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German keyboard music from the late Renaissance to the *Galant*

Recordings of German keyboard music have long been a mainstay of the early music discography, with the peerless works of J. S. Bach often taking pride of place. Although Bach is represented in the batch of twelve recordings reviewed here, these releases are largely devoted to the music of lesser-known keyboardist-composers. We begin with a number of discs featuring works from the North German organ school before moving on to consider several recent recordings of harpsichord music, ranging from Froberger's suites to harpsichord duets by W. F. and J. C. Bach.

The Hungarian-born organist Joseph Kelemen has recorded a broad sampling of works from the North German organ school for the Oehms Classics series *Norddeutsche Orgelmeister* (Oehms Classics OC014, issued 2016, 491'), which was released as a box set earlier this year. (Kelemen has also recorded another set for Oehms devoted to South German organ music.) The sixth and final album in the series, **Hieronymus & Jacob jun. Praetorius: Organ works** (Oehms Classics OC691, rec 2013, 77'), features music by Hieronymus Praetorius, and his son Jacob, a one-time student of Sweelinck. The three hymns and Magnificat setting by Hieronymus (drawn from the Visby Tablature of 1611) contrast well with the somewhat more progressive praeambulum, two organ chorales, and Magnificat setting by Jacob included on the programme. (As an interesting aside, the manuscript for Jacob's Magnificat setting was cut up and used to mend the bellows of the chapel organ of Clausholm Castle in Denmark around 1700; this was only discovered and the piece reconstructed in the 1960s.) While it is easy for this repertory—which, aesthetically, lies on the threshold between the Renaissance and the early Baroque—to sound somewhat wooden, Kelemen imbues his performance with musicality and finesse, with singing descant lines and beautifully contoured pedal parts. The tasteful choice of registrations (which are detailed in the informative liner notes by Kelemen) further enriches the performance and showcases the historic organ of St Stephanskirche in Tangermünde, built by Hans Scherer the younger around 1624. The instrument is not only a pleasure to listen to, but

is also an ideal choice for this repertory given that Scherer was acquainted with Jacob and took care of the organ he played at the Jacobikirche in Hamburg.

The ten extant works by Michael Praetorius, the renowned author of the *Syntagma Musicum* (and no relation of Hieronymus and Jacob), are featured on **Michael Praetorius: Complete organ works** (CPO 777 716-2, issued 2014, 129'), which also includes the complete (if scant) surviving works by Hieronymus Praetorius III, David Abel, Johann Bahr, Wilhelm Karges, Petrus Hasse I and II, Melchior Woltman, Jakob Bölsche and the comparatively better-known Andreas Werckmeister. Friedhelm Flamme plays the organ built by Christoph Treutmann for the Klosterkirche in Grauhof in 1737, a High Baroque instrument in well (rather than mean-tone) temperament. Although the organ has a truly magnificent and remarkable sound that combines elements of North and Central German organ-building traditions, some purists may find that it is, overall, perhaps a bit 'modern' for the earlier 17th-century repertory on the album. But this hardly matters in the face of Flamme's masterful performance, which brings eloquence and intensity to even the most trifling work by the most obscure of these *Kleinmeister*.

Flamme's motivation for programming the works of the more obscure composers mentioned above becomes clear in the context of his larger recording project for CPO, which, like Kelemen's, is devoted to the music of the North German organ school, but goes even further in scope: Flamme intends to record the *complete* corpus of North German Baroque organ repertory. Thus, another release in this series, **Delphin & Nicolaus Adam Strunck: Complete organ works** (CPO 777 597-2, rec 2013, 130'), likewise is padded with the surviving works by Christian Flor, and the more obscure Dietrich Meyer, Johann Decker and Marcus Olter. Flamme performs the works by Delphin Strunck (which fills the first of the two CDs comprising the album) on the organ by Andreas Schweimb in the former abbey church of Sts Abdon and Sennen in Salzgitter-Ringelheim, while those by the others are performed on the Johann Christoph Thielemann organ of the Trinity Church in Gräfenhain. Once again, Flamme's playing does credit to these works, many of which are unlikely to be heard outside of a project such as his.

Somewhat more familiar repertory is to be found on another album from Flamme's North German organ

works series, which features music by Jacob Praetorius's most illustrious pupil: **Matthias Weckmann: Complete organ works** (CPO 777 873-2, *rec* 2013, 116'). The album's title should be taken literally, because even though there's enough music to fill two CDs, there is much more surviving keyboard music by Weckmann that is not included on the grounds that those pieces were not explicitly intended for the organ—a programming criterion that is arguably a bit tenuous, given the general lack of instrumental specificity in keyboard scores from this time. Nonetheless, Flamme's programme of all nine of Weckmann's chorale settings, plus a praebulum, a fantasia and a fugue leaves one in little doubt of his compositional genius and keyboard prowess as one of Buxtehude and J. S. Bach's most significant antecedents. Flamme maintains the high standard of performance heard on his other recordings, and uses for this album the Johann Patroclus Möller organ in Marienmünster Abbey, with the unique touch of having two hard-working calcants manually pump the bellows instead of resorting to the now-ubiquitous electric wind system. It must be said that Flamme's North German organ series—which numbers 13 albums in all—is a tremendous contribution to the discography, not only for its comprehensiveness, but also for the performer's high level of artistry.

Yet another recording dedicated to two great North German organ composers, **Bruhns, Hasse: Complete organ works** (Dynamic CDS7685, *rec* 2013, 75'), comes to us from the Italian organist Manuel Tomadin. In a sense, this album is something of a sequel to Tomadin's earlier recording (released by Brilliant Classics) of the works by Leyding, Kneller and Geist. Nicolaus Bruhns and Nicolaus Hasse make for interesting bedfellows here; the eloquence of Hasse's stately counterpoint and simple lines contrasts with the high drama and filigree of Bruhn's dazzling *stylus phantasticus*. Tomadin provides a sturdy interpretation of these works on an organ in the style of Arp Schnitger recently completed by Dell'Orto & Lanzini, although his frequent changes of registration sometimes seem excessive. It is also unclear why three of the pieces by Bruhns are performed transposed from their original keys; the organ's fifth-comma mean-tone temperament does not appear to have been a factor.

Although there is a certain satisfaction in having a recording that boasts the *complete* works of a given composer (or composers) and exploring their oeuvres by track-hopping around, there is still much to be said for those albums with carefully selected recital programmes that are best enjoyed by listening to them from start to finish. Australian organist Brett Leighton offers such an

experience while showcasing the newly restored instrument of the album's namesake on **The organ of the Stadtkirche St. Marien, Celle** (Musica Omnia MOO405, *issued* 2013, 75'). The programme, entitled 'the rise of the North German organ school', consists of eleven pieces by several of the school's most renowned protagonists: J. Praetorius, Scheidemann, Tunder, Weckmann, all book-ended with toccatas by the great Buxtehude and J. S. Bach. Tasteful playing and the thoughtful programming make this sonic 'snapshot' of the North German organ school a fine addition to any enthusiast's collection.

Although Bach is often seen as the zenith of the North German organ school, he was, of course, also greatly influenced by his fellow Central German keyboardists, such as his purported teacher, Georg Böhm, and his immediate predecessor at the Thomaskirche, Johann Kuhnau. The works of the latter in particular have largely been overshadowed by the incomparable masterpieces of JSB—an unfortunate fate, given Kuhnau's remarkable ingenuity and the significant influence his works had on subsequent German keyboard music and music publishing; he was, after all, the progenitor the German keyboard sonata as a form. **Johann Kuhnau: Complete organ music** (Brilliant Classics 95089, *issued* 2015, 220'), performed by Stefano Molardi, is therefore a most welcome addition to the discography. Molardi uses two Silbermann organs (the instruments in the Freiberg Cathedral and the Marienkirche, Rötha from 1714 and 1722, respectively) for his performances of the Biblical Sonatas (published in 1700) and the seven sonatas comprising Kuhnau's *Frische Clavier Früchte* (published in 1696). The album therefore might have been more appropriately entitled 'complete keyboard sonatas', especially since there is nothing that explicitly ties them to the organ. (Indeed, the clavi-chord probably would have been the instrument that Kuhnau reached for first.) Molardi's playing is nuanced with tasteful registrations and ornamentation, although at times—particularly in the Biblical Sonatas—I would have enjoyed a bit more melodrama. This is nevertheless a highly recommended set for those interested in German keyboard music; and with a new edition of Kuhnau's complete keyboard works having appeared from Henle earlier this year, let us hope that he becomes more of a household name.

Moving now to harpsichord recordings, we encounter that genre of keyboard repertory typically reserved for stringed claviers, and thus not represented on any of the foregoing albums: dance suites. **From the house of Master Böhm** (Melba MR301143, *rec* 2012, 80') features four suites, an 'ouverture'-suite, two chorale partitas,

a prelude, and the lone minuet transmitted in the *Clavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach*, all by Georg Böhm, whose style can be said to bridge the gap between Froberger on the one hand and J. S. Bach on the other. Australian harpsichordist John O'Donnell performs these exquisite works with finesse and gusto on an instrument after Dulcken, masterfully interweaving Böhm's singing melodic lines with the rich *style brisé* textures that support them. Of all the recordings in the present batch, this was the one that I found myself returning to for repeated listenings; highly recommended.

Dance suites also dominate the programme on **Froberger 1649: Suites, toccatas & a lament** (Music & Arts CD-1280, issued 2013, 69'), which features all six suites from Froberger's *Libro Secondo* of 1649 (the earliest of the three surviving Froberger autographs), along with a smattering of other works from the collection. Colin Tilney plays a harpsichord based on a 1644 Andreas Ruckers instrument, with a single 8' + 4' disposition. The harpsichord has an enchanting sound, with a particularly sweet, silvery 8' treble; in one instance Tilney plays on the 4' alone with striking effect. Tilney commands great clarity and poise in his playing, with well-defined musical lines and staid tempos—interpretative qualities that, to my taste, compliment the more contrapuntal pieces on the album better than the dance movements.

Whereas Froberger was one of the earliest German keyboardists to compose dance suites, Gottlieb Muffat, the youngest son of Georg Muffat, was among the last before the sonata form came to dominate German keyboard repertory. On **Gottlieb Muffat: Componimenti musicali; Parthie in D minor; Parthie Parisien** (Naxos 8.572610, rec 2012, 65'), harpsichordist Naoko Akutagawa performs three large dance suites ('parthie') and a virtuoso ciaccona with 38 variations; the latter piece and one of the suites are drawn from Muffat's second publication (and the album's namesake), *Componimenti musicali per il cembalo* (1736–39). The cosmopolitanism that Froberger cultivated in his own pieces achieves new heights in Muffat's delightful late Baroque works, with French, Italian and German stylistic elements blended together in a delectable mélange. Akutagawa brings gracefulness, wit and an occasional touch of melodrama to bear on these pieces in charming performances; for those unfamiliar with Gottlieb Muffat, this recording would make for a nice addition to your collection.

The final two recordings in the present batch both feature programmes of music for two keyboard instruments. On **The Bach's court in Leipzig: The harpsichord**

lordship (Stradivarius STR37012, rec 2013, 59'), the Italian harpsichord duo Daccapo (Luigi Accardo & Enrico Bissolo) perform what are arguably the four most well-known German works for two harpsichords: the concertos in A minor and C major by Krebs and J. S. Bach respectively, the 'duetto' (really another concerto) by W. F. Bach, and the two-movement Sonata in G by J. C. Bach. Daccapo maintain terrific ensemble and play with vigour and aplomb to create a rich, luscious sound that is almost orchestral in character. The only shortcoming of this recording lies in the rambling and poorly translated liner notes.

The theme of keyboard duets is taken a step further on **Der Stille Kurfürst | The silent elector** (Klanglogo KL1501, rec 2011, 65'), performed by Hildegard Saretz and Michaela Hasselt, who together comprise the Leipziger CembaloDuo. This name is misleading in the case of this album, however, for Saretz and Hasselt perform together on harpsichord and fortepiano respectively. In my opinion, although the idea of the harpsichord and fortepiano together is charming, the sonic reality is less so; the keyboard cousins tend to amplify the worst qualities in one another, such that even the most robust harpsichord sounds thin and plinky and the finest fortepiano unfocused and murky when heard against each other. Although the CD only reconfirms this impression for me, the playing is commendable and the programme very interesting indeed, featuring works from the circle of the Saxon Elector Friedrich August III—an amateur keyboard player who enjoyed playing keyboard duets. Original compositions for two keyboards by the elector's court musicians, Peter August and Joseph Schuster, are found alongside C. H. Graun's concerto for two harpsichords, and arrangements of pieces by Janitsch and Haydn. An eclectic album for those in search of novelty.

Websites

Brilliant Classics www.brilliantclassics.com

CPO www.jpc.de/jpcng/cpo/home

Dynamic www.dynamic.it

Klanglogo www.klanglogo.de

Melba www.melbarecordings.com

Music & Arts www.musicandarts.com

Musica Omnia www.musicaomnia.org

Naxos www.naxos.com

Oehms Classics www.oehmsclassics.de

Stradivarius www.stradivarius.it

doi:10.1093/em/caw065

Advance Access publication October 31, 2016