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

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Early Music Review (Roberto Giuliani - 2011.02.01)

PREVIEW ental music of the early 17th century

The three CDs under review, which will be discussed in the chronological order of their recording, encompass a broad spectrum of early 17th-century music. Attention will be devoted not only to matters of performance practice, but also to the selections of the programmes and locations of the recordings.

The Contest of Apollo and Pan: An anthology of instrumental music by Castello and his contemporaries (Chandos CHAN 0756, rec 2004, 73') demonstrates the contrast between wind and stringed instruments and between the wild and sublime. Pan, with his prodigious agility, sexually beguiling, rugged and fast-moving, gladdens the hearts of all (Greek etymology) and is often depicted with a syrinx. Apollo, on Mount Parnassus, is represented as the God of music and poetry, and even has a herd sold to Hermes, who had invented the lyre, to take possession of the instrument. With his lyre, Apollo won not only the musical duel with Pan (thus Ovid's Metamorphosis tale) but also with Marsyas, who was skinned after having been hung from a pine tree. In this CD, the battle is far less grim, but despite the widespread presence of writing for the violin, the sound of the dulcian is the really interesting aspect of this recording, which is built around unusual repertory for bassoon and violin; the contrasts in timbre build on the natural contrasts of the Baroque idiom.

The ensemble Apollo & Pan, winners of the 2001 Early Music Network International Young Artist's Competition, and now making their debut recording, address the limitations of the repertory available for this combination of instruments by adding a second violin. This enables them to approach a series of sonatas (nos. 10, 4, 7, 8 and 9, in that order) from Book II (1629) by Dario Castello, a wind player at St Mark's, Venice. A collection of early 17th-century instrumental variations is added to these sonatas: Chiacona op. 3 by Merula; Sonata and Balletto op. 22 no. 1 by Marini, Sinfonia Brando Gagliarda and Corrrente from Book IV by Buonamente; the famous Toccata no. 1 from Book II and Capriccio sull'aria di Ruggiero by Frescobaldi; a Sonata from Book IV by Rossi; Ancor che col partire by De Rore (followed by Spadi da Faenza's version); and a Sonata by Turini. The time-span from 1621 to 1655 is comprehensively covered. Within this programme, dulcian player Sally Holman can fully demonstrate her skill. This is especially evident in the Sonata no. 7 by Bertoli (a passacaglia bass is entrusted to her instrument, with divisions becoming increasingly virtuosic), in the Chiacona by Merula and in the Balletto by Marini. Within this creative collection of anthologies, perhaps the least interesting tracks are those involving music by Castello; these collections of virtuoso instrumental music are in fact less important for what they represent about compositional practice than for the

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dissemination that the composer was assured by several reprints; a similar process is also reflected in the choices of repertory on this CD, another element in the chain of transmission.

Giovanni Gabrieli and his contemporaries: Canzoni per sonare con ogni sorte di stromenti (Venice, 1608) (SFZ SFZM 0209, rec 2007, 67') contains samples of the work of Venetian publisher Alessandro Raverii, cousin of Gardano. These cover a short span, from 1606 to 1609, but the inclusion of his typographic mark, an eagle carrying in its beak the words 'Aeternitati', was prophetic, immortalizing amongst other things his collection Canzoni per sonare con ogni sorte di strumenti a 4, 5 e 8 con il suo Basso generale per l'org. Nuovamente raccolte da diversi Eccellentissimi Musici (Venice, 1608). Of the 36 compositions originally included in the collection, the ensemble His Majestys Sagbutts & Cornetts has selected 25, of which the majority are by Giovanni Gabrieli: he is represented by the 6 Canzoni (the entire set of those in the collection). Following those, and belonging to different generations and originating from Venice, Brescia and Ferrara, are three compositions by Frescobaldi and Guami, two by Antegnati, Lappi, Massaino and Merulo and one each by Bartolini, Chilese, Grillo, Luzzaschi and Maschera. This is a pity, because the CD could have contained even more music, especially compositions by Chilese; we know him only through the three pieces in this anthology printed by Raverii, and it would therefore have been interesting to listen to them all.

The editorial project undertaken by the ensemble is commendable, but the difficulty of encompassing the music of a range of contemporary composers is also reflected by the cover of the CD: this highlights 'Canzoni per sonare' and 'Giovanni Gabrieli' whilst 'and his contemporaries' is given in small characters. This suggests a legitimate compromise between the obligation to inform and the need not to discourage the buyer; but an explicit reference to the miscellaneous character of the collection would have been preferable. This approach does not alter the historical and aesthetic value of the CD, where the variety of types of instrumentation and the ability of the performers sustains the listener's attention, despite the fact that this repertory may appear too homogeneous, at least at first hearing. Even the sound-quality of the recording, made in the Church of St John the Evangelist in London, avoids this danger of homogeneity, bringing out as it does the different instruments and instrumental combinations. However, in some cases, for example, tracks 1, 8 and 11, the final chord is not allowed to resonate for long enough, being interrupting in an unnatural manner.

The qualities of His Majestys Sagbutts & Cornetts have been established for many years, particularly in relation to sound-quality and agility in the improvised ornamentations. The ensemble generates a real sensation of splendour through the dialogues between wind and string groups. Contributing further to the excellence of the recording are the ensembles the Purcell String Quartet, and the lute group Chordophony, which offers a stimulating performance of Canzon Vigesimasesta 'La Negrona' à 8 by Lappi, with the four lutes divided into two choirs; the composition is written antiphonally for high and low choirs. Also noteworthy is the performance of new versions of pieces performed previously, but using different instruments: a case in point is Canzon Quartadecima 'Capricio', a 4 by Grillo, first assigned to the organ and then to the violin consort. The booklet specifies the instrumental assembly of each item. The abbreviations of the performers suffer in some cases from printing errors: GC, for example, is Gary Cooper (harpsichord and organ), not mentioned in the list of performers on p. 7.

The scoring combinations imply careful thought. For example, the interpretation of Canzon Trigesimaquarta, à 8, per Quattro viole, e quattro Chiteroni, ò Leuti by Massaino involves the string quartet (in preference to violas da gamba) and lute

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quartet (instead of the chitarrones). In line with the practice of the time, this choice also reflects the availability of players where, in the absence of alternatives, one has to make do with who happens to be present. 'So the final scoring of violin and lute consorts was one of personal choice', we read in the note by Jamie Savan (cornett), 'as was our choice of scoring for all the canzonas with unspecified instrumentations. In allocating these pieces to various combinations of wind instruments, bowed and plucked strings, organ or harpsichord, our aim was to create a kaleidoscope of sound, all within the spirit suggested by Raverii's designation of ogni sorte di stromenti'.

In Echo & Risposta: Virtuoso instrumental music from the galleries of the Abbey Church of Muri (Audite SACD 92.572, rec 2008, 73') we are again faced with a group focused on a particular segment of Baroque-era production, this time music for cornett, which led its members to unearth rarely performed music, and in a sense to build a repertory. Les Cornets Noirs, prize-winners at the Concours Musica Antiqua at the Festival van Vlaanderen Brugge 2000, orientate this disc towards the 1620s and 30s with their choices of music by Becker, Re, Corradini, Rossi, Gussago, Castello, Riccio, Marini, Viadana, Picchi, Stradella, Scheidt, Sommer and Staden. The effect is of a varied programme, with different atmospheres, with 'echo & risposta', as the title states, a diversity of instrumentation, as facilitated by the skill of the musicians. It is, moreover, commendable to have included works not only by famous authors such as Rossi or Scheidt (whose Echo has a duration of 8'40˝) but also by lesser-known composers.

Of constant importance on the CD itself and in the booklet is the issue of choice and interchanging of instruments (for instance, Sonata a quattro Violini e doi Chitarroni by Rossi). A 'light' ensemble consisting of two cornetts and two organs (Suonata La Golferamma. A 2 cornetti in risposta by Corradini, Canzon a 2 in echo by Riccio) is alternated with the two choir pieces by Becker, Rossi, Picchi and Staden, leading up to the musical magniloquence of Marini, Somer and Scheidt (Canzon Cornetto a 4).

The label Audite is evidently concerned with the quality of the sound (super audio CD, surround sound), and is rightly convinced that the CD should have its own independent aesthetic. The care taken in the preparation of the finished product is considerable, with the booklet including much information on the instruments and on their appropriateness for each item, and about the microphones and technical specifications of the product. The association Freunde der Walls Klosterkirche commissioned the construction of two cornetts (Serge Delmas, Paris, 2005) tuned at the pitch of the two Bossard organs (approximately A = 425), so they can be used in a musical performance that exploits the four galleries of Muri Abbey. This CD provides the first evidence of this practice. 'The Abbey Church of Muri, Switzerland', says the booklet, 'with its four galleries around a large octagonal dome, enables several groups of musicians to be widely spaced, creating unique spatial acoustics. The ensemble Les Cornets Noirs exploits this fantastic building to full effect in an exciting recording of instrumental music from the early Baroque'.

Finally, the booklets accompanying all of these CDs are, as usual, presented in French, English and German, carefully avoiding Italian and thus omitting a sector of the market. This is a bad habit of publishers, particularly if one considers that the composers presented here are almost all Italian and that many have become international figures, as the Italians have become so inattentive to their own musical heritage!

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