

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
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# An Eagle over Falcons: recording harpsichord music by John Worgan (1724-1790)

## Julian Perkins

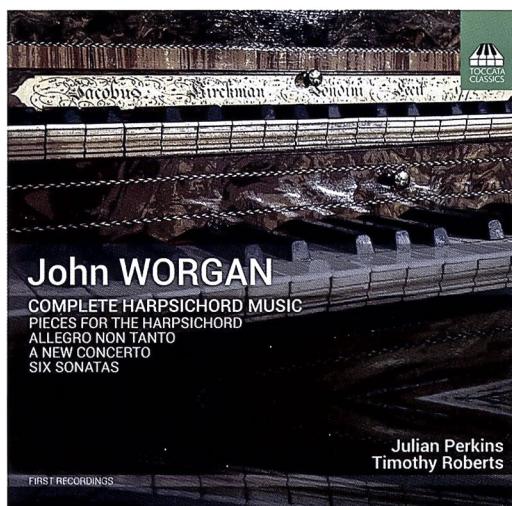
When Timothy Roberts invited me to record John Worgan's harpsichord music (illus.1), I reacted with some scepticism. Who was this unknown English composer whose music is littered with unusual figurations, breaches of 18th-century compositional orthodoxy and even moments of harmonic kinkiness? I initially thought Worgan's music slightly crude compared to the dazzling harpsichord suites I have recorded by his compatriots, James Nares and John Christopher Smith Jnr. Like Alessandro Longo, when he edited Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas, I even attempted to 'normalize' some of Worgan's more eccentric passages.

virtuosity of Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas and C. P. E. Bach's experimental music clear. They're a bit odd, make no mistake, but it's a wilful sort of oddity that I found impossible to resist'.

Once I had accepted Worgan's 'wilful oddity', I too found his music impossible to resist. It oozes character and could perhaps be described as being in the 'Anglo-Scarlatti' style, in which the robust rhythmic verve one often finds in the music of Thomas Arne and William Boyce is fused with Italianate zest and lyricism. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the demonic Presto of Worgan's second sonata, where he delights in Scarlatti's trademark gesture of hand-crossing while puncturing extended Vivaldi-esque figurations with explosive bass notes that fire off like cannonballs on the Kirckman harpsichord used in this recording. Scarlatti speaks of 'an ingenious Jesting with Art' in the preface to his much-loved *Essercizi per Gravicembalo*, and this capricious aesthetic impregnates much of Worgan's music.

Yet his native English sensibilities are strong. Worgan's indulgence in stylistic digression, frequent levity and occasional bawdiness are perhaps comparable to Laurence Sterne's literary phenomenon of the 1760s, *Tristram Shandy* – and even the music of Charles Ives and Percy Grainger. The short opening movement of Worgan's Sonata No.1 has a tongue-in-cheek quality that evokes *opera buffa*, and this comic *hors d'œuvre* prepares us for an assortment of theatrical movements that Timothy Roberts describes as '... a series of *commedia dell'arte* masks until Sonata No.6, where Worgan shows his real, honest meat-and-two-veg old-fashioned character'. We hear the prolific composer of Vauxhall songs in the pathos of Sonata No.2's Air, galant sensibilities in Sonata No.5's Gavott and the New Concerto's Minuet, while Sonata No.4's Bizzaria – with its two opposing ideas – encapsulates Sterne's celebrated remark: 'Nothing is so perfectly amusing as a total change of ideas'.

It was a joy to record this music on a double-manual Kirckman harpsichord of 1772 from Dumfries House, newly restored by Huw Saunders (illus.2).<sup>1</sup> Its age and provenance make it a suitable choice for Worgan's six harpsichord sonatas (illus.3) and his New Concerto. The relative weight and depth of its keyboard action compel

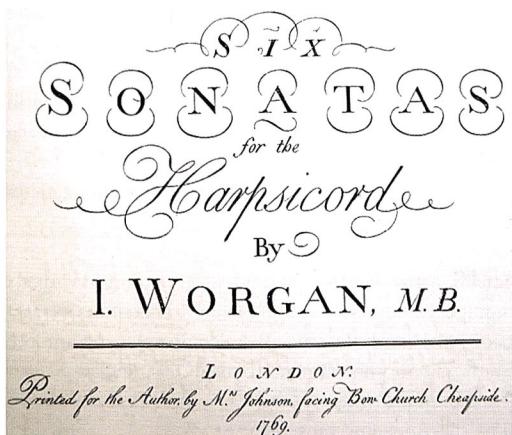


Illus.1 John Worgan, Complete Harpsichord Music, CD

Timothy endured my doubts with good grace. He pointed out that some moments of apparent crudity are probably parodies, and showed me an instance where Handel's music is as surprising as Worgan's. I was also much encouraged by Stephen Pettitt, record critic of the *Sunday Times*, who wrote: 'I must admit that the music of the Vauxhall Gardens organist John Worgan had completely passed me by hitherto, and I'm often a bit cynical about musical byways. But when Julian played his sonatas live in nightly instalments on YouTube I was beguiled. The ideas are bold and charming, the rule-breakings sometimes outrageous (but surely intended), the parallels with the miniature dramas and



Illus.2 Kirckman harpsichord (1772), Dumfries House

Illus.3 John Worgan, *Six Sonatas for the Harpsicord* (London, 1769), title page

the player to engage physically in the sound and create voluptuous sonorities that capture the music's orchestral textures. This sonic power arises in part from the instrument's solid oak case, which is in marked contrast to the lighter cases of poplar and cypress commonly found in Flemish and Italian harpsichords – and makes it a nightmare to move! English harpsichords could even be considered Baroque Wurlitzers: like organs, tonal contrast is achieved more through different stop combinations than through changes in pitch. How I enjoyed exploring over a dozen sounds such as the nutty 'Nazard' (officially a 'lute') stop in Sonata No.2's concluding *Spiritoso*, and a buff effect in Sonata No.3's *Minuet*, where the Nazard register's dampers mute a set of strings. In wanting to showcase this sonorous instrument, I was pleased to reach the extremes of the keyboard's range: a bottom F in

Sonata No.3's *Andante* and, through ornamentation, a top F in Sonata No.5's *Gavott*.

So why has Worgan's music been largely forgotten? Handel himself admired his playing, Charles Burney described him as 'a very masterly and learned fugueist on the organ',<sup>2</sup> Charles Wesley Jnr was one of his pupils – and Worgan Street in South London is apparently named after him. In a lengthy 'Memoir of Worgan' that dates from 1823, thirty-three years after his death, Richard Mackenzie Bacon lauds this original musician as 'an eagle over falcons' whose playing was 'a perpetual excitement of intense interest in the bosom of the taste, that is an honour to human nature'.<sup>3</sup> Let's hope this neglected eagle can now rise like a phoenix from the ashes of oblivion.

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- 1 For the Kirkman family and their instruments, see Donald Boalch, ed Charles Mould, *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord* (Oxford, 3/1995) and Charles Mould and Peter Mole, *Jacob Kirkman, Harpsichord Maker to Her Majesty* (Ellesmere, 2016).
- 2 Charles Burney, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period, to which is prefixed, a Dissertation on the Music of the Ancients* (London, 1776-89), ed. Frank Mercer (London, 1935, r/1957), vol.2, p.1009.
- 3 Richard Mackenzie Bacon, 'Memoir of the Life and Works of John Worgan, Mus.D', *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, Vol. 5 (1823), pp.113-134 at 118.