Güttler leads the Virtuosi Saxoniae, a well-tempered group of musicians from Dresden, in swiftly executed, gracious performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's Orchestral Suites, BWV 1066-1069. These attractive works date from 1718-1723, when Bach was Kapellmeister to the music-loving Prince Leopold of the tiny principality of Anhalt-Köthen. As the prince was of the reformed faith, he did not require much music for his church services, and so Bach had considerable latitude to compose purely secular instrumental music. The Brandenburg Concertos date from this fruitful period, and also the sonatas and partitas for solo violin, the unaccompanied cello suites, and the violin concertos. And so do the Orchestral Suites.

Even the most casual glance at these four suites shows us they were written for great popularity. Bach titled them with the French name "*Ouverture*." They consist of a relatively slow and spacious Ouverture (literally, "opening") in dotted rhythms, followed by a suite of graceful pieces in dance tempo: Courante, Gavotte, Menuet, and Bourée, concluding with a Gigue (jig) in

to the present day. The booklet notes aptly describe this work as a “balance between visceral and cerebral entertainment.” Its headlong rush slows by the time we reach Variation 15 to allow for a lilting *Siciliana*.

More excitement awaits us in the Trio Sonata in G minor, RV 73, which contains as rapid an *Allemanda* as you will ever hear in a dance normally characterized by its stately measures. Sonata in A minor, RV 43 allows the cello to establish a solid presence and display its rich cantabile, particularly in the second Largo movement.

Finally, the Lute Concerto in D, RV 93, often performed on guitar and here played by Lenti on theorbo, makes its gracious presence felt on this CD. One of Vivaldi's most popular works, it features alert tempi plus ritornellos in the opening Allegro and a fast dance-like finale in 6/8 with the feeling of a Tarantella. In between, the Largo, today one of “Vivaldi's greatest hits,” makes much of a simple melody over soft string accompaniment.



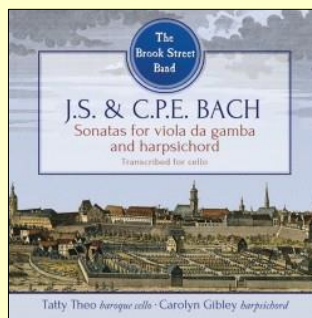
Bach: Concertos for Oboe and Oboe d'amore  
Gaspar X. Ruiz, oboe; Portland Baroque under Monica Huggett (Avie Records)

Gonzalo X. Ruiz, Argentine-born oboist who has been on the faculty of the Juilliard School in New York since 2009 and has a busy performance career in the US and Europe, gives a dazzling exhibition of musicianship combined with insightful scholarship in reconstructions for the baroque oboe of Bach harpsichord concertos. Collaborating here as he has often done over the past 20 years with Monica Huggett, director of the Portland Baroque Orchestra, he displays the sure grasp of Baroque style and the drop-dead beautiful tone that make these reconstructions sound so absolutely authentic they might have originally been written with the oboe and oboe d'amore in mind.

Well, they might have been at that. Or at least transcribed by J.S. Bach for one of his musical evenings at one of more of Leipzig's coffee houses, with either of several available candidates as the likely performer.

quick 3/8 or compound time, or some other similarly fast-paced dance. Thus, we have stately grandeur in the overture, followed by pulse-quickening tempi in the suite of dances. These suites were by no means cookie-cutters in terms of the order and type of dances, and Bach threw in other dance genres (Forlane, Passepied, Rondeau, Polonaise) for variety as it suited him. Significantly, after the fugal section in the second half of the overture, there were no “learned” forms – fugue, chaconne, passacaglia, etc. Manifestly, this warm, summery music was meant to be enjoyed.

The performances on this 73-minute CD capture the spirit and the sense of play in these suites. Occasionally, we may have a solemn moment, as in the sublime Sarabande in Suite No. 2, but the mood is never sad or tragic. And speaking of sublimity, one of Bach's finest moments is the Air in Suite No. 3, beautifully realized by a concertino of 2 violins, viola and cello over a basso continuo of double bass and harpsichord. Time seems to stand still in this movement. Not so the very energetic Badinerie (literally, “jesting”), in which the flautist - here, Eckart Haupt - is called upon to produce and articulate the notes as fast as is humanly possible on the transverse flute. The final movement in Suite No. 4, a festive work for 3 trumpets and 3 oboes, is titled “*Réjouissance*” (Rejoicing) – and how right the man was!



J. S. Bach + C. P. E. Bach: Sonatas for Viola da gamba and Harpsichord – Tatty Theo, Carolyn Gibley (Avie Records)

Johann Sebastian Bach's three Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord are given sturdy, gracious and consistently alert performances by Tatty Theo and Carolyn Gibley on this album, with a fine example of the genre by Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel as a welcome bonus.

In this recording, the bass viola da gamba is replaced by a four-string baroque cello, a decision that Theo finds easily defensible in terms of contemporary 18<sup>th</sup> century practice. Indeed, the range of her period instrument (Joseph Hill, London ca. 1741) and the technique she employs fit the requirements of the music like a glove. Also, the cello is a somewhat quicker instrument than its venerable predecessor, which had already begun to be supplanted by it at the time Bach composed these three sonatas.

Baroque composers, of necessity, frequently re-heated their material, and scholarly opinion over the past hundred years has been far from unanimous that Bach's Harpsichord Concertos BWV 1053, 1055, 1056 and 1060 were originally or solely intended for keyboard instrument. As we hear them on the present recording with Ruiz' distinguished artistry, of which his beautiful singing tone in the slow movements calls for special commendation, these works seem as clearly idiomatic for oboe as they are for harpsichord. Maybe more so.

"In retrospect," says Ruiz in his booklet notes, BWV 1060 for 2 Harpsichords "was particularly low-hanging fruit for musicologists," and it is usually heard today in various transcriptions for violin and oboe, a partnership that, as Huggett and Ruiz demonstrate, fits like a glove with the two instruments weaving absolutely glorious embellishments around each other's melody lines. And the Largo of BWV 1056, one of the world's best-loved melodies, sounds as if it could only have been written with the oboe in mind.

A special case here is BWV 1059, which does not have an original harpsichord version and was reconstructed from two sinfonias for organ and strings from the Cantata BWV 35 with the unforgettable, spiritually radiant Adagio from Cantata BWV 156 as its middle movement. Ruiz, surely one of the best oboists on this planet (if not the very best), meets its formidable challenges head-on, with consistently pleasing results.

Theo and Gibley, founding members of the famed Brook Street Band, give it their all in smashing performances of the elder Bach's three sonatas, BWV 1027-1029. They bring out the individuality as well as family resemblance in these works, reflecting their likely conception as a set. From the noble, steadily-paced Adagio opening of BWV 1027, they have their fingers on the pulse of Bach's lithe, alert rhythms and his three-part layout in which the cello and the keyboard right hand each take a melodic part with the keyboard left hand as the third part – in effect, trio sonatas for two instruments. These musicians are also keenly aware of the emotional affect in the slow movements, which gradually lighten from the anguish in the Andante of BWV 1027 to the sublimely lovely mood of simple happiness in the Adagio of BWV 1029.

C.P.E. Bach composed his Trio in G minor, Wq 88 in the 1740's, when the gamba had become pretty much a museum piece except among diehard connoisseurs. It is a remarkable example of an ancient instrument singing strikingly modern music, as the composer's signature "*sturm-und-drang*" style is very much in evidence, particularly in the rather impassioned Larghetto. Needless to say, it sounds great in the present performance.