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French chamber music

In promoting his cherished *réunion des goûts*, François Couperin never sought to denigrate the native French musical tradition but rather to enrich it with elements imported from Italy in an attempt to achieve 'the perfection of music'. The present batch of recordings, consisting mainly of chamber music composed between the 1690s and the 1740s, illustrates the varying degree to which French composers of the period came to terms with Italian styles and techniques or, in some cases, ignored them completely.

Elements of the two national traditions are nicely juxtaposed on a disc entitled **Italy versus France: Lully, Corelli, d'Anglebert, Rebel, Muffat, Couperin** (Hyphen Press Music HPM004, *rec* 2010, 79'), part of an enterprising series in which The Bach Players approach French music from various different perspectives. At one extreme in the present programme is a group of items representing the unalloyed *style français*—the overture and chaconne from Lully's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, together with two theorbo pieces by Robert de Visée and d'Anglebert's *Tombeau de M. Chambonnières*, a tribute to the founder of the French *clavecin* school. At the other is Corelli's trio sonata on the *ciaccona*, op.12 no.12, plus a keyboard toccata by Pasquini and the G minor sonata from Georg Muffat's homage to Corelli, *Armonico tributo*. Between these are two further works in that archetypal French genre, the *tombeau*, which nevertheless adopt the medium of the Italian trio sonata: Jean-Féry Rebel's *Tombeau de M. de Lully* and Couperin's *Le Parnasse, ou L'Apothéose*

de Corelli. This imaginative programming creates an anthology which amounts to far more than the sum of its parts. All the music is first rate, and The Bach Players, directed by Nicolette Moonen, do it full justice, whether in Muffat's sublime contrapuntal edifices, or in the dignified but poignant *tombeaux* by d'Anglebert and Rebel, or in Couperin's evocation of Corelli's 'enthousiasme'. Uplifting and hugely enjoyable.

A further disc in The Bach Players' series, **An Italian in Paris** (Hyphen Press Music HPM007, *rec* 2013, 68'), explores the somewhat subversive attempts of a first generation of French composers to get to grips with the medium of the solo and trio sonata, newly imported from Italy during the final decades of the 17th century. This recording demonstrates the remarkable assurance with which these pioneering composers assimilated the musical language of Italy, each producing an individual synthesis. The programme begins and ends with the first works of this kind: Couperin's trio sonata 'La Pucelle' (which the composer felt compelled to pass off as an Italian work) and Charpentier's amazing sonata for eight instruments, almost certainly the earlier of the two. In between come impressively mature solo sonatas by Jean-Féry Rebel and Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, a suite by Duval and contrasting chaconnes by Lully, Clérambault and Bartolotti. This is another splendid anthology, and my sole reservation is that the Couperin sonata presented here is not, in fact, 'La Pucelle' but the substantially revised version which the composer incorporated as the *sonade* in 'La Française' some three decades later. But this matters little when set against The Bach Players' stylish and committed playing.

Three of the other recordings are devoted entirely to chamber works by François Couperin. On **Apothéoses & autres sonades** (Harmonia Mundi HMC902193, *rec* 2014, 57') Amandine Beyer directs Gli Incogniti in *L'Apothéose de Monsieur de Lully* and *Le Parnasse, ou L'Apothéose de Corelli*, together with two other fine ensemble works, *La Sultane* and *La Superbe*. In the absence of specific instrumentation in the sources of these works, the players adopt the standard trio-sonata scoring of two violins and continuo (harpsichord, theorbo and bass viol), plus a second bass viol in *La Sultane*. There have been many good recordings of these pieces, and the present performances, despite some quirky articulation, can stand up well in such company. There are a few minor misjudgements: in the *Apothéose de Lulli*, the rapid semiquavers of 'L'Enlèvement de Lulli au Parnasse' are performed with *notes inégales* and sound uncomfortably rushed, while in the 'Bruit souterraine' the players misunderstand the

notation indicating slurred tremolo; see *Early Music*, xix/1 (1991), pp.43–59. But the technical assurance of Gli Incogniti is impressive, and they communicate the verve and elegance of these pieces.

Performance of Couperin's chamber works on solo strings and continuo, though probably the composer's preferred option, is by no means the only one: abundant evidence suggests that in French works of this kind, each line could be doubled by multiple instruments, often of different families. This is how the ensemble Les Ombres chooses to present Couperin's **Les Nations** (Ambronay AMY035, rec 2012, 106'), scoring the four works for a combination of three violins, two flutes, two oboes, bassoon and bass viol, with a continuo section variously comprising theorbo, arclute, guitar and harpsichord. My previous experience of this multi-instrument approach has not been encouraging. Yet any concerns about sour intonation, ragged ornaments or inflexible shaping are immediately dispelled by the present performances: Les Ombres, directed by Margaux Blanchard and Sylvain Sartre, display an astonishing degree of unanimity in the control of decorative detail and rhythmic elasticity—all without a hint of contrivance. True, some instrumental combinations work better than others: an oboe on the second line but not the top one can occasionally unbalance the ensemble, and some listeners may find the kaleidoscopic changes of instrumentation too frenetic. Overall, however, I have nothing but praise for the panache and imagination revealed by these talented players. It was a nice touch to include Bach's transcription of the 'Légèrement' from *L'Impériale*, here performed on the organ by Benjamin Alard.

Couperin himself encouraged such multi-instrument scoring in the preface to his *Concerts royaux*, and the ones he specifies—harpsichord, flute, oboe, bass viol and bassoon—are all in evidence on a recording of his **Concerts Royaux** (Analekta AN 2 9993, rec 2012, 60') performed by the ensemble Clavecin en concert under the direction of Luc Beauséjour. The instruments are disposed in a variety of combinations, without too many fussy changes of scoring; even so, it was unwise to allot the sarabande in the third concert to harpsichord with bassoon on the 'contre partie', given that the glorious final phrase of this line had to be transposed down an octave. Despite a dry recorded acoustic and less than ideal balance (the harpsichord, for example, is all but inaudible in the oboe–bassoon duos), there is much to enjoy on this disc—not least, the stylish flute playing of Grégoire Jeay.

Most of the remaining discs place the spotlight squarely on *le goût français*. Although Jacques-Martin Hotteterre

was one of the relatively few French musicians of his generation to visit Italy (an experience that earned him the sobriquet 'le Romain'), the recording of his **Complete chamber music vol.1: Suites op.2** (CPO 777 790–2, rec 2011, 75') emphasizes the French side of his idiom. This disc, performed by Camerata Köln, is devoted to his first book of *Pièces pour la flûte traversière, et autres instruments, avec la basse-continue*, op.2, in the revised second edition of 1715 comprising five suites. The performers adopt some of the alternative scoring options set out in Hotteterre's preface, allotting one suite each to the transverse flute, recorder, bass viol and harpsichord, and one to a mixed-instrument *symphonie* typical of the period. This makes for a satisfyingly varied programme, performed with elegance and refinement. True, the ornaments—in particular, the *pincé* and the slide—are sometimes despatched in too perfunctory a manner rather than relished as integral parts of the melodic line. But the grace and tonal beauty of the playing are such that I look forward to further releases in this enterprising venture.

Hotteterre 'le Romain' also features on **Un concert pour Madame de Sévigné** (Flora 2110, rec 2009, 70'), played by Marc Hantäi, Georges Barthel, Eduardo Egüez and Philippe Pierlot. The CD presentation is remarkably uninformative about the chosen works and their putative connection with Madame de Sévigné. This is nevertheless one of the most enjoyable recordings in my batch. Performed on two flutes, theorbo and bass viol, it includes Hotteterre's second suite for two treble instruments without bass, a suite for bass viol by Marin Marais from the Panmure manuscript, and various pieces from contemporary anthologies by Lully, Gautier and the ubiquitous 'Anon'. The performers sound thoroughly at home in this repertory and communicate a sense of effortless enjoyment. The two flautists, perfectly matched, are supported by the sensitive continuo playing of Eduoard Egüez (theorbo) and Philippe Pierlot (bass viol), the latter taking the solo in the Marais suite which he himself has reconstructed.

Charles-François Dieupart's *Six suites de clavecin* (1701) were published by Estienne Roger in Amsterdam in two versions, one for solo keyboard and the other for violin and flute with bass viol and arclute accompaniment. Of the four suites presented on the disc entitled **Charles Dieupart: Les suites** (Carpe Diem CD-16303, rec 2013, 57'), nos.1–3 adopt the less familiar 'ensemble' alternative, performed here on recorder, quinton (better known as the *pardessus de viole*) and continuo, while the remaining suite (no.6) is played as a harpsichord solo by Yizhar Karshon. A majority of solo movements

are allotted to Corina Marti (recorder), whose playing is lively and attractive, if at times a little headstrong. I would have preferred more of the *tierces coulées* to be tucked in before the beat rather than played as on-beat appoggiaturas; moreover, it is a pity that no one noticed the ugly, thrice-repeated C \sharp /C \sharp clash between recorder and theorbo in the sarabande of Suite no.2—a consequence of not observing the key signature in interpreting the figured bass. For me, the highlight of this recording is the ravishing playing of Tore Eketorp on the quinton, whether as the solo instrument or expertly blended with the recorder.

A *pot pourri* entitled **Michel de la Barre: La Julie** (Agogique AG0010, rec 2010, 68') presents a musical portrait of the eponymous composer, who was the outstanding French flautist of the early 18th century. This disc, performed by Le Mercure Galant under the direction of Serge Saitta, takes its title from one of La Barre's gavottes, based on his own air 'C'est des beaux yeux de Julie' (sung here, along with several other vocal items, by the soprano Camille Poul). Naturally, the programme includes works for La Barre's own instrument—among them, the third suite from his famous *Premier livre de pièces pour la flûte traversière avec la basse-continue* (1702) and the D minor trio from the *Premier livre des trios* (1694) in its revised version of 1707. But considerable space is also devoted to extracts from two of his operas, *Le Triomphe des arts* (1700) and *La Vénitienne* (1705). It is good to hear these rarely performed operatic excerpts, derived from the composer's 'reduced' scores and played (as they must often have been in the composer's day) by a mixed ensemble—in this case, two transverse flutes and two violins with bass viol, theorbo and harpsichord continuo. In some of these extracts, the combination of two violins and flutes does not produce the desired 'chorus' effect, and the resulting sonority tends to be rather sour. By contrast, the one-to-a-part playing is full of character and a constant delight.

Two very different aspects of French music are represented on **Les Goûts Accordés** (Atma ACD2 2673, rec 2010, 64'), which contrasts theorbo suites by Robert de Visée (from the Saizenay manuscript of 1699) with mid-18th-century sonatas by Jean-Baptiste Barrière, the latter written for that newcomer to France, the violoncello. If Visée's suites represent the dance-based *louisquatorzien* style in all its purity, Barrière's sonatas reveal the considerable extent to which Italian influences had been absorbed during the intervening half-century. Esteban La Rotta plays two of the Visée suites, together with the composer's

arrangements of works by Nicolas Hotman and Lully. While there is no denying the skill and refinement of La Rotta's performances, the theorbo is recorded in an oppressively over-resonant acoustic, and these tracks are best sampled a few at a time. I much preferred the Barrière sonatas, eloquently performed by Jivko Geogiev on a five-string cello and ably supported by a continuo team comprising bass viol, organ and theorbo. Outstanding here is the D minor sonata 'à tre' from Barrière's third book, in which cello and viol (Margaret Little) duet delightfully throughout. The disc includes the almost equally fine D minor and C minor sonatas from Book 2, written before the composer's three-year sojourn in Rome and hence marginally less Italianate. I hope these performers will record more of Barrière's cello works, which, though still relatively little known, include some of the finest French ensemble music of the mid-century.

The fashion for chamber music with obligato keyboard, sparked off in France by Mondonville in the late 1730s, was taken up by numerous composers, among them the indefatigable Joseph Bodin de Boismortier. His **Six Sonates, op.91** (Musica Omnia MO0307, issued 2010, 61'), were published in c.1741 and are scored for flute with a fully notated harpsichord part. Although such works are nowadays described as 'accompanied keyboard music', Boismortier treats the flute and harpsichord on equal terms: indeed, much of the appeal of these inventive pieces comes from the imaginative interplay of the two instruments and the unusual sonorities they sometimes create. Douglas Worthen, playing a Richard Potter flute of c.1755, and harpsichordist Ursula Dütschler prove persuasive advocates of this music. Their sensitive, neatly articulated performances are enhanced by a beautifully balanced recording that allows both instruments to be heard to good effect.

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