

LINER NOTE FOR *THE LONG 17th CENTURY: A CORNUCOPIA OF EARLY KEYBOARD MUSIC*

A survey of the music of the period sometimes designated – with often shifting margins – 'the long 17th century' leaves us struck by a characteristic forward-thinking individuality and inventiveness, even as strong 'national' flavours and a time-honoured melancholy strain remain pervasive. The profound change in the European world view driven by scientific discovery during the era that embraces the last three decades or so of the 16th century through to the beginning of the 18th century imbues also music with a bracing sense of untravelled terrain and discovery, while the awareness of past certainties vanishing becomes ever more acute. Throughout this time musical genres and techniques are modernised and streamlined, new effects and sonorities are realised, a humanistic sensuousness comes into play even in the more austere modes of expression, and exciting ways are found to put the strange and weird in relief. But, in the work of the best composers, seriousness of purpose and affect so often manifest themselves in a striving to preserve some of the harder-won complexities of the old styles.

Every era has its own version of this attachment to the past as a fast-disappearing beacon, even as we are swept along by bewildering new experiences. And perhaps a sensibility informed by that combined push-and-pull of present and past is fundamental to finding common ground with the music of the 17th century now; that is, as a departure point for making the music familiar but also contemporary to us – and not a mere theme-park visit to a distant world. At least, that is, to a world that many modern-instrument musicians still perceive as distant. How can we re-imagine this as a 'modern' music? Can we advocate it beyond the confines of being thought of as Early Music, beyond the notion of a field somehow kept apart from the rest of music, unblemished by the intrusion of practitioners who do not specialise in historical instruments and their associated practices?

A modern-day performer's advocacy of 17th-century keyboard music can take many forms, of course, and the kind of advocacy one envisions will drive not only what one chooses to play, but also how one plays it.

If it is to be a compilation of varied works from the era, as in this recording, ideas and images abound that might inform the aesthetic of the whole. Will it simply be a collection of favourite things or highlights or recognised masterpieces? Will it resemble a cabinet of curiosities, a 'horn of plenty' perhaps? Will it recall a series of vignettes or a collection of engravings? Will it end up as a wayward and ever-expanding series of 'finds'? Will it attempt any form of categorisation, of being systematic? How will it speak to the now ubiquitous field of curation as the domain not only of the professional but also of the amateur? Will it be aimed at the knowledgeable or the novice, or both? Given the range of material to explore from this era, even the act of collecting will not only draw on some anachronistic ideas but indeed strongly reflect the highly personal inclinations, tastes and foibles of the collector.

So, no selection from such a vast – and, it must be said, uneven – repertoire can hope to be truly balanced or representative. And my recital here does not claim to be an exception. I have put together for this recording 36 works, each by a different composer, enabling the covering of considerable ground, but also giving some free rein to caprice. First to mention must be some striking omissions: the greatest of the English virginalists represented here are Byrd, Bull and Tomkins. The obvious one missing from this group is Orlando Gibbons (whose complete keyboard music I recorded elsewhere). His fantasias and pavans are beyond comparison, but excellent examples of those types of works are found in the Ferrabosco I Fantasia (**CD1:9**) and Tomkins' *Sad Pavan for These Distracted Times* (**CD1:21**). Purcell does not make an appearance either, mainly because I feel his keyboard music to be less interesting than that of his highly idiosyncratic teacher, Matthew Locke, whose suites are outwardly of the type that Purcell also wrote, but which Locke had suffused with a high concentration of cryptic and obtuse features. Although my collection reaches into the very beginning of the 18th century with short pieces by Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre and Gaspard Le Roux, no Jean-Philippe Rameau or François Couperin has been included. The works of the former two are suggestive of an emerging new sensibility in French keyboard music and form part of the

bridge to Rameau and Couperin, whose outstanding contributions properly belong to the 18th century.

My programme includes works which could have been intended for a variety of different keyboard instruments, frequently not specified. Transfers and interchanges between instruments (with the necessary adjustments made) would in most cases have been commonly assumed, depending on the occasion and requirements, putting the focus on elements in the scores that, to an extent, transcend instrumental disposition. A latter-day incarnation of such musicianly pragmatism must likewise include the piano – and if necessity be the master of invention, there may not exist another medium where so many solutions can be found when adopting, adapting and recasting a repertoire as broad in scope as this. A number of the works included here can be effectively rendered on quite crude keyboard instruments (say, for instance the Tisdale Almand [CD1:15] or the Bruna Tiento [CD1:6]) but others require the kind of intricate detailing that can only be properly served by a sophisticated medium such as the finest organs and harpsichords of the time (see for example Sweelinck's *Mein junges Leben* [CD2:2]). But the piano can do justice, not just to the virtuosity required in such works, but also to the sheer range of mood, from sober exposition to ecstatic culmination, as in, for example, Byrd's *Walsingham* (CD2:4) or Buxtehude's *La Capricciosa* (CD2:6).

Indeed, it can portray certain references to other instruments and genres, and elements of scale, viscerally in a way that an instrument with the narrow colouristic range of, say, a set of virginals can only hint at: resettings, remouldings, copies or transliterations in which much is lost, but much gained, too. The Gabrieli Ricercar included here (CD1:7) is part of a publication that lacks a specific instrumental designation altogether, and one can easily imagine the sonorities of either the organ or of sackbutts and cornets. The two Trabaci Gagliardas (CD1:11) are also strongly suggestive of a wind or brass ensemble, its simple notation however leaving much room for complicated articulation and some improvised elaborations. The Ferrabosco I Fantasia is either a keyboard transcription of a work for viol consort – or the viol consort version may

be a transcription of the keyboard work. Either way, the lightness and fleetness of a nimble viol ensemble can inform an agile and clearly-voiced piano reading, its dense four-part writing and relative lack of registral contrast perhaps impediments on the harpsichord or organ where voices cannot be stratified dynamically. The Schildt *Paduana lagrima* (CD1:16), while clearly a keyboard work, leaves much room for the mind to still hark back to the mournful lute of Dowland, making this a delicate exercise in touch and tone on the piano, including subtle uses of the sustaining pedal. And in the Scheidemann Galliarda (CD1:24) a tensely sprung rhythmic profile and acute accentuation are possible in ways unique to the piano, but without in any way gainsaying the musical content that leaps from the page. In a few instances I ventured into quite idiomatic organ territory: the Batalha by Braga (CD2:9) was obviously conceived by its composer with extreme dynamic contrasts reverberating through a big space in mind. To enjoy and convey its quirkiness and asymmetries on the piano effectively means re-inventing the piece as a study in less crude colour contrasts, utilising the buoyant sonorities possible on the piano (especially effective in the dance sections) alongside more solid 'blocks' of sound, and utilising techniques of timing and pedaling in ways alien to the organ, thus bringing to the fore the oddness of this musical patchwork rather than the simpler pleasure of its echo effects. Likewise the immensely exciting riff on the final phrase of the chorale on which the Pretorius' *Nun lob, mein Seel* (CD2:7) is based undoubtedly would benefit from the sheer impact of a large organ sound, but the work is so rich in rhythmic, textural and contrapuntal particulars – moments of interest that the piano can pinpoint with great specificity and with greater alacrity than an organ in a big acoustic, thereby exploiting a profusion of detail which itself can generate an excitement perhaps equal to, but different from, that of a dynamic organ performance. And with Frescobaldi I did not opt for one of his Partitas or Ricercari, but rather for a slow, other-worldly organ Toccata (CD1:10), where its extraordinary chromaticism and strange cadential delays are heightened not by a contemporary tuning system as it may be on the organ, but instead by the capability on the piano to colour every note individually by touch, dynamics or the pedal, and

where vertical relationships can be made to stand out through dislocation between the hands or individual voices.

As such, a modern advocacy of this repertoire on the piano cannot be a 'pure' advocacy of 'the music', but constantly requires interventions of the performer's own craft – a celebration of a type of deliberate misreading which to some might seem perverse, but which has always been part of how a repertoire traverses different times, each with its own fashions. It then becomes compelling to examine a set of broader aesthetic values that informs the craft in similarly powerful ways. That is, aesthetic preferences of the performer that not only steer repertoire selection in the first place but that may also affect the way in which one plays or affect what one chooses to exploit or bring to the fore in a given work.

One such value may be variety for its own sake as a driving principle. Some examples from this collection: the four pieces **CD1:4–7** all share the characteristic opening rhythmic figure of the canzona, but at vastly different tempos. Specifying their differences in character, tonal palette and rhythmic lift becomes much more acute when one works them as a set, finding an individualised space for each in relation to the other. The seven variation works (**CD2:1–7**) have grounds or themes of very different character and length, but it is the impulse to differentiate more graphically that may urge different ways of finding and highlighting continuity, or of grouping of variations, or of linking or pausing between groups, or of changing tempos in each work. Thus, through the transparent and prismatic exploratory utterances of the Kerll Passacaglia (**CD2:1**), a sense of 'wholeness' can be forged in a very different manner from that of the 'through-composed' and sonorous Cabanilles Pasacalles (**CD2:3**). Bull's Ut, Re, Mi (**CD2:5**) can seem free-associational and relaxed by comparison, with only momentary accesses of urgency. The groupings of short variations in Byrd's *Walsingham* can be made to collectively build to a tremendous and transformative catharsis, while the fairly long variations in Sweelinck's *Mein junges Leben* can each be made to appear more like polished objects in themselves, with only a delicate sense of underlying trajectory. By contrast Buxtehude's

extensive set of variations on *La Capricciosa* can be made to feel both ludic and multifarious through a panorama of contrasts in texture and tempo and character, only gathering a real sense of weight towards the end.

Another broad value may be that of pervasive virtuosity, a sense of setting or engineering challenges, not just responding to them. And such challenges must be tailor-made for the piano. Some examples: because one can voice so transparently on the piano, it is possible to take the Weckmann Canzon III (CD1:4) at a faster tempo than would make aural sense on organ or harpsichord, discovering a new palate and vibrant textures for this work, replete with repeated notes. The sparring lines of the Louis Couperin Duo (CD1:8) can attain a new character on the piano when a complex array of voicing tricks and different accents are thrown into the mix – more akin to the interplay of two lively string players than the sound of the organ. Dealing creatively with Byrd's profuse ornamentation in *Walsingham* while rhythmic lift and openness of sonority are maintained becomes a considerable challenge on the piano, and a quite unusual sound world, Byzantine in intricacy, can emerge as a result. And new expressive vistas open up when one challenges oneself to execute the double notes and figuration work in Sweelinck's *Mein junges Leben* with a fleetness and lightness that still conveys a sense of fragility even as the writing becomes denser – virtually impossible on the organ or harpsichord where these passages can so easily sound either laboured or over-busy. A third overarching value may be the palpable sense of a dialogue between opposites.

Identifying resonant contrasts for oneself can be a powerful way to delineate the worlds one may desire to traverse. There may lie a whole range of experience to navigate between these extremes, and also worlds of artifice and artistry to discover: from sacred to secular, high style to low style, formal to informal, archaic to new-fangled, large scale to small, public to intimate, tragic to frivolous, one-of-a-kind to generic, eccentric to conventional, complex to simple, multifarious to monochrome, elegant to boorish, weightless to earthbound, gentle to abrasive, relaxed to pressured, buttoned-up to

exuberant, questing to affirmative... It is liberating to know that these ideas can strike us just as powerfully in 17th-century keyboard music as in any other repertoire – even though we may have very different ways of experiencing and of communicating them now from 400 years ago. In this way we bring ourselves and our means to 'old' music, at times even perhaps imposing ourselves, even as our sensitivities and skills are in turn honed, refined and harnessed by the encounter. And thus the music of the 17th century can become a fertile new playing field for the modern pianist.

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