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## From the sixties to the sixties

In this set of recordings we explore chamber and orchestral music mostly by Germans and Austrians, going slightly beyond the century of 1660–1760. We will encounter Rosenmüller, Schmelzer, Biber, Fasch, Kerll, Kress, Endler, Pisendel, Hasse, Heinichen, Graupner, Telemann, Quantz, Handel, three of the Bachs, and a few others who influenced them.

There are two essential albums by the young American ensemble ACRONYM. In both of them, there is the rich sound of a firm and deep instrumental bass line leading the music. The players are remarkably creative with instrumentation and the details they find to emphasize within the music; both albums have the same 12 instrumentalists plus baritone Jesse Blumberg. An uncommon sonority is the use of a lirone among the continuo instruments. The first disc is **Johann Rosenmüller in exile** (New Focus Recordings FCR909, *issued* 2017, 52'). From his post in Leipzig, Rosenmüller in his late 30s faced allegations of sexual misconduct with some of the boys. He escaped prison and fled to Italy, building a new career for himself in Venice with the translated name of Giovanni Rosenmiller. The selections here are from his Venetian repertory. There are four cantatas from undated manuscripts, alternated with three published sonatas in five instrumental parts (nos. 4, 6 and 8) from 1670. The cantatas are about faithfulness, mercy and victory over death. Blumberg and the instrumentalists are consistently excellent. This album does not duplicate any of the Rosenmüller compositions that The King's Noyse recorded in a similar programme (Harmonia Mundi HMU 907179, *issued* 1996, 72').

ACRONYM's acrostic allegedly means 'Adventurous Curators of Rosenmüller's Oeuvre Not Yet Minted'. Whimsically, the group has changed it for its next album: **Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber: The battle, the bethel & the ball** (Olde Focus Recordings FCR913, *issued* 2018, 68'); ACRONYM here means 'Anachronistic Cooperative Realizing Obscure Nuanced Yesteryear's Masterpieces'. Most of these dances and cantatas have uncertain attribution to Biber, but this is admitted only inside the liner notes. Some are recording premieres. Soprano Molly Quinn joins the ensemble for one ten-minute cantata that

conflates the sweetness of Jesus with imagery from the Song of Solomon. The last section is about death by stabbing, as illustrated by the ensemble's string parts. Quinn's characterization and expression are outstanding through the shifting emotions of this music. The shorter cantata that Jesse Blumberg sings is about the bread of life. Both these cantatas include a scordatura violin in the instrumentation. Violinists Edwin Huizinga, Karina Schmitz and Adriane Post all get solos in this programme, as does Loren Ludwig with viola da gamba. A surprising sound effect happens at the end of the battle piece in this interpretation; I will not spoil that disc-ending surprise here. The artwork reproduces many small details from Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which really has nothing to do with Biber, but is appealing.

From Australia comes **Johann Heinrich Schmelzer: The emperor's fiddler** (Obsidian CD718, *issued* 2018, 55'). David Irving plays Schmelzer's six violin sonatas of *Sonatae unarum fidium* (1664), assisted by a colourful continuo team. That team includes Hannah Lane playing triple harp, Tommie Andersson playing theorbo, John O'Donnell playing harpsichord and organ, and Laura Vaughan playing viola da gamba and lirone. O'Donnell fills out the programme with an organ performance of Johann Caspar Kerll's Passacaglia. The liner notes exhaustively document Schmelzer's career and compositions, and the instruments and playing techniques. They also advertise the virtue that all the musicians read from a facsimile of the 1664 print in crafting this performance.

It's hard to point to anything specifically at fault with this expert performance or recording, either in the violin solo or the continuo work. The preparation and execution are perfectly and beautifully done, but somehow I have found this boring next to Romanesca's recording of the same six sonatas (Harmonia Mundi HMU 907143, *issued* 1995, 67'). Romanesca—Andrew Manze, Nigel North and John Toll—conveyed more brinkmanship; their rendition of the third sonata is much more exciting. Some other listeners might be thoroughly satisfied with Irving's scrupulously understated interpretation, or want to have both of these CDs to hear different sides of the music. I would summarize the Irving performance as a theatrical coach might put it, analysing a staged scene while feeling dissatisfied: the thoughts seem all planned, not enough like a series of connected or essential discoveries in the

moment. Irving gives us careful philology where Manze delivers poetry.

A must-hear album is by a group named Girandole Armoniche (Esther Crazzolarà, Teodoro Baù and Federica Bianchi): **Extravagantes Seicento: Sonatas for violin and viola da gamba at the Habsburg Court** (Arcana A112, issued 2019, 57'). This Italian trio plays violin, viola da gamba and harpsichord. The programme includes sonatas for violin and continuo by Schmelzer, Biber, Giovanni Antonio Pandolfi Mealli (1624–70), Samuel Friedrich Capricornus (1628–65), Ignazio Albertini (c.1644–1685) and a harpsichord ciaccona by Kerll. Most of this music was for the court of Emperor Leopold I (himself a composer), from 1658 forward. These magnificent performances are lively and enterprising. The extravagant continuo improvisation by Baù and Bianchi drives and responds to the intense emotional characters of the music. Bianchi adds similarly elaborate embellishment within her harpsichord solo. Violinist Crazzolarà is extraordinarily expressive, too, while using separate bows for the fastest runs. One of the two Schmelzer sonatas is the fourth one from the 1664 set, the same as played by Irving and Romanesca. It is a ten-minute composition including a long passacaglia on the bass of a descending tetrachord. Crazzolarà and her colleagues outdo that competition with both delicacy and feisty bravura, partly caused by the use of the more percussive harpsichord rather than organ. Where David Irving's ensemble follows him dutifully, Crazzolarà's inspires her freedom. This ensemble seems to be discovering things in the moment among all three musicians, and it's thrilling. As it is with some jazz records where the musical dialogue is this responsive and alert, it's easy not to care very much what music the artists chose to play (or make up). It is sufficient to be both moved and astonished by the way it goes, enjoying it as it happens.

For something much bigger, we hear **Violin concertos from Darmstadt** (Audax ADX13716, issued 2018, 68') with Johannes Pramsohler leading the Darmstädter Barocksolisten. The packaging emphasizes the presence of music by the little-known Johann Jakob Kress (c.1685–1728). The liner notes tantalize us by describing a Kress concerto that was supposedly a prototype for Bach's fifth Brandenburg Concerto, but that piece is unfortunately not included in this recording. The defensible claim is that there was already too much D major here. The two offered concertos by Kress are in C major and C minor, interspersed between bigger orchestral concertos in D by Telemann, Fasch and Johann Samuel Endler (1694–1762). Pramsohler has interpolated into the latter two extra movements drawn from a different suite by Endler. The

performances by the 20-member Darmstadt orchestra are impressive, especially from the three trumpeters. The string playing is not always perfect; the bass line sometimes lags slightly behind the beat, and Pramsohler's own violin solos include some inaccurate intonation when he gets to the highest notes. Still, these clever and rare compositions are well worth hearing in this recording. Pramsohler's liner note advertises that this album is intended as a counterpart to his debut CD, where he had played concertos by Johann Georg Pisendel (the exacting concertmaster of the Dresden court orchestra).

For our taste of Dresden, we have two other albums. The first is **Johann Friedrich Fasch: Overture symphonies** (CPO 777 952-2, issued 2015, 75') played by Les Amis de Philippe and directed by Ludger Rémy. There are five 'Overture Symphonies' here: two in D, two in G, and one in F. In the modern catalogue of Fasch's works, series K, they are items D2, G21, F4, G5 and D1. Three of the pieces are advertised as world premiere recordings. These grand concertos were for Dresden court and chapels. Fasch (1688–1758) composed more than 80 of them, influenced partly by Vivaldi and by concertmaster Pisendel. All of the present pieces have oboes or flutes, bassoon, strings and continuo. Between two and four horns are included most of the time, and the two pieces in D additionally have three trumpets and timpani. The editions and programme notes are by Manfred Fechner, working from Dresden library parts. The performance is suitably lively, and the alert orchestra has fine control of dynamics in the phrasing. With this all-around excellence, one would have hoped for more volumes with additional Fasch concertos. Unfortunately, Ludger Rémy died in 2017, not long after the 2015 release of this album. He and his ensemble made a 2016 recording of some smaller-scaled anonymous concertos from Dresden, and then a set of Heinrich Schütz's vocal music was their last issued recording in 2018.

More of this vast 18th-century Dresden repertory is available from the Dresdner Barockorchester: **Gloria Dresdensis** (CPO 777 782-2, issued 2014, 71'). This project shows the cross-fertilization between German and Italian styles. The represented composers are Giuseppe Brescianello (c.1690–1758), Pisendel, Hasse, Fasch, Caldara, Sammartini and Handel; the pieces are sinfonias, overtures and a sonata. The performance by this 29-member Dresden orchestra is fine, but it often sounds like generic expert-consensus clean execution without much interpretative risk. No one conducts; Ulrike Titze and Margret Baumgartl take turns leading as concertmistress. I'd like to hear more imaginative specificity to the phrasing, as I hear in the Rémy performance (playing different

music). Of course, no one knows for sure how much Pisen-del's own court ensemble was able to interpret this music more than 250 years ago; perhaps playing it even halfway as cleanly as this was good enough. The recorded sound is clear, but the third movement of the Fasch overture has a clumsy digital edit near the end.

Without any trumpets or drums, but nevertheless extroverted, we have **Concerti bizzarri** (Linn CKD 526, issued 2016, 73') by Monica Huggett and the Irish Baroque Orchestra. The 18-member orchestra is resident at the National Concert Hall in Dublin, and this recording is a showcase for soloists drawn from the orchestra. The composers are Fasch, Telemann, Heinichen, Vivaldi and Christoph Graupner. The title, *Concerti Bizzarri*, seems to be a misnomer as none of the pieces is especially bizarre. These concertos are colourful and delightful, however, although none of these pieces was familiar to me, and the robust performances introduce them irresistibly. The Vivaldi concerto has two cello soloists. All the other pieces include oboes, bassoons or flutes among the soloists. One of Graupner's pieces whimsically gives us three instruments 'of love' at once: flute d'amore, oboe d'amore and viola d'amore. Director Huggett summarizes the collection well in her programme note: 'What I love about this music is the sheer beauty of the sound world, all the luscious colours and deep sonorities: it's the audio equivalent of eating the best chocolate mousse!'

Visiting smaller rooms, we have **Georg Philipp Telemann: Essercizii musici** (Channel Classics CCS 40118, issued 2018, 120') from Florilegium (an English ensemble, but recorded in Amsterdam). This is a two-CD set presenting about half of the sonatas from the collection (composed in the 1730s, and published in 1740): seven trio sonatas and four solo sonatas, for various melody instruments (oboe, flute, recorder, violin, viola da gamba). More than eleven could have been included in the space here on both discs. A liner note says that Florilegium plans to record a second volume of the other sonatas and trios, completing the set. The performances are gentle and graceful, bringing out the easily perceived logic of Telemann's compositional techniques. This is an ideal ensemble for this repertory, and vice versa—everyone's playing sounds effortless.

I especially like the creativity from the *basso continuo* team. Varied from movement to movement and guided by good taste, they explore some non-obvious combinations. Sometimes the cellist renders several phrases with pizzicato. The harpsichordist does not always double all of the bass line with the cello or the viola da gamba, but plays more simply. The archlute or Baroque guitar replace the

harpsichord often. In one piece, there is no bowed string in the bass, but the bass line is played on archlute with simple harpsichord continuo chords.

Because Ashley Solomon's essay describes the different style and form of the two solo harpsichord suites (as opposed to the sonatas and trios for other instruments), it would have been apropos to hear at least one of those suites here. Presumably, they will both be included in volume 2 for completeness, even though they are not ensemble music. I am eager to hear what Florilegium's Pawel Sieczak will make of these two suites, perhaps on the Ruckers copy he plays here in volume 1. In comparison, Roberto Loreggian's performance on a 16' Mietke-styled harpsichord (Brilliant Classics 94337, issued 2013, 326') seems too grand.

We hear this composer's simplicity and charm again in **Georg Philipp Telemann: Melodious canons & fantasias** (Resonus RES10207, issued 2018, 59'). The package advertises the Elysium Ensemble, but here that consists only of flautist Greg Dikmans and violinist Lucinda Moon, who have beautiful rapport from playing together for more than 30 years. The programme includes all six Canonic Sonatas (18 canonic movements), two fantasias for flute, and one fantasia for violin. The Canonic Sonatas are usually played on two equal melody instruments, but the mixed consort here sounds remarkably effective with the two different timbres. It is easy to follow the voice-leading this way, knowing which player is a bar or two ahead of the other. I especially like the calm dignity of Greg Dikmans's flute solos. The liner notes are thorough regarding Telemann's career, these pieces, the aesthetics from Johann Joachim Quantz's 1752 flute treatise, and these instruments (tuned at  $a' = 400$ ).

Finally, we are guests **In Sara Levy's salon** (Acis APLO0367, issued 2017, 70'). This programme explores music from the circle of Sara Levy (1761–1854), salon hostess in Berlin, who had been a student of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach in the 1770s. Director Rebecca Cypess has assembled The Raritan Players to play music that Levy had either collected copies of, or had studied. The ensemble here is a string quartet, traverso player and two keyboardists. The composers represented are Quantz and the Bach circle: Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emmanuel, Johann Sebastian, and Johann Nikolaus Forkel. Sebastian's pieces are the organ trio, BWV526 (as arranged by these performers for two fortepianos), and the flute sonata in E $\flat$  major, BWV1031, arranged for flute, violin and continuo. Emanuel's modern pieces are the Quartet in D, Wq.94 (possibly commissioned by Levy along with some other quartets by him), and

the fortepiano Sonata in G, wq.56/ii, published in 1780. Friedemann's contribution is only a two-minute Andante for solo harpsichord. From Forkel we hear a twelve-minute set of piano variations on 'God Save the King'. Quantz's piece is the old-fashioned Quartet in E minor, QV4:9, for flute and strings, likely from the 1720s. Everything is suitable for a well-appointed drawing room, as simulated by the acoustics of a small hall

at Rutgers University. The performances are lovely, making an afternoon of genteel entertainment. In the equally fine sequel to this, The Raritan Players' two keyboardists (Cypess and Yi-heng Yang) explore this Sara Levy repertory further. That newer album is named *Sisters, Face to Face* (Acis APL41769, issued 2019, 63').

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