

Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Baroque Special

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Bach: Brandenburg Concertos – Mertin, Wiener Kammerorchester, Harnoncourt, Leonhardt, Melkus (Supraphon Archiv)

In 1950, in the Casino Baumgarten, Linzer Straße, Vienna, a significant event took place. Under the expert direction of Josef Mertin, the members of an ensemble known as the Vienna Chamber Orchestra performed and recorded the first-ever account of the Brandenburg Concertos of J. S. Bach that used period instruments and the best available knowledge of baroque performance practices. Significantly, it occurred just as European cities had really begun to recover from the devastation of a war that had also caused any number of peacetime activities to be placed on hold. That included a revival of baroque music that was ready to blossom when the war intervened.

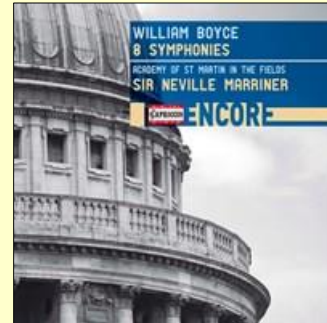
Curiously, the recordings were not released in Vienna, but in Prague by Supraphon in 1953, and on 12 shellac discs, not vinyl records. Nevertheless, it was an important step in the baroque revival, and it involved figures who would later make names for themselves in that sphere. Master violinist Eduard Melkus played the 1st viola in Brandenburg Concerto No. 6. The late Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929-2016), later director of the Vienna Concentus Musicus for many years, played the cello and viola da gamba. Gustav Leonhardt, the Dutchman who was to gain fame as



Purcell: Opera Suites - Sir Neville Marriner, Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (Capriccio Encore)

In these 1994 recordings, Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy capture the essence of the liveness and spirit that made Henry Purcell (1659-1695) the most celebrated English composer of his day. In his short life of 36 years, he was amazingly prolific, writing church anthems, fantasies for consorts of viols, and eight charming suites for harpsichord. Of course, you might not have been aware of his contributions in these areas if you weren't a churchgoer or a musical connoisseur. For the majority of the music-loving public, Purcell was *the* greatest composer of all for the theatre. He wrote only one opera (*Dido and Aeneas*), but he poured his lyrical genius into some forty-three other plays, masques, and semi-operas.

All of these ephemeral stage shows, including *The Fairy Queen*, a very free adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, have long since disappeared from view. But they left behind a wealth of music by Purcell in the form of overtures, symphonies (or "sinfony") which were interludes between acts, dances, songs, and other types of incidental music. Aided by his ability to compose folk-like melodies and his ear for the natural cadences of the language, he was particularly skilled in writing songs in English, a



Boyce: 8 Symphonies - Sir Neville Marriner, Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (Capriccio Encore)

These 1993 recordings are among the very best Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy have ever given us, and that's saying a lot. They capture the spirit of an age in their lively perception of the warmly human qualities of their composer, his alert rhythms, his engaging melodies, and a counterpoint worn so intelligently and lightly one is scarcely aware of it.

William Boyce (1711-1779) was that rarest of men, a universally beloved figure in a very competitive arena in which composers and publishers regularly pirated material from their contemporaries. His music in these 8 Symphonies shows a balanced personality with a nice feeling for popular taste and an absolutely amazing liveness and economy. In particular, they contain numerous movements in dance tempo: minuets, gavottes, and even a "Jigg" as the finale of No. 7. They would have had the greatest popular appeal in an age in which dancing was easily the most popular form of social interaction. Sir Neville and the Academy handle these dance movements with all the vivacity and alertness they deserve, so that home listeners will be hard-put to keep their seats!

"Symphony" needs to be explained in the context in which Boyce's age understood the word. It should not be confused with the modern concept of the symphony that come about with

a harpsichordist, is featured here on viola da gamba, while Bruno Seidlhofer took the honors on keyboard. Jürg Schaeftlein was the oboist, and his sister Elisabeth was one of the recorders in No. 4. Helmut Wobisch (trumpet), Alfred Altenburger (violin), and Camillo Wanausek (flute) completed a distinguished lineup of players we would be hearing all through the early years of the baroque revival.

The recorded sound is somewhat bass-heavy in comparison with what we would have later in the vinyl era. It is amazing that we are able to experience the music as optimally as we can, considering the fact that the original recordings had been in Supraphon's vaults more than sixty years. There is an undeniable harshness, attributable to limitations in the recording media, in the sound of the higher-pitched instruments such as the violin, trumpet, and flute in Nos. 4 and 5. On the other hand, the harpsichord cadenza in 5 is a thing of real beauty, perhaps due in part to the fact that the recording technology favored its register in this concerto.

Mertin took great care to allow the timbres of the ancient instruments, especially the members of the gamba family (viola da braccio, viola da gamba) to stand out clearly so that listeners unfamiliar with these instruments could get an idea of what they had to offer. Inner voices register very distinctly in Nos. 3 and 6, and the *Affettuoso* in 5 and the *Andante* in 6 shine forth as moments of sheer poetry.

As a footnote, these sessions must have been a labor of love in more than one sense. Violinist Alice Hoffelner (latter Frau Harnoncourt), happily still among us, was of great assistance to the booklet annotation in identifying from memory who played what instrument in these sessions. A rare 1950 group picture with the other members of the Vienna Gamba Quartet on page 11 captures her as a pretty 20 year old gazing adoringly at the thin, serious-looking young man who was to be her future husband (She's looking at *you*, Nikolaus!)

task at which many classical composers in the English-speaking countries have been uninspiring.

There are no actual vocals in the present program of instrumental music, but there are quite a few song transcriptions here, including "If love's a sweet passion" from *The Fairy Queen* and "How blest are shepherds" and "Fairest Isle" from *King Arthur*. With his firm grasp of a ground bass as the foundation for a composition, Purcell was equally skilled in composing both songs and *chaconnes*, which were variations over a repeated bass. As opposed to the best-known example of the last-named, J.S. Bach's famous Chaconne from *Violin Partita No. 2*, Purcell's *chaconnes* are lightly structured with the bass lines continuously moving, giving an attractive spring and liveness to his music. The Chaconne from Act III of *Dioclesian*, for instance, described in the quaint terminology of the day as "two in one upon a ground," has a pair of flutes describing elegant trceries over a bass provided by the bassoon.

The most familiar chaconne (or "chacony") by Purcell is the sprightly one in *The Fairy Queen*, described as "Dance for a Chinese Man and Woman." (Didn't I say this was a free adaptation of Shakespeare?) An "air," in those days, was any old type of supported tune, and not necessarily of vocal origin. For example, the "Aire" from the Second Music for *King Arthur* is a minuet – and a very danceable one at that!

At the end of the program, Sir Neville includes the Symphony from Act II, Scene 2 of *The Indian Queen*. An extended piece in which vigorous and brassy outer sections enclose the slightly poignant mood of the slower inner section, as if the very music itself were loath to depart from the delectable feast provided here, it makes for a fitting conclusion to 69 minutes of pure entertainment.

Haydn and Mozart, of a major work in four movements that is based on the careful exposition, development, and recapitulation of themes. Boyce's symphonies, which the Baroque era interchangeably called "sinfonias" and "overtures," were basically the curtain raisers for, or interludes between, the acts of larger works, either operas or the unique English mixture of poetry and music known as an "ode."

That these little gems carried much less baggage than their modern counterpart can be judged from their length. The 23 movements in these 8 "symphonies" have a total duration of just 61 minutes in these smartly paced performances. We sense the pure essence of music expressed with a breathtaking economy such as we would not experience again until Darius Milhaud's 6 Little Symphonies of 1917-1922 or Prokofiev's Classical Symphony of 1925.

Another source of the charm in Boyce's symphonies lies in the way his woodwind solos occasionally pop out of the fabric in the most natural manner, notable for a time when the winds were mostly used to support the melodies in the strings and add a little color. The very mellow-voiced bassoon solo in the *Andante* of No. 3 in C major and the highly imaginative, florid flute solo in the *Moderato* of No. 7 in B-flat are the most prominent examples, but Boyce also makes extensive use of the oboes to add to the character of his various Gavotte movements (*Tempo di Gavotta*). His *Largo* and *Larghetto* in No. 6 in F major are quicker-paced than we might expect from their markings, while the way in which the opening movement, *Pomposo*, in No. 8 in D minor, characterized by smart dotted rhythms and up-beat figuration, gives way to a fugal section in which Boyce wears his learning lightly, reveals the hand of a master.



Telemann: Violin Sonatas - Valerio Losito, violin; Federico del Sordo, harpsichord (Brilliant Classics)

The Telemann rediscovery surges on apace. Since Georg Philipp Telemann was probably music history's most prolific composer, with perhaps six thousand works to his credit (estimates vary, even as new items get discovered and cataloged), the revival will be going on for a long time. Not only was his creative imagination seemingly endless, but he brought together all the major national schools of music that flourished in his day – French, Italian, German, and Polish – and whatever he borrowed in terms of style he made very much his own.

We hear Telemann's range as composer and technician in this new Brilliant Classics release of the 6 Violin Sonatas (1715) that he dedicated to Johann Ernst, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and published as his Opus 1. At the age of 34, these were hardly Telemann's first music compositions – far from it. In those days, "opus" was just a publisher's convention. If you were a savvy composer, you collected the best items of instrumental music you had available in a particular genre and published it, usually with a florid dedication aimed at attracting patronage, but also with the purpose of drawing praise from musical cognoscenti.

As we can readily hear in these beautifully tempered performances by Italian musicians Valerio Losito, baroque violin, and Federico del Sordo, harpsichord, Telemann accomplished both purposes in these six sonatas. His range is simply immense, from the rousing Gigue flavored by rapidly fingered

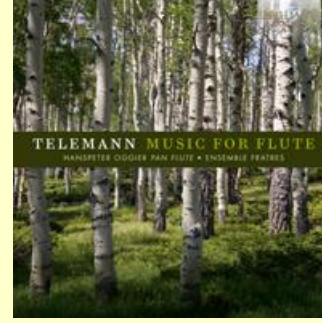


Bach: Organ Works, Vol. II Miklós Teleki, organist (Hungaroton)

On a new Hungaroton release, we have organist Miklós Teleki in a program that displays the various textures and the range of color and rhythm in the music of J. S. Bach. The selections are well-chosen in terms of their accessibility for a first-time listener.

The instrument in these November, 2015 recordings is a 17-register fully mechanical organ designed and built in 2004 by the Aquincum Organ Works of Budapest and installed in the Lutheran Church of Siófok, Hungary, a beautiful wooden structure completed as recently as 1990. The bright-sounding acoustic lets us hear Bach's counterpoint in a clear perspective, though I could wish for a mellower organ sound, which will no doubt be the case as its pipes develop a patina of age over the years. (An organ with a 2004 birthdate still qualifies a very young instrument.)

Both organ and organist display the audacity of youth in a program of considerable range and persuasive charm. We begin with the Organ concerto in D minor, BWV 596, which was Bach's transcription of a concerto for 2 violins and cello from Antonio Vivaldi's Opus 3, the path-breaking set of 12 concerti known as L'Estro Armonico. (Harmonic Ecstasy). The three voices give way easily to a fugue in the opening movement. The second movement, *Largo e spiccato* (Slow and bouncy, by analogy with a string technique in which the bow is bounced on the strings) is based on a lilting Siciliano, while the finale is rich in contrapuntal figurations.



Telemann: Music for Flute Hanspeter Oggier, pan flute; Ensemble Fratres (Brilliant Classics)

These are extraordinary works by the German composer Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767), reflecting his love of color and timbre, his passion for clarity, and his desire to make his music accessible to a wide audience. It also reflects his admiration for the raw energy and sheer excitement generated by the Polish musicians he encountered in his long life journey.

The program includes the Suite in A minor, TWV55:a2, and Concertos in D major, TWV51:D2, and G major, TWV51:G2, all for flute, strings, and basso continuo (a.k.a. figured bass, a standard shorthand widely used by composers of the baroque), and the Suite in G major, TWV55:G2 for strings and continuo, known as "La Bizarre," for reasons that will be apparent to the listener. The music is lively, very straightforward, and quite accessible, and it is performed with much raw energy and élan by Hanspeter Oggier and the members of the Ensemble Fratres.

That's the good news. The flip side of the coin is the strange sound of the instrumental timbres and the very aggressive style of performance employed by the Fratres. They all play baroque instruments or modern facsimiles, but with an edge that sounds very harsh. Their articulation is so very precise that one gets the impression of sharply struck notes without rhythmical flexibility. It reminds me of an earlier stage in the baroque revival when performers' enthusiasm for exotic, edgy timbres outpaced their grasp of the freedom from strict metrical regularity that helped make the music so popular in the 18th century. What we have here

passages on an empty string that create sympathetic vibrations in the adjacent strings in No. 2 in D major (an Italian technique known as "la Campanella," Little Bells) to the gracefully melodious Siciliana that opens No. 3. Figurations in the harpsichord help to add a regal character to the Adagio in support of the violin in No. 1 G minor.

Elsewhere, the final Allegro in No. 4 in G major is highly rhythmic and in a folk style that recalls the rousing national style of Poland (which Telemann was quite influential in introducing to the German public of his day). Sonata No. 5 in A minor reveals Telemann's passion for shapely elegance in its suite-like four movements: an Allemanda in Largo time, an energetic Corrente, a Corelli-like Sarabanda, and a wild, perpetual motion Giga (gigue), for which the composer took pains to describe the requisite bowing technique. Finally, we have in No. 6 in A major another French suite, concluding with a Giga in 6/8 time in which the very rapid up-and-down bowings suggest trumpet fanfares.

In all these attractive works, Losito and del Sordo display their fine Italian hands and a remarkably adept and responsive partnership. The sound of Losito's instrument, a 1741 violin by Pier Lorenzo Vangelisti, with lamb gut strung bows by Davide Longhi, has a distinctly bright sheen that serves this particular music well. For his part, del Sordo, performing on a harpsichord by Sassman after Mietcke, works with the violin to weave the patterns of rhythmic elements in such places as the Corrente in No. 6, where Telemann has deliberately left their placement vague in order to be-devil the performing artists.

Another attractive work, though unaccountably lesser-known, is the Partita in C minor, BWV 767, with nine variations on the chorale melody "O Gott, du frommer Gott" (O God, you righteous God) that are notable for their flexibility in metre, tempo, and dynamics, and for the beautiful chromatic scales in No. 8.

The "Little" Fugue in G minor, BWV 578, derives its appellation from its relatively short duration (3:45), and not the scope of its great musical ideas. As the very model of a beautifully balanced fugue with steadily progressive movement, it has remained popular ever since Bach's day.

The Pastorale in F major, BWV 590 is another of Bach's popular favorites for its mixture of South German and Italian influences, particularly the opening movement, Alla Siciliana with its tranquil melody over steady pedal points that makes it appropriate for the Christmas season. It is followed by a stately Allemande, and then by a really lovely Aria over a basic chordal accompaniment. The finale, a lively *Alla Gigue*, returns us logically and satisfactorily to the key of F major after excursions into other keys in the previous movements.

The program concludes with the wonderful Prelude and Fugue in E-flat major, BWV 552, where the monumental prelude is balanced by a five-part fugue that ends the work on a rousing, affirmative note. As he does elsewhere in the program, Miklós Teleki does a great job keeping all the elements in a balanced perspective. And as I've hinted previously, the availability of an instrument of such high clarity is a definite plus.

is an uncomfortably bright and aggressive sound that will not be pleasing to everyone. As the old saying goes, "people who like this sort of thing will find it the sort of thing they like."

The very best thing about these performances is the pan flute of Hanspeter Oggier in the A minor Suite and the two concertos. Over the centuries this instrument, which had antecedents in ancient times, has gone by various names including *flauto pastorale* and *chalumeau*. (There is a wealth of information on it in the present booklet annotation). It must be a difficult instrument to master as well as Oggier does. Even then, he occasionally experiences overtones and inadvertent landings on adjacent notes from the fact that it is easy to overblow. The payback for an artist such as Oggier lies in its delectable timbre, which produces an attractive range of tone color.

That is particularly evident in the Suite in A minor, a signature work by Telemann that has interesting points of comparison and contrast with J.S. Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2, which it resembles somewhat in its layout: Overture, *Les Plaisirs*, *Air a l'Italien*, Minuets I and II, *Réjouissance*, Passepieds I and II, and Polonoise. Oggier explores the range of color and expression in this work with many delightful touches, including the splendid flourishes with which he occasionally finishes a section. The many chromatic surprises in the *Air a l'Italien* (Air in the Italian Style) and its dramatic transition into an Allegro, call for particular notice. The *Réjouissance* (shades of Handel's Royal Fireworks Music!) is upbeat and engaging. So are the very sprightly pair of Passepieds and the concluding Polonoise, dances whose treatment by Telemann recalls their rustic origins.