

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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## RECORDINGS

**Andrew Appel, harpsichord. "Pièces de Clavecin, Volume 1: The Tragic Muse", Orchid Classics 2012, ORC 100026. Reviewed by Charlene Brendler**

What is needed to perform the harpsichord works of a great composer from a by-gone age of elegance and refinement? A sensitive touch, an understanding of the rhythmic conventions of the time, and a variable, fluid ornamentation technique to render the instrument susceptible to expression, for starters. What does the listener need? A cultivated sensibility of the aesthetics of the time, and an aural appreciation for the subtle and variable expressive sonorities heard in fine harpsichord playing. Andrew Appel, Director of the Four Nations Ensemble (New York) offers the listener his interpretation of François Couperin with the CD entitled "The Tragic Muse" on the Orchid Classics label, featuring the Third and the Eighth *Ordres* from books I and II of *Pièces de Clavecin*.

Couperin's multi-dimensional music often requires several hearings to appreciate the content or expressive meaning. It is illusive, compelling, intimate and grand, and it is demanding: He requested that his markings be scrupulously followed, and, he elevated ornamentation from a decorative to an expressive role. Touch, rhythmic sensibility, and fluid ornamentation are key elements for Couperin. Appel's recording is uneven in its presentation of these qualities. Some pieces are magnificently played, and others leave the listener unmoved.

In the first book (1713) of *Pièces de Clavecin*, Couperin introduced genre pieces with a descriptive title. These soon became popular and composers replaced the typical (binary dance form) harpsichord piece with musical portraits and other types of descriptive scenes. The Third *Ordre* opens as a melancholy suite of dances lacking only the Gigue. Appel delivers a strong sense of pacing to the momentous and tragic Allemande "La Ténébreuse" providing the necessary grandeur and solemnity. The two Courantes that follow offer a contrast in mood to the Allemande. They are effectively played on a single 8-foot register, with a crystalline sonority and Appel's tight, rhythmical sense.

The nine genre pieces that follow have a mechanical, matter of fact delivery. Although the facile playing is not consistently convincing, the ornamentation is sensitively expressive. A tender graciousness lends surprising musical poetry to the second part of "Les Laurentines," a quality also heard in the well-played "Les Regrets" (a very effective piece that uses a French melodic line against an Italian bass line). The *ordre* closes with "La Favorite," a Chaconne in duple rather than triple meter. Here, Appel's rendition disappoints the listener with a rigid use of *inégale*. It also lacks a sense of an arching line or phrase.

The Eighth *Ordre* is one of the most substantial suites in the second book (1716-17) of *Pièces de Clavecin*. Appel Opens the CD playing a strong rendition of "La Raphaële," a musical portrait of the painter. It continues with a second Allemande, two Courantes, the "Sarabande L'Unique," A Rondeau, Gigue, another genre piece "La Morinéte," and the big Passacaille.

One hears Appel playing at his most inspired level in this powerfully rich and expressive *ordre*. He offers a few of his personal ornaments (in good taste) in the beautifully played and dissonance laden "Sarabande L'Unique." Once again, sparkling upper register sonorities add to the effectively played concise rhythms in the Gigue. The famous and majestic Passacaglia is delivered with appropriate dramatic power. Appel's approach magnifies the dimensions, ranging from intense and poignant, to voluptuous and spacious, and, he effectively prepares the musical climax that is driven over a chromatic bass line.

Appel is an accomplished player who offers a variety of musical strengths, but they are delivered inconsistently. He can play beautifully, or be rather matter of fact, using a touch that is ineffectual or unexpressive. Both ends of the spectrum can be heard on this recording. The instrument heard on this CD is an enlarged 1648 Johannes Ruckers replica, built by Rutkowski and Robinette in 1990. It adequately delivers the expressive demands of the music, and is especially pleasing on the single 8-foot registers.

**Nathaniel Mander, harpsichord, "The 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Salon" Raynham Recitals 2015. Reviewed by Meg Cotner**

What a delight it is to listen to a recording like Nathaniel Mander's *The 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Salon* and get lost in the magnificence of this glorious *musique de clavecin*. This young British harpsichordist has put together a programme of French keyboard music featuring sophisticated, exuberant, and expressive works of François Couperin, Jacques Duphly, and Claude Balbastre, and a single piece by Pierre Claude Foucquet, a talented organist who worked at the Saint Honoré Church, the Chapel Royale, and Notre Dame Cathedral during the eighteenth century.

Mander plays a harpsichord made by Alan Gotto based on a 1716 instrument by Pierre Donzelague, which Gotto describes as sounding "Flemish with a French accent". It's definitely not as naturally rich and booming in the bass as some later instruments are, but Mander manipulates that range well when necessary. His sound is clear, well articulated, and at times eerily pure, especially in the upper treble.

The record opens with Couperin's *La Visionnaire* from the 25th *Ordre*, and this is rather fitting since it's a French Overture with grand gestures. He moves

forward solidly with assuredness, transitioning into a quick, sprightly imitative section with wonderful flourishes in both upper and lower ranges of the keyboard; Mander manages to bring a wonderful sheen to the notes in this section of the piece.

He continues the first half of the recording with more selections from Couperin's 25th Ordre, as well as his 24th and 19th Ordres. Mander's interpretation of *L'Amphibie* would be an excellent remedy for when you're feeling down, as it is imbued with a sense of pure of joy. Even when it moves to its parallel minor there is still joy to be found, and this minor section is surprisingly effusive as well. I also like his addition of the 4-foot register, which makes the major sections really sparkle.

The second half of the recording is spent with mid-18th century favourites Duphly and Balbastre. The Balbastre selections are from his 1759 *Pièces de Clavecin*, whereas the Duphly works are from his first three books of keyboard music from 1744, 1748, and 1756. Mander's Duphly set is one of the stronger parts of the recording and shows off his range in both virtuosity with *La De Belombre*'s ornamentation and quick passages, and sensitivity with *Les Grâces*, arguably the sweetest piece on the recording. In *Les Grâces* in particular, the notes and trills bloom beautifully and gracefully. It is also the longest track, but that is not a bother at all — the impression is the player truly enjoys immersing himself in this special sound world. It draws you in like no other piece he plays.

He also includes the curious *Le Carillon de Cythere* (The Bells of Cythera) from Pierre Claude Foucquet's *Second Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* (1751). It is exquisitely onomatopoeic, and Mander creates an engaging, pure bell-like sound in the higher register at the start of the piece. He also does a fantastic job of making the distinctive long trill last with carefully timed repetitions. And he still keeps your attention during the final 13 repetitive low F notes, indicated as "*L'heure*" in the score, which sound like clock chimes. This is a truly magical piece.

Overall this is a very enjoyable recording. The only thing I would really wish for is that Mander would take a little more time between dramatic elements and changes in sections; sometimes it felt like he moves on too quickly. There are what appear to be some out of tune notes, which could have been easily attended to by the recording engineers in post-production, especially in Duphly's *La Forqueray*. Other than that, if you are a fan of the height of French baroque harpsichord music, this is a dream of a disc and worth your time for multiple listenings.

**Sam Haywood, piano , "Chopin's Own Piano, Cobbe Collection Trust, CFC 104, 2010. Reviewed by Richard Troeger**

**Recorded at Hatchlands Park, 9-10 March 2010 on Pleyel Piano No. 13819 (1847-48). CONTENTS: Berceuse, Opus 57; Barcarolle, Opus 60; Scherzo No. 1, Opus 20; Fantasy, Opus 49; Ballade No. 4, Opus 52; Scherzo No. 2, Opus 31; Nocturne Opus 27/2, Polonaise In A Flat, Opus 53.**

This is a lovely recording and I urge anyone interested in fine Chopin playing to acquire it. The programme consists of very well-known repertoire, which allows a ready comparison between what the Pleyel piano can tell the listener (and the player) about the music, and what is retained in the mind from often hearing these same works on the modern piano. If there is any contest, the Pleyel wins, and so does Mr. Haywood. If he is not accustomed to Pleyels (as his brief commentary on the CD leaflet implies) he certainly made a rapid assimilation. The performances are assured, poised, and elegant; fiery and delicate by turn. Even in *fortissimo* the piano's tone is never strained (as can happen with Pleyels) and the very precise dynamic shading that the action affords is utilised with fine control and sensibility. Timing is fairly "straight," on the whole, but never constricted, and agogic stresses emerge tellingly. Every work unfolds with complete naturalness; in addition to fine detail, Haywood carries the listener through from beginning to end with no slackening of the overall line. Although his playing technique is obviously first-class (and here he is dealing with an unforgiving type of instrument), there is never an impression of fireworks for its own sake, but of unflagging musical projection.

The accompanying leaflet offers a short commentary by Haywood about playing the instrument, and a brief note by Alec Cobbe about the piano itself: "Chopin's own piano." This is the instrument the composer acquired in January, 1848, probably used in a public concert that February, and took to the UK for his concert tour in 1848. Chopin sold it to the mother of one of his pupils before returning to Paris. The piano seems to have stayed with the family for many years; was sold at auction in the late 1970s; and was acquired by Mr. Cobbe in 1988. Its relationship with Chopin was only recently identified (through the serial number) by the Chopin scholar Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. (Home again, Chopin obtained another instrument from Pleyel: his last, No. 14810 [1848], purchased from Pleyel after his death by Jane Stirling and sent to Chopin's family in Poland. It now resides in the Fryderyk Chopin Museum, Warsaw.) The CD leaflet also presents photographs of the piano's action, the stamped serial number, the Pleyel ledger

entry for No. 13819, a small reproduction of Chopin's last Parisian concert programme, and images of Sam Haywood and Camille Pleyel.

It would be pleasant if a fuller booklet had been included, with more details concerning both player and instrument. An outline of the history and restoration of the latter would be interesting; the restorer is not identified, let alone choices made in the restoration, condition when found, etc. The tone is very mellow, to the point where I have wondered if the highs were "rolled off" a bit in post-production. The sound of the recording *per se* gives the impression of being a mix of close and distant microphone placement, perhaps making the best of a rather live, close acoustic. The final result is clear and direct, if a bit "close."

## SCORES

**John Christopher Smith, Suite de Pièces Pour le Clavecin, Ed. Jolando Scarpa, Edition Walhall EW872 & 914. Reviewed by John Collins**

John Christopher Smith, a pupil of Handel and later his amanuensis, was the son of a German organist and composer (Johann Christoph Schmidt) who had been a contemporary student with Handel in Halle. In addition to two sets of six suites, two sets of six lessons, and a set of 12 sonatas, all for keyboard, the younger Smith also composed operas, oratorios, hymns and songs. This set of suites has been available in facsimile for many years, but as far as I am aware this is the first modern edition.

These two volumes present the second book of harpsichord suites originally published by John Walsh in c.1735. The six suites, here published as three per volume, embrace quite a wide range of styles and were noticeably influenced by Handel's own set of eight suites. The suites in the first volume under review are in A Major, F Major and E Minor.

The A Major suite opens with a Prelude which includes single-note passages and two-part writing (at least in notation) followed by a typically loose fugue. A dotted-rhythm Allemande, a mainly two voice 3/8 Courante with relentless semiquaver writing, an Allegro and a 3/8 Vivace, the model for which will be immediately apparent, are the remaining movements.

The second Suite commences with a majestic movement in triple time, the opening section exploiting the rhythm crotchet, dotted crotchet, quaver, with texture ranging from two voices to chords. Then a lengthy central section in quaver triplets is followed by a return to the opening but with the rhythm smoothed to equal crotchets in two-voice writing before a return to the fuller textured chords leads into an Allemande based on semiquaver passagework. This is followed by a Courante marked

*Andante* which is based on triplets and an impressive Gavotte with a central section which begins in the relative minor and finishes in the mediant minor before a recapitulation of the opening strain.

The third suite, in E Minor, opens with a substantial fugue, followed by an Allemande marked Larghetto which combines dotted rhythms and semiquaver triplets, and a 3/4 Courante which moves in quavers. A binary-form Allegro has both scalar passages and broken chord arpeggios, before the Gigue in 12/8, in two voices punctuated occasionally by full textured chords.

The suites in the second volume are in C Minor, G Major and F Minor. The fourth Suite opens with a binary-form two-voice prelude in 3/4, which makes much use of scalar runs in semiquavers against crotchets. An Allemande, which features flowing semiquavers in a mainly three-voice texture is followed by a 3/8 movement in two voices, featuring sequential semiquaver writing with many opportunities for stressing the implied three-voice writing, as the melodic line alternates with an oscillating note. Although untitled, it is clearly fast in tempo and is followed by a lilting through-composed Siciliana. The next movement, again untitled, is another two-voice movement, in 3/4, with the right hand mainly in quaver triplets against left hand crotchets. The final movement is a Menuet followed by three variations, with the insistent quaver figures appearing first in the treble, then in the bass and then both hands together; Handel's model is again evident.

The fifth Suite opens with a lengthy Chaconne-like piece in 3/4, which follows the majestic chordal opening with two-part writing including arpeggiated triads, quaver triplets, and quaver figures passed from hand to hand before scalar runs and typically string-derived figures lead to the chordal coda. This splendid piece is followed by a workman-like Allemande, a Courante in quaver movement, and a short binary-form triple-time Largo which concludes in B, before an Air with five Doubles of increasing brilliance, including semiquaver triplets and demisemiquaver runs, the influence being all too obvious!

The final Suite in the for the time rarely used key of F Minor opens with a Grave which has offers an effective treatment of the descending chromatic fourth and leads into a fugue based on repeated crotchets and syncopations, which concludes with sequential chord-changing beneath an inverted pedal, before a final statement of the subject in the treble and a run down to a thick dominant seventh, the performer clearly expected to improvise a short cadence before the closing chords. The Allemande presents a rich variety of textures and the Courante moves in sequential quavers with passages for both hands above middle C. The concluding piece is a massive Chaconne in the tonic major, by far the most impressive movement in the entire six suites, its 22

couplets (1-9 in the major, 10-14 in the tonic minor and 15-22 in the major) containing a wide variety of textures from two voices with various manner of arpeggios to thick chords, and rhythms including triplets and making technical and muscular demands on the player.

Ornament signs used include *tr*, (although the original uses just a “*t*”), grace notes representing appoggiaturas and upward slides, frequently unslurred as in the original, and the wavy line with a stroke through it, which represents the beat; in many instances it is followed by a large comma, which is an attempt to reproduce the original sign which has includes a diagonal line at the end. Since this sign appears over dotted notes it may well imply a double repercussion, although some dotted notes in the original do have the graphic sign without the diagonal termination. No explanation of these ornaments is provided in the introduction, which gives a brief biography, and there is no separate critical commentary, with editorial amendments indicated within the score, which is clearly printed with six systems to the page.

I do wonder why Edition Walhall issues so many collections in two volumes of no more than 40 pages each, rather than in one volume of 80 or so, without duplication of introduction, at a cheaper overall price. These are most attractive pieces and although considerably more demanding than the collections of his contemporaries, particularly in the fugues where parts pass between the hands, and care will also be required in the pseudo-polyphonic writing in the dances where “parts” cross as well as in the rapid runs. It is much to be hoped that these exciting suites will take their place in recitals. I look forward to the new edition of the first book of Smith’s suites from this enterprising publisher and editor.

**Catena sammlung (Mus. Ms. Landsberg 122 - Berlin volume II, ed. Jolando Scarpa, Edition Walhall EW922. Reviewed by John Collins**

I reviewed volume I of this new edition of the Catena Manuscript for the previous issue of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano* (Volume 19 no. 1, Autumn 2014) and since then a copy of the second, and final volume has arrived.

Volume II contains a further 28 pieces, most of which, being untitled in the manuscript, have been given tentative titles by the editor, and opens with a *Fantasia dopo l’Epistola* in three sections, outer movements in C-time in a canzona rhythm enclosing a triple time section in C3, the first two of the six beats being a dotted crotchet-quaver. This is followed by a toccata-like piece not dissimilar to some of those found in the Chigi manuscripts in the Vatican. Three contrapuntal Versetti on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tone are followed by a more substantial canzone

with plenty of quaver work against minims as the piece progresses. Five shorter canzoni follow, of which only the second one has a triple time central section; the third and fifth conclude with toccata-like passages which also occur in a few canzona in the Cimino Manuscript (also edited by Scarpa for Edition Walhall). There follow four Versetti, one on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tone and three on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tone; all have canzona rhythms, the final two in smaller note-values. A further imitative piece entitled Canzone by the editor has a subject on equal quavers, followed by two more Versetti on the 5<sup>th</sup> Tone.

Two far more substantial pieces in the 1<sup>st</sup> Tone follow, the first being a piece which the editor has, rightly, entitled Toccata, which opens with quaver arpeggio flourishes before settling into scalar semiquavers over held octaves and two-voice passages before a winding down single-note broken arpeggio. This is followed by a majestic Passacalli based on the descending tetrachord, which progresses through figuration and rhythmic motifs before a harmonically exciting conclusion. Of the following three Versetti on the 6<sup>th</sup> Tone, the second is homophonic and the third is in 3/2 with a dotted rhythm to the subject. A short imitative untitled piece is followed by three pieces entitled Canzone by the editor, which are imitative although not in the expected rhythms, the subject of the final one being similar but in a different rhythm to an earlier Versetto on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tone. Two imitative Versetti on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tone are then followed by a canzone, the subject of which includes both the sharpened and natural seventh; in the final bar the three voices of the right hand telescope into one.

The next piece is entitled Spagnola in the manuscript, its dactylic rhythm showing its genesis in a canzone; it has nothing in common with the pieces entitled Spagnoletta by Frescobaldi or Storace. The following untitled piece and the next canzone are short imitative pieces, after which comes the Corrente entitled Frescobaldi; not included amongst his published pieces, it is similar to them stylistically, with much made of the dotted crotchet-quaver-crotchet rhythm in the first part. An imitative piece entitled Canzone by the editor opens with the expected minim converted into a quaver rest followed by three repeated notes, the piece concluding with a short flourish. The closing piece in the collection, entitled Versetto by the editor, consists of short motifs in two voices before left hand octaves in the final two bars.

The printing is clear, most pages having six systems to the page. The volume is a further welcome addition in modern notation to the relatively scarce material from the post-Frescobaldi time in Rome in particular and Italy in general; none of the pieces has an obligato pedal part, and although many are liturgically based and are still suitable for such use today, they also offer good teaching material.