

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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REVIEWS

RECORDINGS

Corina Marti, harpsichord, "Johannes de Lublin Tablature". Brilliant Classics 95556.

Reviewed by John Collins.

The tablature known as the Jan of Lublin Tablature is by far the most extensive of several such anthologies for keyboard instruments which have survived in Poland from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, containing more than 230 compositions on 260 folios, notated in old German tablature, a mix of letters and notes on a stave, as can be seen on the CD cover which illustrates the opening bars of *Ad novem Saltus*, heard here on track 19. It is likely that Johannes of Lublin was the scribe for the majority of the pieces, which cover genres including praeambula, settings of vocal pieces both sacred and secular, from across Europe, organ masses and dances, but excluding abstract fugal compositions, probably taking a good 12 years to compile the anthology in Kraków.

For this recording Corina Marti has selected some 39 mainly very short pieces ranging from the *Preambulum in a per h* which lasts a mere 29 seconds to a setting of *Deus qui sedes super thronum* after Johann Walter which weighs in at 4' 54"; some two-thirds of the pieces last under two minutes. The pieces are subdivided into five groups, the first four each introduced by a Preambulum; these are less improvisatory. This generous selection lasts just under 75 minutes and includes nine Praeambula, dance pieces, many of which are entitled simply Corea, and settings of sacred and secular vocal music, including some by Claudio de Sermisy, Josquin, Senfl and Sandrin.

The harpsichord heard on this CD was made in 2017 by Volker Platte, after an anonymous Neapolitan model of c. 1520. It has two stops, an 8ft and a 4 ft, and is tuned at A = 494. Its compass is C/E-a² missing g#². The 4ft stop is heard by itself to great effect at the opening statement of the *Jeszcze Marczynie* following the Passamezzo track 3 and in *Corea*, track 12 and in track 27, *Ave Jerachia*. The voicing provides clarity, the rapid decay and percussive nature adding to the impact of the rhythmically precise playing of the dance

pieces when played using both registers.

The slim booklet which comes with the CD contains an article on the tablature and its contents and brief details about the performer's current research and work. The standard of playing is uniformly very high, with plenty of tastefully added ornamentation, including divisions as well as rhythmic changes which work well, although just occasionally passages without added divisions would have stood out. Repeats are added to the dances. The tempo chosen for each piece captures its mood admirably from the fluid rapidity of the dances, particularly in the triple time *Proprio* or *Nachtanz*, with repeats including tastefully stylish added ornamentation, to the delicate slower tempo with more restrained ornamentation in such haunting pieces as the settings of *Le content est riche en ce monde* with its second part *D'ung plaisir*, *Dulce memoire*, *Plus mille regres*, *Tribulatio* and the final track *Sicut lilium inter spinas*.

The range of pieces played gives us a glimpse into domestic mid -16th century keyboard activity in Kraków, and Marti succeeds in making a large number of pieces sound different enough to captivate the listener. The list of tracks gives the folio but omits the date when it is present in some titles – including the number of the piece and the volume in the modern edition would have been helpful to players. Marti is to be congratulated on breaking new ground and introducing a repertoire which, although extensive in terms of surviving sources, will be completely unknown to many.

Mahan Esfahani, "The Passinge Mesures": Music of the English Virginalists. Hyperion CDA68249. Reviewed by Pamela Hickman.

Iranian/American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani's recent CD "The Passinge Mesures" offers a representative selection of music of the English (and Welsh) Virginalist school, much of it appearing in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, but not all. The artist takes the listener on a journey into the riches of this genre and into his own very personal relationship into it.

We are talking about an entire genre that developed and functioned over only a few of decades, the entire school dying out completely

by the middle of the seventeenth century. William Byrd, the first great master of the English Virginalist school of keyboard composition, presided over this era. Indeed, Esfahani's playing of Byrd's "The ny nth pavan and galliarde, the Passinge Mesures" (from which the disc takes its title, "Passinge Mesures" apparently being an English miswriting of "passamezzo"), the two dances written in the 1570s to a passamezzo antico bass, bristles with ideas, buoyant figurations and registration changes. Esfahani's resourceful playing of the two dances and the variations on each is validation of the fantasy and exuberance there to be unleashed in this music. As to John Bull's Chromatic (Queen Elizabeth's) pavan and galliard, its opening pavan emerges meditative and bewitching, with the artist's playing of the galliard, albeit ornate, still reminding the listener of the joyful dance's leaps and hops and of its defining feature: a vigorous jump on the last two beats of a phrase.

The great Welsh composer Thomas Tomkins, Byrd's last surviving pupil, is represented on the disc. His setting of the popular 16th-century ballad tune "Barafostus Dreame" (it is not clear who this man was and what kind of dream he had) opens majestically; Esfahani's playing of the work is stylish, varied and exhilarating, the artist's hallmark dexterity and incisive playing spelling out the course of the eight variations as he highlights the individuality of each. To me, one of the disc's highlights is the performance of Tomkins' Pavane (FVB CXXIII), ceremonious, plangent, and eloquent, Esfahani's ornamentation sometimes profuse, indeed always fascinating, as are the unexpected harmonic shifts embedded here and there in the score. Other dances featured include the elegant Pavin "M.Orlando Gibbons" by Gibbons himself and "Nobodys Gigge", a cheerful, compact piece by Richard Farnaby (Giles Farnaby's lesser-known son, employed to teach Sir Nicholas Saunderson of Fillingham's children "in skill of musick and plaiinge upon instruments")

With the simple melodic style of popular songs and folk tunes serving as a starting-point for composers of the English Virginal School to engage in elaborate forays into keyboard virtuosity, the disc also includes a selection of pieces based on song melodies - an anonymous setting of John Dowland's wistful "Can she excuse my wrongs?"

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and Esfahani's serene playing of William Inglot's empathic setting (one of several) of "The leaves bee greene", a popular tune of the late sixteenth century, also referred to as "Browning".

Then there are a number of song-based pieces by Giles Farnaby, whose cousin, Nicholas Farnaby, a maker of virginals, may have been instrumental in pointing him in the direction of keyboard music and his subsequent contributions to the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. I have heard performances of Farnaby's "Woody-Cock" sounding like a lexicon of harpsichord techniques. Esfahani's reading of it speaks of its temperament, invention and spirit; in his bold, unfettered playing of some variations, Esfahani does not waive articulacy in the name of harum-scarum complexity.

If the fantasia is the composer's unbuttoned invitation to spontaneity and free expression, this keyboardist meets him at eye level, as in John Bull's Fantasia "Mr Dr Bull", Esfahani identifying and celebrating John Bull's daring and individuality with his own. Indeed, no less so in William Byrd's "Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la", also referred to as the "Hexachord Fantasia", featuring the stepwise ascending and descending Guidonian hexachord as a recurrent subject (17 times, in fact) and including two song melodies. Esfahani, however, takes it a step further as he invites the piece to burgeon with the rich palette of his own natural and spontaneous expression.

Recorded in 2017, most of the pieces are played on a double-manual harpsichord by Robert Goble & Son, Oxford (1990) based on an instrument made by Carl Conrad Fleischer, Hamburg (1710), with some works performed on a virginals made by Huw Saunders, London (1989) and a copy of an instrument made by Thomas White, London (1642). The temperament used for the recording is quarter-comma meantone. The artist's personal and informative liner notes make for interesting reading. Listening to the warm, richly resonant recording quality of "The Passinge Mesures", with just enough of a hint of keyboard action heard, I felt as if I were seated in Esfahani's own music room: a disc of remarkable performance, conviction and originality! The album is dedicated to the memory of Canadian historic keyboard artist Bradford Tracey (1951-1987).

Élisabeth Joyé, clavecin & orgue. JCF Fischer, Uranie. Encelade 1402, 2015.

Reviewed by Meg Cotter

Ever since I first came across the music of Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer early in my harpsichord studies, I was smitten in particular with his *Musikalischer Parnassus*, so I went into the opportunity to review this recording of his music with a fair bit of bias. I'm happy to say that this set of pieces performed by Élisabeth Joyé meets the mark of tasteful playing with intellectually-rigorous musical choices. I would not go so far as to say that her playing is full of unbridled passion, but it is a very well-thought-out performance and one I would not hesitate to recommend.

The disc is split between works for harpsichord and organ, the harpsichord music making the bulk of the programme. The harpsichord by Philippe Humeau (France, 1993), after Carl Conrad Fleischer (Hamburg, 1720) is resonant and clear right from the start and is a good fit for this music. The choice to open with the suite *Uranie* (the muse of astronomy) from the abovementioned *Musikalischer Parnassus* was a smart one, what with its fantastic chordal opening, so strong and powerful; the chord progression is delicious, and you get to dig into the piece along with her.

Joyé continues with another of the suites from *Musikalischer Parnassus*, *Melpomene* (the muse of tragedy). The Chaconne that ends the suite has a bit of a melancholy vibe and Joyé highlights that well. The final piece she chose from *Musikalischer Parnassus* is the *Prélude Harpegiato* which sounds pretty much exactly as you'd expect (thanks, cognate). It's short and sweet and another chance to sink into the world of pleasing chord progressions.

Beyond that on the harpsichord side of things, there are three pieces from Fischer's *Musicalisches Blumen-Büslein*, the earliest keyboard works he published, released in 1698. The *Aria et huit variations* is the longest piece on the CD. The aria itself has a kind of sweetness to it that is quite nice; Joyé does a great job bringing out that affect and is adept at realising the ornamentation. The variations have good variety in both structure and execution, especially when it comes to articulation and her choice of registration. The third variation in particular has a distinctive sound, in that it is played an octave

higher than written – likely on the 4' rank alone – giving it a delicate feel.

The organ pieces start at track 20, with the *Praeludium 10 et Fuga en Fa majeur* from *Ariadne Musica*. The production choice to leave a nice juicy period of silence after the harpsichord section and before the organ section was smart because once you hear the first note the difference in the sound worlds is jarring and beautiful. It's important to note that this organ, of the Foyer de l'Âme is new (except for the case, the reharmonized flute 8' and bourdon 16'); the notes say that it "is based on a Saxon aesthetic and, generally speaking, is built in the classical style." It was built by Quentin Blumenroeder in 2009. His website has more detail on this instrument:

"This is an organ we built for the Temple du Foyer de l'âme in Paris. The old case was kept but made deeper. The front was also preserved as we thought its design was well adapted to the case and a new front would have made the instrument look gaudy. The aesthetic of this organ is Saxon in spirit and devised to best fit the Continuo. It has two 56-note keyboards (C to g³) and a 30-note pedal-board (C to f¹.)"

But back to the music. In some ways the organ pieces have a more adventuresome spirit and as a harpsichordist it's hard to not be mesmerized by the ability for organists to keep the sound going so effortlessly. The second of the organ pieces, *Praeludium 1, 6 Fugues en Finale en Re mineur*, has wonderful harmonies with intelligent noodling in between chords. The sustained sound makes dissonances even more delicious. Sometimes it sounds eerie but overall, I love her sound and registration choices. The piece can sound busy but it's always clear and understandable; the articulation is a delight. What a wonderful sound world; I want to live inside this organ while she plays this music.

She returns to *Musikalischer Parnassus*, bringing it to the organ with the Chaconne from *Euterpe* (muse of flutes and lyric poetry – appropriate for an organ). Despite the dense organ sound, it still feels like a danceable Chaconne. The ability to hold notes brings out certain elements and tones that add interest; the length of the piece gives opportunity to play with registration, which she does; the bass is always clear. It's really a wonderful piece and she gives it a lot of care and variation to make it

interesting.

She ends the disc with two ricercars from *Ariadne Musica - Ricercaras super totidem sacrorum anni temporum ecclesiasticas cantilenas: Ricercar pro festis paschalibus super initium cantilenae. Crist ist erstanden* (probably the longest title on the disc). The first one is played on the organ, the second on harpsichord. The first ricercar comes off as sombre-sounding compared to the chaconne before — very staid and serious. Then the harpsichord ends things, which was quite a surprise to the ears!

The booklet contains notes in French and English and is informative and useful. Check out the black and white photos of the instruments and the spaces they're in, and of course of the artist. The CD art is also fabulous.

**Mafalda Nejmeddine, harpsichord,
“Sei Sonate per Cembalo, Alberto Gomes
da Silva. Available from <https://national-music-museum.myshopify.com>**

Reviewed by John Collins.

Mafalda Nejmeddine is one of the leading Portuguese harpsichordists and interpreters of her country's keyboard music of the eighteenth century, on which she has written extensively, and is a researcher at the Centro de estudos de sociologia e estética musical at the University of Évora. Although small in output when compared to the vast quantity of material preserved in Spanish archives, the Portuguese sonatas from this period are in no way lesser in stature, as Nejmeddine so ably demonstrates in this first complete recording of the set of six sonatas published by Alberto Gomes da Silva in Lisbon c. 1780 (only sonatas 2 and 4 have been recorded previously). This is one of just two such collections printed in Portugal during the eighteenth century, although many more pieces survive in manuscripts.

The harpsichord used is the magnificent single manual harpsichord made in 1780 by Lisbon maker José Calisto now residing in the National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota. Of typical Portuguese construction it has two x 8ft registers and a buff stop. Its sonorous tone quality gives a full sound with plenty of depth to the passages in octaves in the bass and a brightness in the

treble and clarity to the full chords throughout its compass.

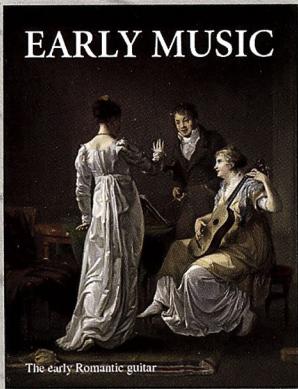
The first two sonatas contain three movements. The second sonata opens with a Preludio but the following movement has no tempo indication and is here taken at a fairly sedate pace which brings out the rhythmic variety. The remaining four contain two. The five opening movements marked *Allegro* are taken at a pace that allows the articulation to point the carefully marked phrasing, and the *Allegretto* which opens Sonata V is also well paced. The closing movement in the first Sonata is an *Allegro*, and in the remaining five it is a *Minuet*, these being taken at a slower pace which allows the quite complex writing space to breathe, especially in the spacious *Minuet* to Sonata no. 6. Particularly beautiful is the Minuet which closes the fourth sonata, being headed “In the style of the Portuguese guitar”, the buff stop coming into its own here. The playing in the two sonatas in minor keys conveys the inherently Portuguese “saudade” (a feeling of longing, yearning or melancholy).

The CD is accompanied by a booklet giving plenty of illuminating details of the pieces in the collection and its place in Portuguese keyboard history, as well as that of the place of the harpsichord and fortepiano in the country. There is also information about the instrument and the performer. The performance of these vigorously demanding movements is confident and assured, with crisp articulation and clean ornaments which sound like an integral part of the line, especially those added in the repeats and the clear transition from one rhythm to another in rapid changes.

Nejmeddine's nimble dexterity is apparent in the passages in octaves in the bass as well as the numerous wide leaps and passages for crossed hands, which are negotiated effortlessly. The combination apparent throughout this recording is of a player who is thoroughly at home in this music as much in the eloquently tender passages as in the more precipitous movements, and an instrument that is a perfect match for it — an unbeatable pairing. This CD is especially recommended for those discerning listeners looking for something different from the plethora of recordings of Scarlatti and Soler. It is very much to be hoped that Nejmeddine will record more pieces from this relatively unknown and neglected repertoire.

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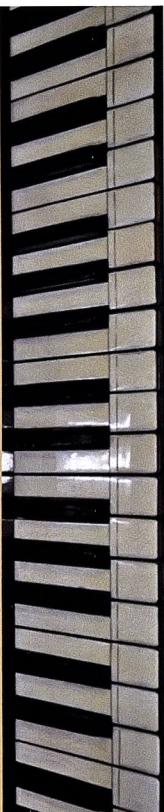
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