

Peter Holman

English music

This batch of recent recordings is eloquent testimony to the continuing interest among performers and recording companies in the 'golden age' of English secular music. Interestingly, of the eight individuals or groups reviewed here, only two, the viol consorts, are based in England. English singers and keyboard players seem to be neglecting their great heritage of madrigals, songs or virginal music at present, though that may reflect the parlous state of our recording industry more than an actual lack of interest.

We start, appropriately, with **William Byrd: Complete consort music** (Linn CKD372, *rec* 2010, 80') by the viol consort Phantasm. It contains 27 out of the 33 complete pieces in vol.17 of the Byrd Collected Works, omitting only 'the spurious or inadequately reconstructed works' according to Laurence Dreyfus's lucid and informative notes. They are placed in a varied and satisfying sequence juxtaposing genres, styles and periods, though Dreyfus includes a table ordering them by 'possible date of composition', from 1560 to 1603, so one could programme them to hear Byrd's extraordinary development as a consort composer step by step, from the early three- and four-part plainsong settings to the five-part 'Browning' and the great six-part fantasias. Phantasm clearly know this wonderful music very well, and play it with authority, conviction and complete technical control. The players make a beautiful, blended and cohesive sound, with little of the over-emphasis and excessive vibrato that marred their early live performances. Nothing is said about the viols used, but they sound like Jacobean rather than Elizabethan models, so in a sense we hear Byrd as he might have been performed around the time of his death. If you have no CDs of English consort music in your collection, this would be a good place to start.

William Byrd: Complete fantasias for harpsichord (Naxos 8.572433, *rec* 2010, 78') by Glen Wilson, an American active in Germany and the Netherlands, offers music of equal greatness, though much less known, most players concentrating on the more immediately appealing sets of variations on popular tunes or the pavans and galliards. Wilson plays with obvious enthusiasm for the music (which is also reflected in his highly personal and sometimes idiosyncratic notes), and has considerable virtuosity where required, though I found the CD rather tiring to listen to. There is less variety of idiom and mood than in the consort music, and Wilson's style is direct,

often rather aggressive, with little spreading of chords. His instrument, a closely recorded and strongly voiced Ruckers copy by Henk van Schevikhoven, is not always in tune and sometimes emits an audible 'ping' when chords are released. I yearned for more variety, both in the playing and the choice of instrument: an occasional change to a suitable organ or a virginals would have brought welcome relief. However, this is a useful bargain introduction to a neglected area of Byrd's output.

There is no lack of variety in **John Bull: Complete works for keyboard, Volume I** (Musica Omnia mo0301, *rec* 2007, 93'), a two-CD collaboration between the Boston-based maker and player Peter Watchorn and the young Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. Three Flemish-type harpsichords are used, a single-manual after Hans Moermans I (1584), a two-manual after Hans Moermans II (1642) and a two-manual after Ruckers-Blanchet (1646/1756); Watchorn had a hand in designing or making all three. They are beautiful instruments, though the two later ones struck me as being rather too sophisticated and refined for Bull; the earlier Moermans, with single 8' and 4' strings, must be much closer to the instruments he would have played in Antwerp. Nevertheless, Watchorn and Esfahani are persuasive Bull players, with a nice balance between introspection and virtuosity, and the music, consisting mostly of pavans and galliards, character pieces and some of the simpler variations, is delightful. My reservations are that the CDs are rather short measure (the programme could almost have fitted onto a single disc); that the pavans are taken too slowly (perhaps influenced by the two-minim barring in the Musica Britannica edition, which gives the false impression of a crotchet beat); and that the tuning of the harpsichords is not always perfect—and not just in the Chromatic Pavan and Galliard with its A and E's, which is recorded in modified meantone temperament.

Two other CDs are concerned with the activities of English musicians in exile on the Continent. In **Amorous in music: William Cavendish in Antwerp (1648–1660)** (Et'cetera KTC4019, *rec* 2006, 67') Mark Levy's viol consort Concordia, Angharad Gruffydd Jones (soprano), Elizabeth Kenny (lute and theorbo) and Gary Cooper (harpsichord and organ) explore the patronage of the Duke of Newcastle, at Welbeck Abbey, at Charles I's court (where he came into contact with William and Henry Lawes and Nicholas Lanier), and in Antwerp during the Interregnum (where he lived in the Rubens House and seemingly had Matthew Locke in his entourage). There are songs by Lanier, the Lawes brothers and Locke, an extract from Dowland's 'Lamentatio Henrici Noel'

(Cavendish owned the manuscript) and a charming solo motet by Galeazzo Sabbatini (Locke copied it out while in the Netherlands). The consort pieces include a fantasia by Orlando Gibbons (republished in Antwerp in 1648), a four-part suite by William Lawes, Jenkins's 'Newark Siege' Pavan and Galliard (Cavendish was commander of the Royalist forces), a fantasia by Leonora Duarte (Cavendish attended musical gatherings at her family's house in Antwerp) and a fine five-part Symphonia by the Brussels composer Nicolaus à Kempis (published in Antwerp in 1647). Other pieces are less appropriate, such as the four-part pavan attributed to Dowland in Thomas Simpson's *Taffel-Consort* (Hamburg, 1621) and Peter Philips's great five-part 'Dolorosa' Pavan and Galliard, though Lynn Hulse gamely tries to connect them all to Cavendish in her excellent notes. The performances are mostly very good. Angharad Gruffydd Jones sings with intelligence and excellent diction, and Elizabeth Kenny's accompaniments are a model. Concordia play the consort pieces with considerable virtuosity and refinement, though the players are hard pressed in 'Newark Siege' and in the à Kempis symphonia (which is for violins rather than viols), and they sometimes use too much vibrato for my taste, while Gary Cooper's harpsichord continuo is often overactive and rather distracting. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating CD, illuminating an important episode in the cultural relations between England and the Netherlands.

Roberto Gini's **Henry Butler: The division violist** (Et'cetera KTC1906, rec 2009, 78') is the first CD devoted to the English Catholic viol player Henry Butler (d.1652), who spent most of his working life at the Spanish court. It consists of ten sets of variations for solo bass viol together with two short preludes and a sonata-like piece—possibly the first by an Englishman. The music is of considerable interest and importance, throwing light on the origins of the English division viol idiom and its relationship to related traditions elsewhere in Europe, such as Italian *viola bastarda* music. Gini discusses this in his interesting notes, though in my opinion he makes too much of the parallels between Butler and Orazio Bassani (more fruitful connections could be made with Alfonso Ferrabosco II and Daniel Norcombe, another Catholic exile, working in the Spanish Netherlands). Also, his idea that Butler's own viol is depicted in a 1631 painting by Vincenzo Carducci is fanciful. Gini is a wonderful viol player, who makes light of Butler's many difficulties, and he is ably supported by Marco Angilella (bass viol), Sara Dieci (keyboard) and Elena Spotti (harp). However, in my opinion he plays virtually all the pieces too slowly, and it is often difficult to comprehend the structure and the harmonic direction

because things tend to grind to a halt at the end of sections. This is a pity: there are some fine pieces here, such as the sets of divisions based on the harmonies of 'Callino casturame' (VdGS no.13) and the Spanish Pavan (VdGS no.5), and Gini clearly has the technique to do justice to them at a reasonable speed. One mainly for the viol fanatic, I'm afraid.

Two recitals of 16th- and early 17th-century songs and instrumental music can be dealt with in short order. **Ye Sacred Muses: complaintes, élegies et chansons** (Ameson ASCP1122, rec 2011, 61') is on paper an attractive anthology of consort songs, lute songs and fantasias by Byrd, Dowland and others, and the French countertenor Jean-Michel Fumas has a nice voice, though his singing is ruled out of court for me by his comedy accent and his constant mispronunciation of English words. There is also the problem that the lute-song repertory is generally intended for a high voice (soprano or tenor), not a countertenor, and there are some dubious scoring decisions: a Coprario duet is performed with a viol replacing the upper voice and a lute takes the vocal line in an instrumental play-through of Byrd's 'The man is blest'. The Eliza Consort (four viols and lute) play well but use the wrong instruments: four-part writing with a single soprano, two inner parts and a bass requires a treble viol, two tenors and a bass, not a treble, tenor and two basses. The booklet is a disgrace: it is mainly taken up with extensive biographies and photos of the performers, the notes are confined to the obvious (Dowland 'was one of the most famous luteists and composers of his time'), the texts are in the wrong order and many subsequent verses are missing.

Tears of Joy: English lute songs and secular music (Et'cetera KTC4038, rec 2011, 55') by the Flemish quartet Zefiro Torna is a lively anthology of songs and instrumental pieces from Dowland and his contemporaries to Henry Lawes, Thomas Brewer, Robert Ramsey and Matthew Locke. It is mostly sung by Cécile Kempnaers (soprano) accompanied by two lutes and a *nykelharpa* (a Swedish keyed folk fiddle)—it is not explained how this last instrument might be appropriate for English 17th-century music. Kempnaers is much more engaged with the English language and with the meaning of the words than Fumas, though a comedy accent appears from time to time. The main problem is that the lily is gilded in virtually every piece, with a second lute introduced into the lute songs, and the *nykelharpa* frequently added to provide inner parts or interludes between the verses. I found it unnecessary and rather off-putting, though others may react differently. The package includes a second CD of extracts from their previous recordings, marking Zefiro

Torna's 15th anniversary. (NB: the Flat Pavan and Galliard is by John Johnson, not his son Robert.)

Phantasm's latest CD, **William Lawes: Consorts to the organ** (Linn CKD399, *rec* 2011, 78'), brings us full circle. It contains four out of the five sets or suites in five parts and three of the five sets in six parts. This new recording is particularly welcome because, as its title indicates, it includes Lawes's written-out organ part (played by Daniel Hyde), which, although largely confined to doubling the viols, contributes a good deal to the sonority of the ensemble; it was omitted in Phantasm's earlier Channel Classics recordings of the complete five- and six-part consorts. I will not waste space extolling Lawes, and everything I said about Phantasm's Byrd applies to this recording: it is superb playing of some of the greatest music written by an Englishman.

Websites

Ameson no website

Et'cetera www.etcetera-records.com

Linn www.linnrecords.com

Musica Omnia www.musicaomnia.org

Naxos www.naxos.com

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Elizabeth Roche

Handelian rarities

Music scholars are all too well aware that 'of the making of many books there is no end', but for those who review recordings of Baroque music, Ecclesiastes's words seem ever more applicable to new CDs—and also DVDs—of Handel. As is not necessarily the case with musicological writings, however, this is almost always an entirely good thing, especially when they include little-known or newly reconstructed pieces which increase our all-round understanding and appreciation of Handel's work, as well as providing delectable listening.

That Handel's dramatic activities included providing incidental music to spoken drama may come as a surprise even to Handel devotees, but the Early Opera Company's **Handel: Alceste** (Chandos CHAN0788, *rec* 2011, 63') contains all that remains of the score he provided for the playwright Tobias Smollett's tragedy after Euripides's *Alcestis*. However, the project was abandoned—possibly because of the ruinous cost of the unprecedentedly magnificent scenery Smollett required—shortly before

the planned première in February 1750. The text disappeared, much of Handel's music was (naturally) reused, mainly in *The Choice of Hercules* and *Alexander Balus*, and the surviving items are not only too disparate to constitute a coherent narrative, but also make it obvious that Smollett's adaptation was so wholesale as to rule out their use in a production of Euripides's drama. Alceste's death in exchange for that of her husband, Admetus, occurs at the beginning of the Greek play, but Smollett delays it until Act 4, the events of his first three acts, including the wedding celebrations and Admetus's illness, being merely referred to in passing by Euripides. Much of this music, however, is far too good to be allowed to languish unheard; Calliope's serene 'Gentle Morpheus', sung to the dying Admetus, is one of Handel's most effective invocations of sleep, and deserves a place in recital programmes—as does Charon's sinister, almost Polyphemus-like 'Ye fleeting shades, I come', sung as he ferries Alceste to Hades, and whose orchestral accompaniment evokes both rushing water and the grim repetitive strokes of his oars. Both this and the brilliant coloratura aria 'Ye swift minutes as ye fly' do give some credence to the suggestion that the theatre manager had in fact rejected Handel's music, even before the production's cancellation, as being too difficult for the available performers. It poses no problems, however, for Christian Curnyn's excellent singers, and this fascinating salvage operation deserves hearty congratulations all round.

Mendelssohn's arrangement of Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* may also be unfamiliar to some listeners, and it is a most happy coincidence that Nicholas McGegan's recording of it with the NDR Chor and FestspielOrchester Göttingen—**Georg Friedrich Händel: Dettingen Te Deum (version by Mendelssohn Bartholdy)** (Carus 83.358, *rec* 2009, 64')—has arrived along with Stephen Layton's CD of Handel's original score with the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Academy of Ancient Music—**Handel: Dettingen Te Deum; Zadok the Priest; Organ Concerto No.14** (Hyperion CDA67678, *rec* 2007, 61'). Handel began work on this grand ceremonial piece immediately after George II's victory at the Battle of Dettingen in June 1743, in readiness for the expected thanksgiving service in St Paul's Cathedral. However, between political problems and the monarch's decision to spend the summer at home in Hanover, this never materialized, and the eventual first performance was merely part of Sunday Matins in the very small Chapel Royal—not the ideal venue for an exultant piece involving lavish use of trumpets and drums. However, Handel does also seize every opportunity the text offers for