



Echo & Risposta – Virtuoso instrumental music from the galleries of the Abbey Church of Muri

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[musica Dei donum](#) (01.03.2011)

The early 17th century was a musically exciting time, in particular in Italy where composers experimented with new composition techniques, harmony, different forms of instrumental music and combinations of instruments. And on top of that instrumental music became more idiomatic and considerably more virtuosic. At the same time the good things of the past were kept intact. And that results in a colourful and differentiated musical landscape which attracted composers and performers from all over the continent. Some went to Italy to listen and learn, others copied whatever Italian music they could lay their hands on. And some Italian masters travelled north to look for employment and passed on their art to musicians from above the Alps. Therefore it doesn't wonder that in this programme of instrumental music by Italian composers of the first half of the 17th century some German names appear. These were all influenced by the newest trends in Italian music. The programme focuses on music in which instruments or groups of instruments are juxtaposed. Two of the compositional techniques which regularly turn up are mentioned in the title. The echo was very popular in the time around 1600 and the first decades which followed. It was used in madrigals and in operas as well as in sacred vocal music. One of the most famous examples is the concerto 'Audi coelum' from Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine*. In *Echo ad manuale duplex forte & lene* by Samuel Scheidt we find the strictest application of this principle. It was originally written for one organ with two manuals, one with a loud, the second with a softer registration. It is played here on both organs, because both of them have just one manual. From beginning to end all phrases are partly repeated as in an echo. Another example is the *Canzon a 2 in echo* by Giovanni Battista Riccio. The term *risposta* refers to another popular compositional technique, the *cori spezzati*. Although it was Adrian Willaert who laid the foundations of this technique in Venetian sacred music, the whole concept of two groups which in some way or another are juxtaposed and play or sing in turn is as old as Western music. It is rooted in the practice of antiphonal singing in the early Christian church as the verses of a psalm are divided over two groups of singers. In music for the church composers could exploit here the acoustical characteristics of the often large spaces. And although the instrumental pieces on this disc were mostly not specifically written for ecclesiastical use, we know that such pieces were included in the liturgy, for instance as a replacement of an antiphon. That also justifies the performance of this music in a church like the Abbey Church of Muri with its two organs. In sacred music the Venetian technique of *cori spezzati* was mostly used in pieces for eight voices. But in instrumental music other ways of splitting the ensemble were applied as well. In the *Canzon francese in risposta* by Lodovico Grossi da Viadana, for instance, both 'choirs' consist of one treble and one bass instrument—violin/bassoon vs cornett/sackbut—with basso continuo. At the end they join into a four-part texture. Benedetto Re's *Canzone a 4* follows the same principle. The *Canzon XII* by Giovanni Picchi is different: here two instruments are juxtaposed in various combinations: two

treble vs two bass instruments or one treble/bass pair vs the other. In his Sonata a quattro Violini e doi Chitarroni Salomone Rossi comes up with again another way of splitting the ensemble. Here two pairs of treble instruments (in this recording two violins and two cornetts respectively) are contrasted, both with their own continuo group. Alessandro Stradella does the same in his Sonata a 4. The programme also contains some pieces which don't strictly adhere to the compositional principles which are the subject of this disc, like the Sonata X a 3 by Dario Castello which contains a virtuosic part for the bassoon. This piece is full of dissonances, another feature of the time which doesn't appear prominently in the music on this disc. In Johann Staden's Sonata I the part of the bass instrument is given some prominence as well. Here the ensemble is split into two groups: two cornetts, bassoon and organ vs two violins, sackbut and organ. Johann Sommer is one of the lesser-known composers in the programme and worked in North Germany. His Sonata a 4 is a virtuosic piece full of imitation between the various instruments. This is a most exciting disc. That is first and foremost due to the music which is technically brilliant, colourful and often daring. The use of the two organs in the Abbey Church of Muri considerably contributes to the excitement. The performances are impressive and technically immaculate. Although the music on this disc wasn't specifically intended for liturgical use, it is very interesting and enthralling to hear this repertoire in such a large space where the effect of contrast between individual instruments or groups of instruments can be fully explored. The booklet is exemplary: there are extensive programme notes by Philipp Zimmermann in German and English, a specification of the instruments, the disposition of both organs as well as the registration in every single piece. The tracklist gives the scoring of every piece as well as the source from which it is taken.