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REVIEWS

RECORDINGS

"Sébastián Albero: Sonatas for Harpsichord"
Performer: Gilbert Rowland, harpsichord
Label: LIR Classics, LIR018
Reviewed by James McCarty

The eminent British harpsichordist Gilbert Rowland, perhaps best known recently for his recordings of Soler, now brings us more music from the Spanish court, that of Sébastián Albero (1722-1756). Albero was appointed organist of the Spanish royal chapel in 1748. For at least eight years, then, he was in the musical neighbourhood of Domenico Scarlatti, and it appears that Scarlatti had as profound an influence on Albero as he did on Soler.

Two collections of Albero's keyboard music survive – the eighteen pieces on the present recording are from an earlier manuscript comprising 30 single-movement sonatas. These works have been neglected on disc since the 1990s, when recordings by Joseph Payne on BIS and Aniko Horvath on Hungaroton appeared. Somewhat surprisingly for such specialized repertoire, these performances are still available. Another recording from that decade, "Varaciones del Fandango Español" by Andreas Staier on Teldec, contains two of the three-movement works from the second manuscript. These later works are a bit farther off the beaten track of the typical Spanish harpsichord sonata, and thus are of considerable musical interest.

The single-movement sonatas on Mr. Rowland's recording, on the other hand, fit quite comfortably into the mould formed by the Scarlatti oeuvre, and anyone who enjoys those works, or those of Padre Soler, should find himself right at home. Two of the sonatas are fugues – the remainder are paired by tonality. Albero's interest and skill in fugal form may have derived from his organ training with José Elias, organist at the convent of the Descalzas Reales, and although these fugues do not scale the contrapuntal heights of Bach, they nevertheless add welcome variety to the programme.

The harpsichord in this recording is by the Kentish maker Andrew Wooderson, after the 1750 Jean (Ioannes) Goermans in the Bate Collection at Oxford. The instrument, which is beautifully recorded, exhibits a very late-French tonal quality, with a booming bass register reminiscent of Taskin, and a high ratio of overtones to the fundamental in the upper registers (the so-called "French fizz"). Whether or not this sort of harpsichord is your cup of tea in this repertoire, there is no denying the beauty and power of this instrument. It would be a delight to hear Armand-Louis Couperin, Balbastre, or Royer performed on this harpsichord.

Rowland tends toward the conservative in his interpretation of these sonatas, without much rhythmic inflection or agogic accent. His tempi are not overly fast, a wise choice considering the lush tonal character of the instrument. This recording will appeal to those interested in Spanish baroque keyboard music generally, as well as Albero in particular. The same audiences will want to acquire the Staier recording as well.

BOOKS

Author: Edward Kottick
Title: A History of the Harpsichord
Publisher: Indiana University Press, 2003
ISBN: 0-253-34166-3
Reviewed by Micaela Schmitz

This is a valuable 2 ½" hardback book that really will become the new standard reference on the subject. Its detail, photos, explanations, diagrams and organized text are extremely useful. A CD with 19 recorded examples, all historic originals played by reputable performers, gives a useful tour of different timbres and performance styles. Throughout the book we hear the voice of a maker who understands how the instruments were and are used; this source is useful to makers, players, curators, historians, researchers, and aesthetes.

The book is organized chronologically into five main parts, and within these geographical styles and trends are further explained. Important makers such as the Ruckers family receive special treatment, yet obscure or unusual cases also receive their due, with many names I did not recognize but was glad to learn. There are interesting details: for example about "mother and child" virginals, details on tuning and pitch, aspects of construction which affect timbre, and cultural aspects such as this lovely passage: "…a musical instrument was a symbol of resurrection, a miraculous rebirth of a tree, which, though felled and made into lumber, lived again as a music-making device through the mysterious skills of the builder." (p. 128)

Nothing is left uncovered. The earliest part on the 14th century includes iconographic evidence and engravings. Of great interest to be me was a section on the revival of the harpsichord -a brilliant way of sharing our "modern" harpsichord heritage. Kottick is even handed; he does not damn the revivalist or *Serien* makers, and he acknowledges the useful place of kits in the development of the field. He places instruments in the historical context of their time – not just the originals but also those made from the 1880's in their image. This is a great "recent history lesson" to those like me who were not lucky enough to be the vanguard of the revival itself.

The book's only fault is its asset; it is so complete that one worries about missing something, and therefore it took this reviewer some time to read through it!

SCORES

Title: Girolamo Frescobaldi, *Organ and Keyboard Works*
***1.1 Recercari, et Canzoni franzese (Rome, Zannetti, 1616, 1618) 1.2. Toccate e Partite d'intavolatura di cimbalo, libro primo* (Rome, Borboni, 1615, 21616)**
Editor: Christopher Stembridge with Kenneth Gilbert
Publisher: Bärenreiter Urtext
Reviewed by Richard Lester

In reviewing such a major contribution to the understanding of Frescobaldi's keyboard music, one can only marvel at the painstaking research by Christopher Stembridge. Although much work in the field was already undertaken by Frederick Hammond in 1983, Stembridge goes beyond by adding material that gives a much clearer and often greater dimension to the music in historical context, also setting out invaluable information on performance. For the sake of space here, I will focus on a few points from the performer's perspective and any views expressed are purely alternative thoughts for consideration.

Volume 1 of the new Bärenreiter edition includes the *Recercari, et Canzoni franzese (Rome, Zannetti, 1616, 1618)* and volume 1.2, the *Toccate e Partite d'intavolatura di cimbalo*. Stembridge delves into all aspects of performance in assiduous detail. The sections on articulation, fingering, tempi and ornamentation are particularly informative, and those that refer to instruments, tuning and pitch also throw light on a more authentic approach.

But inevitably with such a huge tome, there are a few points requiring clarification, especially to newcomers in the field of interpretation of the genre. In the section headed Tuning and Pitch, it is to my mind misleading to state, "Exactly how Frescobaldi tuned his harpsichord is not known. Quarter-comma mean-tone, which makes all major thirds pure, is a possibility." Taken at face value, this is not the case as only eight pure major thirds are possible in quarter comma meantone: A-C#, Bb-D, C-E, D-F#, Eb-G, E-G#, F-A, and G-B; the remaining major thirds in the scale are then offensively sharp. Less frequently used notes (Ab, D# and Db) are then unacceptable in this system. So, for example, the E that has been tuned pure to G# will produce an extremely wide third from Ab (its chromatic counterpart) to the C above. Stembridge here also makes no reference to harpsichords with split keys, quite common in Italy up until the 1640s, which were built largely to accommodate these limitations. Readers may like to visit my own website www.frescobaldi.org.uk for an explanation of the split key harpsichord.

A later point regarding "Unmeasured time in the Toccatas" concerns the statement in Frescobaldi's preface that the Toccatas "are not subject to a [regular] beat as we see practised in contemporary madrigals'. This is always a worrying phrase, as to my mind many performers seem to interpret this statement as accelerating and braking on a manic scale that distorts the *affetti* (passions of the soul) style that Frescobaldi intends. Frescobaldi's instructions are usually quite explicit and in the preface to both volumes of toccatas marked for organ or harpsichord, he suggests arpeggiating the opening chords *adagio*.

Does this apply to the organ though, an instrument unaccustomed to the practice of arpeggiation? Stembridge suggests not, as there is no mention of arpeggiation in the preface to *Fiori Musicali*. [Neither, I might add, is there any mention of not playing the toccatas subject to a beat.] I don't think one should confuse the toccatas in *Il primo* and *Il secondo libro di toccate* with those in *Fiori Musicali* as they are quite different. The Elevation toccatas in the *Fiori Musicali* too, are unlike those from *Il secondo libro* Elevation works. Stembridge also suggests that there is no justification for the current vogue for adding passing notes in arpeggiating the opening chords of toccatas as they obscure what the great man wrote. I don't see passing notes as disguising the original text at all as it often assists in rolling a chord to make an expressive point, or more simply for rhythmical placement. The opening arpeggiation to my mind acts as an intrinsic preamble that lends an impromptu air to the work.

Volume 1.2 containing the *Libro primo Toccate e Partite d'intavolatura di cimbalo* and Frescobaldi's original preface and rules for performance also has a detailed critical commentary by Stembridge,

who clarifies many notational ambiguities. One aspect particularly welcome is his use of an asterisk in the musical text where the composer's intentions are unclear, leaving any decision to the performer. This nicely ties in with Frescobaldi's written invitation in allowing freedom to the performer.

A few points to mull over, but all in all this new edition must stand as the definitive source for the great man's work, attracting the academic as well as the layman by this extremely eloquent approach. I should also like to commend the publishers on a more practically sized score also (the outer limits of the previous edition used to wrap themselves annoyingly around my music desk) and foot notes that are footnotes, easily identified and not placed at the back of the volume. Small points but nevertheless, valid. The price of each volume in the UK is around £46.50 –rather a lot you may think –but when you consider the wealth of valuable material, worth every penny.

Title: Beethoven, *35 Piano Sonatas.*
Editor: Barry Cooper
Publisher: Associated Board of Royal Schools of Music
Reviewed by Stefania Neonato

This edition is a significant step towards a better historically informed performance of Beethoven's piano sonatas (35 in all, with the usually excluded three juvenile Bonn Sonatas). These volumes are meant for scholars, teachers and pianists. From a scholarly point of view this work is impeccable, as Barry Cooper presents solid evidence for each of his editorial choices. The history of each of the sonatas is exhaustively chronicled and the sources - even when there are no autographs – are all taken into consideration. It is a practical source for conservatories and music schools as well as for private use.

Together, with an extensive general introduction on editorial principles and the available sources, there is a compendium of important performance practice matters such as instruments, pedalling, tempo and metronome markings, dynamics, slurs and articulation, staccato, ornaments, and repeats. The typical process of writing, copying, engraving and finally publishing a sonata during Beethoven's time is also well outlined and we learn why there are so many discrepancies even with the existence of an autograph; it's not always possible to say whether those discrepancies are due to last-minute changes or errors in the engraving. Generally, Cooper acknowledges the editions that show evidence of Beethoven's direct participation. The following passage in an interview with Michael White for the New York Times (20 January 2008) is quite telling with respect to the editor's philosophy: "the whole point of a new edition is to understand the composer's original intentions, which get corrupted over time, not least by other editors in their attempt to understand."

Cooper deals with the categories of "purity" and "contamination", addressing implicitly the concept of the "sacredness" of Urtext editions, despite this edition making no such claim. He writes, "the whole concept of an "Urtext" implies some mythical perfect text that never really existed" (*Piano International*, Jan-Feb 2007). At the same time, he seems to believe in the concept of a true or correct performance and states the following in the Introduction:

> It's widely believed that Beethoven's piano sonatas are best performed as the composer intended at the time, as far as this is knowable, rather than in some distorted form that incorporates later performing styles. Even slight deviations [are] inferior.

At this point, one would expect a thorough discussion on performance practice issues but this never takes place. For example, there's no mention of the concept of musical "affect" (or character). The only related word occasionally appearing is "context", used whenever the notation is ambiguous. This significant lack of the early theoretical apparatus is evident in the section on "Tempo and Metronome" in the Introduction. Although Cooper quotes George *Barth's The Pianist as Orator: Beethoven and the Transformation of Keyboard Style* [1] more than once, he does not take into account the strong connection between music and rhetoric in Beethoven's aesthetic, ultimately missing the point of rhythm and flexibility. On page 11 Cooper states: "There is abundant evidence from Czerny and others that, although Beethoven expected pianists to play in essentially strict time, some flexibility is admissible". Actually, it was more specifically called for by the composer himself! But we are not told the criteria for flexibility or about affect.

There is also a somewhat naïve description of the early pianos. Fortepianos have - in Cooper's words - a quieter tone, and therefore have less possibility of tonal graduation. He goes on to say that Beethoven's sonatas display *only* four basic tones: *pp, p, f, ff, plus sf,* and *fp*. Of course dynamics vary according to context and shouldn't be seen as static plateaus with no gradation between them; besides, Beethoven does use *ppp* (which Cooper acknowledges immediately after). In places such as the first movement of the "Appassionata'", contrasts between *pp* and *ff* produce full dramatic effect on the dynamic range on the fortepiano.

The fact that these early instruments sound quieter on a decibel scale when compared to modern pianos doesn't mean they lack dynamic contrast.

Fingering is also a tricky topic. Emanuel Bach wrote that fingering should not be detached from performance, as it is one of its most essential conditions. The fingerings for Cooper's edition (except for the last five Sonatas) are provided by David Ward, who notes in the introduction: "Sometimes I wondered if there was any point in putting in any fingering at all". In quoting both Emanuel Bach and Daniel Türk he acknowledges the interpretive role of fingering and explains his awkward feeling in writing it down, a dilemma between a desire for an absolute truth and an unavoidable relativity. Of course, fingering is something that evolves with the overall artistry of a performer and can be "historically informed" as well.. The present "teaching edition" faces the difficult task of having to be complete (advising the student on every musical aspect) whilst staying true to a philosophy of personal interpretative solutions. The choice of leaving the last five sonatas without any fingering is undoubtedly brave. In Cooper's words: "anyone capable of tackling these (last sonatas) should be able to devise suitable fingerings, and may find editorial ones more intrusive than helpful". A traditional view of the sonatas becoming more and more difficult overshadows the richness of the first ones and confines the "true" artistry and interpretative ability - since fingerings are part of it - to the last five.

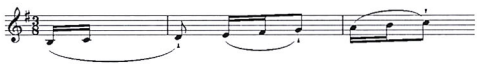
The sections on pedalling and staccato marks are extremely valuable: finally we have a clear explanation of the difference between dots and wedges (called dashes here) and a very insightful interpretation of an elusive inconsistency. Beethoven did apparently conceive notational differences even regarding wedges: according to Cooper, wedges are written longer or shorter depending on the more energetic or milder musical gesture. According to this fascinating view, Beethoven might have changed his handwriting subconsciously or even consciously, even in the case of dots and wedges. We have a great variety of signs of this kind in the extant autographs and a good reproduction of this variety in some of the early editions.

Unfortunately, no trace of this variety is to be seen in any modern edition. A subtlety of Cooper's edition is evident in the commentary to b. 111 ff. of the first movement of the "Waldstein" Sonata Opus 53. If we look more closely at the autograph, Beethoven writes wedges for the *forte* and crescendo and dots for the *pianissimo* parts, meaning probably a less sharp kind of touch, something certainly difficult to reproduce on a printed page (no trace of it in the first edition).

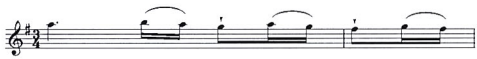
It's curious though, that Cooper didn't include both markings in his edition. He has only wedges throughout his volumes as Henle has only dots.

There are several short musical examples on three CDs, some on period instruments. Two extracts from the first and third movements of Opus 27 no. 2 for instance, are played both on a period and a modern instrument, to demonstrate the most audible and characteristic differences between the two. The knowledge of period instruments is defined as necessary for the understanding of Beethoven's sound world and including recorded examples is indeed a remarkable idea for a teaching edition. Yet, I wonder how modern pianists who haven't had the chance of a first hand encounter with early instruments will react to this experience. Will they think that this is the way to play "authentically", a potential "Urtext-performance"? In the second movement of Opus 7 we are asked to listen to the silences, which are described to be extremely important and telling, but how the sound merges into the silence seems to have only one nuance and not an extremely appealing one (track 4). Similarly, in the fourth movement of the same sonata the repeated notes in the left hand, although very clear and carefully articulated on the fortepiano, sound completely out of the "*grazioso*" context (track 7). Listening to the period piano, I feel the music is somehow lost.

In defining the importance of knowing period instruments for getting at Beethoven's sound world, Cooper states that "these sonorities can then to some extent be reproduced on a modern instrument." I don't believe they really can. In fact if a teacher or a professional pianist were to rely solely on this text, they would have several good suggestions regarding execution but very few hints about interpretation. The concept of interpretation is usually left to the side except for being quickly called into play whenever the score shows challenging passages, not easily realised on a modern piano. In comparing these two passages for instance:



Sonata Op.14 No. 2. III Scherzo: Allegro assai



Sonata Op. 49 No. 2. II Tempo di Menuetto

Cooper admits there is a difference between the two articulations on a piano but not as conspicuous as on a bowed instrument, since on a violin or cello it affects bowing (on a piano it should affect the fingering, actually). He goes on to suggest that the

second example should be more emphasized in the staccato notes and that these "should also be very slightly detached from the previous note, *if the speed of the piece and the action of the piano permit*". The two kinds of slurs tell us about character in the first place. But somehow the process is inverted and, only depending on the speed of the piece and on what kind of piano we're playing will we be more or less able to play accordingly. These subtle differences in notation and meaning change the performance of a piece in significant ways and are carefully described in the scholarly section of the commentaries; immediately after, though, they are unfortunately played down by the necessity of being a modern "teaching edition".

The ABRSM is the most international of pedagogical institutions for music, and this edition reflects its geographic and conceptual reach. This work gives probably the closest view one can have today of Beethoven's sonorous world and therefore must be fundamental for whomever wants to tackle this repertoire. It appears to be especially useful for modern pianists: modern in the good sense (because of the need for being historically informed) yet flawed due to an accumulation of "traditional" views and some prejudices about early music practices.

Although as a historically informed performer on fortepiano and modern piano, I would have liked equal treatment between research on the sources and on the performing conventions of Beethoven's time, I regard this edition as the most complete on the market today and I take advantage myself of the immensely valuable scholarly work that Cooper compiled.

Composer: Felix Mendelssohn
Title: Piano Works Volume 1 and Volume 2
Editor: Ullrich Sheideler
Publisher: G.Henle Verlag
Reviewed by: Marcel Zidani

These volumes contain both piano music published in Mendelssohn's lifetime and works published posthumously. Some have personal dedications, whilst others may not have reached publishers because of Mendelssohn's self-criticism (Scheideler's view) or because he had no opportunity to revise them.

The pieces contained here span two decades of piano writing from 1824-1842 and represent a complete overview of the evolution of Mendelssohn's piano music, but do not include his more well-known "Songs without Words". In producing these volumes Henle has succeeded in bringing together chronologically more important piano works with the lesser known ones.

As with most Henle editions the music is exceptionally well laid out and very easy on the eye. There are some very useful fingerings and each work is based on the primary source as its foundation. Any further changes identified on the basis of a second source are not altered in terms of text but are given as individual comments. This collection is unique in this form celebrating the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth and replaces the previous volume of selected piano works. There is a well written and helpful preface which discusses and analyses each piece in detail and gives consideration to Mendelssohn's family, education and letters.

Mendelssohn's style is predominantly classical and it is easy to discover influences from his classical predecessors (mainly Beethoven). There is a strong understanding of the counterpoint from Bach's time. This raises the question: Is this why Mendelssohn's piano music is now perhaps underplayed?

Looking closely at the *Variations sérieuses* op. 54 in volume two, we see that it is set within classical structures, but with lyrical characteristics of the early Romantic movement. Bachian two-, three- and four-part counterpoint exists throughout with a touch of Bach/Busoni at times. Some variations are more baroque and others more romantic. Busoni liked the work very much and many pianists have recorded it, including Horowitz and Richter. Ignaz Moscheles wrote, "I play the *Variations sérieuses* again and again, each time I enjoy the beauty again."

In contrast, *Gondellied* is a beautiful flowing song without words in 6/8 time that is typical of the genre, and had it been included in the more famous 48 "Songs Without Words" then it could well have been one of his most popular. It is a totally unpretentious short piece -a short song without words, charming and pretty.

Aside from the songs without words, Mendelssohn's compositional style was much more conservative, which sets him apart from many of his more adventurous musical contemporaries. The fact that his more famous "Songs Without Words" were far more popular and were the ones upon which his reputation seems to have been based, resulted in his being overtaken by Liszt and Chopin, who pushed the boundaries of piano music.

The new music of such contemporaries developed techniques that exploited the pianos of their day and revolutionised the sounds that people wanted to hear. Mendelssohn's piano music tended to remain contrapuntal in style and refrained from using polyphony to add intensity, reserving this for his more

famous orchestral works. Perhaps one exception to this is the Rondo capriccioso.

This piece immediately stands out from all the others in both volumes, simply because of its long introduction. There are lush romantic chords throughout, with octaves in the bass and at b.18-19 rapid octaves at the climax. It is clear that we are firmly in the nineteenth century, directly alongside Mendelssohn's contemporaries. This work starts off with a fantasy style opening, most markedly in the style of Franz Liszt, however on the next page comes the completely contrasting *capriccioso* section; one feels as if the *capriccioso* is not part of the same piece; it is somewhat more orchestral in style rather than pianistic and the lush romantic chords and harmonies are now put aside for this more classically structured "movement".

In Henle's Preface it is explained that two and a half years after writing the *capriccioso* Mendelssohn was paid to re-write the piece. In an 1830 letter to his sister he wrote, "I have tastily cooked it up with a stirring *Adagio*, some new melodies and passages, and I have been successful." These volumes demonstrate a range of serious pieces of real musical value alongside less important pieces - as Mendelssohn himself realised. To his sister he wrote, "my third etude is really just a disgrace". Not surprisingly his etudes were overshadowed by Chopin's and were only made public posthumously in 1868.

Mendelssohn wrote some of this music as young as 15 years of age[2]. This edition provides real insight into the composer's development and is outstanding teaching material. There is everything here for the piano teacher: orchestration, style, harmony, counterpoint, virtuosity, grandeur and lyricism. What Henle has successfully done here is bring to the attention of pianists and teachers alike the other piano music, demonstrating a more serious side to Mendelssohn and his comprehensive musical education. The price is reasonable and it is put together with a degree of quality that can remain in good shape for the duration of your career. If you want to know the other side of Mendelssohn then this edition is for you.

1 Ithaca, N.Y., (Cornell University Press, 1992).

2 For example the Hebrides overture was composed at the age of seventeen.