Johann Sebastian Bach
The Six French Suites, BWV 812-817; Little Preludes, BWV 924-943
Peter Watchorn, harpsichord
Musica Omnia MO0402 (3 CDs) www.musicacomnia.org

Australian harpsichordist Peter Watchorn has already demonstrated his skill and musicality in other recordings of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) and Dr. John Bull. A scholar and harpsichord builder as well as a performer, he brings all his knowledge to informed and insightful performance, even writing his own completion of the fragmentary ÉMinor Prelude (BWV 932) from the Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach.

The French Suites and the Little Preludes were composed as pedagogical pieces for Bach’s eldest sons; accordingly, Watchorn’s structural approach to performance informs as much as it charms. At no point, however, does the “lesson” become pedantic: quite the opposite. There does the “lesson” become informed and insightful performance, even writing his own completion of the fragmentary ÉMinor Prelude (BWV 932) from the Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach.

Watchorn’s structural premise that they were thought to be absent from the original performance, and assigned their roles to violon and oboe. As string lines, parts in difficult flute keys can be performed at virtuosic speed, adding justification to the radical tempo choices.)

What is lost in this emulation of Baroque opera—a con brio performance that would probably have shocked Bach’s conservative Leipzig employers but that, for a contemporary ear, is a whole lot of fun. (As was done in the Netherland’s Bach Society’s 2004 Channel Classics recording, she eliminates flutes from the score, on the premise that they were thought to be absent from the original performance, and assigned their roles to violin and oboe. As string lines, parts in difficult flute keys can be performed at virtuosic speed, adding justification to the radical tempo choices.)

What is lost in this emulaton of Baroque opera is clarity of contrapuntal text and compositional nuance, particularly in “Ach, mein Sinn,” where the tenor coloratura is obscured by the dramatic tempo. In contrast, the opening chorales in Part 2 are extremely effective, especially the rising chromatic lines that bounce from voice to voice, seeming to suck the air out of the room. Whether this trade-off reflects Bach’s intention remains, to me, an open question.

The virtuosity displayed by performers is truly impressive, showing a level of professionalism and musicality of which Bach could only dream. Huggett’s direction is pristine and very musical, and all the soloists are delightful with full, yet well-controlled, declamation. The chorus is consistently strong, and its dramatic role in the bass aria “Mein teurer Heiland, laß dich fragen” is particularly poignant—a pale shadow haunting the soloist.

The forces are about half the usual complement, but there is still a massiveness to the engineered sound that can seem incongruous with Huggett’s intention.

—Lance Hulme

John Dowland
Dowland in Dublin
Michael Slattery, tenor; La Nef
ATMA Classique ACD22650 www.atmaclassique.com

So, was John Dowland Irish? This release from the Québécois mixed ensemble La Nef and American tenor Michael Slattery asks that very question. Dowland (1563-1626) mentions his “countryman,” an Irishman by the name of John Forster, in A Pilgrim’s Solace (1612); given that he was a staunch Catholic and held an honorary degree from Trinity College in Dublin, perhaps he hailed not from England but from Ireland.

Though this question may never be answered, the disc is meant to demonstrate that Dowland’s compositions are suited to what La Nef calls a “Celtic” flavor. The term made me cringe in fear of “lute song—meets-Riverdance,” but instead of being overly dramatized or orchestrated, these versions are lilting, teasing, immediately familiar and yet teasing, immediately familiar and yet pleasingly different. There are a very few moments when the instrumental introductions to the songs verge on “Celtic Woman” territory (see “Now O Now I Needs Must Part”), but if the practice of Dowland’s day was to extemporize upon favorite songs, then La Nef has simply and pleasantly followed this tradition. Over two decades, this ensemble has grown comfortable playing with and off of each other; they finish each other’s thoughts with the ease of old friends.

The real star of this disc, though, is Michael Slattery; his voice is like warm honey on a summer day. Timbrally, he and La Nef were made for one another. Slattery sings with the intimacy and charm of a favored Elizabethan courtier, without ever being smarmy; his honesty and wistfulness does not just go well with the plaintive songs are especially endearing. He is absolutely believable, and he imbues these pieces with a striking sense of relevance and immediacy.

The incorporation of the Indian shruti box as a drone against which Slattery can discant is a perfect addition to this recording, hearkening to its previous use by Irish musicians such as Nóirín Ni Riain. Slattery explains in the liner notes that the shruti box plays a drone similar to bagpipes, while blending with the timbre of his own voice. I’m curious, though, about the use of a non-Western instrument that has its own history of performance practice. While shruti boxes are becoming more and more popular in U.K. traditions, I wonder what reaction this use inspires in Indian musicians. I’m curious whether this is an accepted inter-cultural exchange, or whether it could inadvertently cause offense.

Standout selections are “Sleep Wayward Thoughts” (which I listened to on repeat rather frequently), “Say, Love, If Ever Thou Didst Find,” and the Dowland standard “Come Again, Sweet Love,” which starts slowly and melancholically but quickly accelerates to a rollicking finish, at the end of which I half expected to hear the cheers and whistles of a well-pleased pub audience.

Whatever your thoughts are on Dowland’s heritage, there is no denying the musicality, charm, and approachability of this recording.

—Karen Cook