

John Kitchen

Harpsichord explorations

Although most of Alessandro Scarlatti's relatively modest output of solo keyboard music has been available for some time in modern editions, it is relatively little played and recorded (and dismissed as 'pupil fodder' in the *New Grove* article). A copy of the Archivum Musicum facsimile of the *Primo e secondo libro di toccate* (1723) has lain undisturbed on my shelves for years, as I thought it did not look very interesting. Nevertheless, this music was widely disseminated, copied and published in Scarlatti's own day, no doubt partly for teaching purposes; some pieces include fingering and other performance directions. It is the sort of repertory that comes alive when brilliantly played, as it does on **Alessandro Scarlatti: Toccatas** (Atma ACD 2 2321, rec 2003, 78'). The harpsichordist is Alexander Weimann, by all accounts a musician of remarkably wide and varied musical interests and experiences. This is volume 1 of a projected three-disc set, and contains ten toccatas and the remarkable *Follia* variations, most of these movements taken from the *Primo e secondo libro di toccate*. Much of the writing is undeniably formulaic, consisting of endless arpeggios and scale passages, and lacking the variety of figuration which characterizes earlier Italian toccatas; the 'fugues' are extremely loose; and there are some crazy moments, not least the end of the *Follia's* 29 variations, which suddenly break off in the dominant; other eccentricities include a corrente in 4/4. Playing on a colourful 2002 copy by David Werbeloff of a late 17th-century Italian instrument, Weimann plays with the utmost passion, vigour and virtuosity, persuading me at least that the music is worth investigating further, and certainly better than its reputation. The notes and recorded sound are good; there seems, however, to be an editing blip in the *Follia* variation where a missing bar disrupts the regular eight-bar phrase structure.

Bob van Asperen's **J. S. Bach: French Suites** (Aeolus AE-10084, rec 2003, 78') is a valuable addition to an already rich catalogue. Here is highly distinguished playing in the Leonhardt mould, with a wonderful sense of controlled freedom. Every individual phrase, figure and ornament is exquisitely shaped but fully integrated into the whole. There is abundant subtlety and nuance, discreet

inégalité, a touch of whimsy at times, and panache where appropriate (as in the courante and bourrée of the G major suite). Asperen's liner notes are full of insights, and the historic instrument on which he plays is of particular interest. This is the Christian Vater single-manual harpsichord of 1738, now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, and the only extant harpsichord by this important organ builder. Now fully restored, it offers (in Asperen's words) 'the opportunity of a rare connection of the specific, Italianate timbre of an original German historic harpsichord, in French chamber pitch [$d' = 392$], with the *French Suites*'. Asperen's authoritative accounts of these wonderful pieces and the echoing, brittle clarity of this rather special harpsichord make a highly attractive combination.

Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre was by all accounts a remarkable musician. A child prodigy, she was introduced to Louis XIV's court at about the age of ten, and enjoyed royal patronage; all her published music was dedicated to the king. In addition to chamber works, she composed opera and ballet, and was an accomplished harpsichordist, organist, improviser, singer and teacher. Her first volume of *Pièces de clavecin* was published in 1687; for long considered lost, a single copy came to light as recently as the 1980s; her second *livre* was published in 1707. Elizabeth Farr presents the contents of both books on **Jacquet de la Guerre: Harpsichord Suites nos.1-6** (Naxos, 8.557654-55, rec 2004, 145'). The music consists almost entirely of the traditional dances of the suite, although the earlier book introduces the first three suites with an unmeasured prelude, and the fourth, unusually, with a *Tocade*, only part of which is unmeasured. Playing on a 2003 instrument by Keith Hill (rather vaguely described as 'French-style'), Farr offers clean, precise, reflective playing of this expressive and at times unpredictable music. For my taste, it is sometimes too held back; a sense of forward momentum seems impeded by the ornaments and other detail. But I suppose one person's mannerism is another's *bon goût*. There is a great deal to enjoy here; added ornamentation, sometimes copious, is stylish, and Farr plays with loving care at all times. The elusive qualities of the unmeasured preludes are particularly well caught. Naxos's presentation is basic but acceptable, and Farr's liner note is brief but scholarly. The recorded sound is good, although as with the Scarlatti disc above there is a missing bar (in the first

of the 1707 D minor gigue) which is presumably the result of a careless edit.

Many were doubtless introduced to Duphly's harpsichord music by Leonhardt's LP recording of 1975, where he begins a penetrating and diverting sleeve-note with the memorable words 'Duphly had few truths to tell the world ...' (On hearing a recital of such 'decadent' 18th-century French music, a colleague of mine once opined, rather more harshly, that 'The French Revolution didn't come a moment too soon.') Duphly, who in fact died the day after the storming of the Bastille in 1789, published four volumes of *Pièces de clavecin* between 1744 and 1768. The music is elegant, refined, pleasant, undemanding, sometimes banal, and (again in Leonhardt's words) 'exactly what bored Parisian society wanted'. As well as more lightweight pieces, some with trite Alberti basses, there are splendidly strong movements, such as *La Forqueray*, *Médée* and the large-scale Chaconne in F. Yannick le Gaillard recorded all four books in the late 1980s on the ADDA label, and the English harpsichordist John Paul (who has made his career in the USA) has now recorded another *intégrale* on **Du Phly: Complete works for harpsichord** (Lyricord LEMS 8053, rec 2004/2005, 212'). John Paul's playing is stylish and informed, but rather literal and at times ponderous; this music needs more persuasion and greater variety of touch and articulation. He plays on a modern instrument by Anden Houben based on the famous 1691 Vaudry (housed in the V&A Museum in London). It sounds well, but for its full effect, this music arguably needs the more opulent, luscious sound of a later style of French double, such as a Taskin or Blanchet. Nevertheless, it is good to have another account of this fascinating if variable repertory.

Douglas Hollick's two CDs offer even more arcane 18th-century French repertory. In 1753 Christophe Moyreau published six books of harpsichord pieces, which he dedicated to the Duke of Orléans, who probably provided financial backing. Moyreau's name is little known today even to *aficionados*, and it is unlikely that the music ever enjoyed wide circulation. He seems to have spent his entire life in Orléans, and so did not benefit from the special *cachet* which Parisians enjoyed; remember François Couperin's haughty assertion, 'Paris is the centre of what is good.' **Moyreau: Pièces de clavecin** (Riverrun RVRCD60, rec 2001, 72') offers a selection of pieces from all six books, demonstrating that Moyreau could at times equal Rameau, that he lacked nothing in inventiveness, that he had a talent for devising and exploiting effective

keyboard textures, that he knew his Scarlatti, and that he could be noble, elegant, astonishing or bizarre as he chose. There are indeed some *grotesqueries*: *La Baccante* (book 3), which presumably depicts some sort of orgy, begins in a rather banal way, proceeds to extend Rameau's characteristic repeated-note *batteries* to great lengths, and indulges in chromatic writing over tediously long pedal-points. As Graham Sadler points out in his excellent notes, Moyreau's more extravagant flights of fancy, diverting though they be, are balanced by beautifully poised pieces such as the elegant *Rondeau La Guepine*. Also very fine are *L'Euridice* and its contrasting companion piece *L'Orphée*. Hollick presents the music with delicacy or virtuosity as appropriate, and plays with conviction and commitment. His instrument is a fine-sounding Donzelague copy (original of 1711) which he built himself in 1989. The final two pieces on the CD are played on the Metzler organ of Trinity College Chapel in Cambridge. Although published respectively in books 2 and 5 along with the harpsichord pieces, both the lugubrious and experimental *La Purgatoire* and the harmonically audacious *Les Cloches d'Orleans*, a work in the tradition of Louis Couperin's and Lebègue's bell-pieces, require performance on the organ. While it is good to have this aspect of Moyreau's work illustrated, the interest of these two movements is historical rather than musical.

Hollick's second CD, **Revolution** (Riverrun RVRCD71, rec 2004/5, 64') offers French keyboard music—variously played on the organ, harpsichord and fortepiano—of the period c.1770–1820. Balbastre, a composition pupil of Rameau and harpsichord teacher of Marie Antoinette, is well represented both by harpsichord pieces (such as the fine *La Suzanne*) and by one of his celebrated *noëls*. These he played at the church of St Roch in Paris at Christmas Midnight Mass in the 1750s and 60s, drawing such crowds that eventually the Archbishop of Paris put a stop to it. Hollick plays the organ pieces, including the well-known *noël Ou s'en vont ces gais bergers* (published 1770) on the Peter Collins organ (1990) of Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh, which has reasonably appropriate French sounds. I find Hollick's performance rather understated, lacking the *élan* which I feel sure Balbastre must have brought to it. Also included is Balbastre's *Marche des Marseillois*, complete with cannon-shots, played on the fortepiano, as indicated. (Of the new-fangled fortepiano, poor Balbastre had earlier said to Taskin '...jamais ce nouveau-venu ne détrônera le majestueux clavecin', but eventually he had to eat his words.) There is also music by Guillaume Lasceux, some

of it reminiscent of the style of the Revolutionary bands of the day (and pretty thin musically). A better composer was Nicolas Séjan, derivative of Haydn and Mozart (the latter famously dismissive of French music of his day which he declared 'not worth a sou'); Séjan was one of the first French composers to write specifically for the piano. Hollick plays one of his *noëls*, and other movements, on a square piano; we know that *noëls* were played domestically, and indeed were published as appropriate 'pour le clavecin et le fortepiano' as well as for the organ. Finally, Boëly's *Fantasia pour le verset Judex crederis au Te Deum* gives a taste of the Last Judgement; here we are not far from Berlioz. This CD is an interesting document of the music of these disturbed times; if little of it is of great intrinsic merit, nevertheless we should

know about it. Douglas Hollick's careful and well-considered performances offer us that opportunity. In both discs from Riverrun the recorded sound is good, as are the liner notes, even if the presentation is rather utilitarian.

Websites

Aeolus <http://www.aeolus-music.com/>

Atma <http://www.atmaclassique.com/>

Lyrichord <http://www.lyrichord.com/>

Naxos <http://www.naxos.com/>

Riverrun <http://www.rvr.cd.co.uk/>

doi:10.1093/em/cal016