

and there are many more subtle adjustments. Sometimes, as in *La Lutine*, one is reminded of Scarlatti, whose music has long been in the repertoire of pianists; but ultimately, as with Glenn Gould's Bach transcriptions, the question just posed is probably best left unanswered.

Angela Hewitt's programme notes are extensive and informative, quoting from Couperin himself: "The harpsichord is perfect with regard to its compass and its brilliance; but as one can neither swell nor diminish the sound, I am always grateful to those who, by an art sustained by taste, are able to render the instrument susceptible to expression." Indeed, in one of the pieces, *Le Rossignol-en-amour*, he recommends the flute as an expressive alternative. Hewitt usually avoids the continual "hairpin effect" that can become very tedious in baroque music, though sometimes the pianistic phrasing serves detrimentally to emphasize the music's short and regular periodic structure.

As an expressive tool, unlike the harpsichord, the piano offers the opportunity to change the balance of the voices; though it seems in many cases that had Couperin wanted this he might well have composed a piece differently. For instance, all bass notes are here much softer than they would be on the harpsichord; their full effect is missing from *Les Idées heureuses*, and the effect of those cadences which end with the low octave in the bass is consistently softened. Similarly, the off beat notes in the tenor register of several passages of *La Mézangère* are almost totally suppressed. This reinforces the impression of a texture dominated by the right hand—which the harpsichord avoids.

One consequence of the brighter tone of the instrument for which Couperin wrote is the lower tessitura of many of the pieces. When a melody inhabits the tenor octave, as in *Le Dodo* or *La Ménestou*, it sounds quite natural on the harpsichord; on the piano, as here, it gives the impression of a female voice with an unusually low tessitura and almost verges on the ridiculous.

Although the harpsichord is often conventionally thought by non-players to sound similar to a musical box, I find this description more apt to the white-toned piano played here, rather than to the gutsy harpsichord timbre that Couperin would have expected. A good example is *La Linote éfarouchée*, in which the low octaves of the left hand are almost completely suppressed, as cannot happen with the harpsichord. Couperin specifies *Légèrement*, but the piano take this to extremes

that are unattainable with the harpsichord. This tendency to soften the edge and thin out the texture by pianistic means imparts to the music a Satie-like —almost New Age— character and ultimately a monotony of tone that Couperin surely did not anticipate. Playing Couperin on the piano certainly extends the instrument's repertoire, but since the music is rendered less arresting in its new surroundings, one wonders whether it will be listened to very intently.

**Pierre Hantaï, *Scarlatti Sonatas vol. 3*
Harmonia Mundi Mirare CD MIR007 2005**

**Richard Lester, *Twenty Three Sonatas from The Complete Keyboard Works of Domenico Scarlatti 1685-1757, Played on Harpsichord, Fortepiano and Organ vol 17 only Privilege Accord PA12517 2005*
www.the-scarlatti-experience.co.uk
The entire set is being reissued in 6 volume sets by Nimbus Records from September 2006 www.wyastone.co.uk**

Reviewed by Meg Cotner

This summer I have had the pleasure to listen to two recent recordings of Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas, one by Pierre Hantaï and the other by Richard Lester. Each disc has its own unique offerings – in both sound and word – and I am here to introduce you to these delights.

Scarlatti's 555 harpsichord sonatas are some of the most challenging of the baroque keyboard repertoire. Every harpsichord student studies them, as do pianists, although according to Hantaï, "...the modern piano does rather smooth the rough edges of this repertoire, and the demonic effects you often find in it lose much of their meaning." Listening to these recordings makes me want to sit down and play through as many of these sonatas as I can, they are so engaging and full of fierce and tender beauty.

Pierre Hantaï's recording has been beautifully produced by the French early music label Mirare. On it, he plays an Italian instrument built in 2002 by Philippe Humeau. Richard Lester's recording, on the Privilege Accord label out of the UK, has a more "home-grown" feel to it compared to Hantaï's recording, which is not necessarily a bad thing in my mind. Lester plays a Portuguese

harpsichord built (no date given) by Michael Cole. The instruments sounds quite different from each other: Hantai's instrument has an incredibly resonant bass and a mellifluous top register, with just enough of a rough edge to be assertive in its own right. Lester's instrument, while also assertive in tone, sounds a bit rougher around the edges overall, less refined and more like the Portuguese instruments I've heard in the past.

Hantai and Lester come from different places with regard to their overall concept of recording these pieces. Lester is on a mission to record all 555 sonatas, while Hantai simply feels there is no justification for recording the entire oeuvre of a composer. In his words, "The performer must choose, and choose the best [sonatas]." This quote comes from a short interview with Hantai at the end of each section of his authored program notes in the CD. In contrast, musicologist and Scarlatti expert W. Dean Sutcliffe wrote the bulk of Lester's program notes, which are very informative, especially since more than half of the sonatas Lester plays are from unpublished manuscripts.

In my eyes, these unpublished pieces are the most enticing aspect of Lester's recording. It is exciting to think of having "new" music by Scarlatti, blasting the less-than accurate 555 number (Kirkpatrick combined two of the sonatas into 204a and 204b so that the total number would be more memorable) to new heights. Although some of the sonatas are not absolutely convincing as being penned by Scarlatti, I would agree with the notes that the Sonata in A (track 15) from the Lisbon *Libro di toccate* is one of the most convincingly Scarlatti's, as is the D Minor Sonata (track 19) from Valladolid Cathedral. Both sonatas are full of energy and interest harmonically. Lester plays them with the vigorous care one would with truly "new" music, and it must have been a thrill for him to present these intriguing pieces alongside more well-known works.

Hantai's recording also contains a number of well-known and popular sonatas, hand-picked by himself, and with respect to his comments, they are perhaps the best ones in his eyes. Sonatas K.517 and K.27, two favorites of mine, are played beautifully, K.27 with its tender *moderato* and K.517 with its incredibly fiery *presto*. Hantai expertly brings out the lyrical line of suspensions in K.27 that is so often hidden in amongst the moving notes, at times almost sounding gamba-like; simply beautiful. And I don't think I've ever heard K.517 played faster or with more restrained exuberance.

The one sonata that the two recordings share is K.146, one of Scarlatti's most famous. Both players use time for expressiveness to their advantage, but at different times. I can't but help hear a bit of "Frenchness" in Hantai's playing, due to his use of staggering and overholding. Lester's approach is more straightforward, simply letting it rip sometimes. He is more straightforward in his playing, and at times this creates more forward motion than Hantai might allow. The recording quality does make an impact, Hantai's recording sounding more immediate and present whereas Lester's in comparison sounds like more at a distance. Lester's harpsichord also has two pedals (one operating the harp, used in K.97, and the other engaging the 8'), which according to his notes, allows the player to make some semblance of dynamics by gradually adding or subtracting a register. He uses this effect in K.146, quite a different approach from Hantai.

In the end, both recordings each provide a little over an hour of aural Scarlatti goodness. Lester's is fascinating in his inclusion of unpublished sonatas, providing great discovery for the listener. Hantai's recording reflects his taste and particular interest in Scarlatti's sonatas. Both players bring great understanding and artistry to their performances on beautifully assertive Italianate instruments. And there's no doubt that both of them are virtuoso players. It's difficult to say if one is better than the other, so I won't; both recordings bring much to the musical table.

Soler, Sonatas, vol. 11
Gilbert Rowland, harpsichord
Naxos CD 8.557640 78'
Reviewed by Patrick Frye III

The eleventh installment of the large output of sonatas for harpsichord by Padre Antonio Soler (1729-1783), performed by eminent Scots harpsichordist, Gilbert Rowland (born 1946), showcases not only an exceptional group of works, but also a high quality recording. A Flemish double harpsichord from the Paris Workshop was tuned and prepared by Andrew Wooderson, and the recording was at Epson College Concert Hall in Surrey, England, in July 2004.

The recording exemplifies the Spanish Soler in many keys: C major, E minor, A minor, D major, B-flat major, and two totally amazing sonatas in the quite distant key of D-flat major—