

David Chung

Keyboard music from France and the Low Countries

This group of CDs testifies not only to the raising of performance standards and advances in scholarship in recent years, but also to the high level of craftsmanship among makers and restorers of historical keyboard instruments. Seven of the CDs are exclusively dedicated to relatively well-known French repertory, and one to more obscure repertory of Flemish and Dutch origin. Without exception, great efforts have been made to link the instruments to the musical and aesthetic qualities of the music. Taken as a whole, the discs reviewed here demonstrate a healthy, multifarious approach to interpreting a multifaceted solo and chamber keyboard repertory that spans some 150 years.

Terence Charlston presents the première recording of some 30 pieces in **La Chasse Royale: Keyboard manuscript of Antoine Seloisse** (Deux-Elles DXL1143, rec 2009, 92'). The manuscript in question, rediscovered by Peter Leech in 2004, belonged to 'Padre Antonio Mason, alias Seloisse', probably Antoine Seloisse (1621–87), a Jesuit professional musician who was active in Saint-Omer from 1659 until his death. Although the music was intended primarily for domestic and liturgical use, the source offers a plethora of information on the transmission of English and continental keyboard music, and has concrete links to Hogwood M1471 and several other manuscripts. John Bull's famous *The King's Hunt* is among the few pieces that can be positively identified. Very probably, Seloisse was personally responsible, either as composer or arranger, for many anonymous works, such as the Variations on the popular tune 'La Folia' (disc 1, no.1). In this recording, three instruments have been discerningly chosen to cover the wide diversity of keyboard styles. Karin Richter's copy of the Donat double-fretted clavichord is a perfect match for the two allemandes designated as being 'fitt for the manicorde' in the Hogwood manuscript (disc 2). The historical organ of St Botolph's, Aldgate, restored by Goetze and Gwynn in 2006 to its 1744 specification, does justice to eleven works in the liturgical or organ style, including several toccatas and chaconnes and one Bergamasca (an older dance variation of Italian origin that was closely connected to lute and guitar repertory). The remaining 20 pieces were recorded on Andrew Garlick's fine replica of the 1624 Ioannes Ruckers

harpsichord (Unterlinden Museum, Colmar). Liner notes by Leech and Charleston offer insight into the historical background and stylistic matters, and information on the source, the edition and the instruments used in the recording. This set stands out as an illustrious model for the fusion of exemplary scholarship and impeccable musicianship.

Karen Flint's albums of solo harpsichord music by Chambonnières and Jacquet de la Guerre were both released by Plectra Music two years ago. In **Jacques Champion de Chambonnières: Les Pièces de clavessin** (Plectra PL21001, issued 2010, 77'), 30 dances, mostly allemandes, courantes and sarabandes, in four key groups (D, A, C and G, respectively) have been selected from the composer's *Les Pièces de clavessin*, published in 1670, and the famous *Bauyn* manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Rés. Vm⁷ 674–5). The opening D major group, for example, comprises eight pieces in the following order: two allemandes, a courante, a sarabande, two courantes, a pavanne and a sarabande. This seeming lack of variety in genres is compensated for by much stylish playing, fine embellishments and creative registration, such as the refreshing use of the 4' stop in the 'Courante de Madame' (no.3). The 1635 Ioannes Ruckers harpsichord, which survives with its original beautiful soundboard decoration, was impeccably restored by John Phillips in 2005 to its mid-18th-century disposition. The characteristic grainy Ruckers sound, resonant yet transparent and with a wide spectrum of colours throughout its range, brings out the contrapuntal texture and allows nuanced articulation. The low pitch (A392) sets a reflective mood and intimate sound, which is particularly effective for pieces like the 'Pavane l'entretien des Dieux' (no.24). The unequal temperaments (quarter-comma meantone and *tempérament ordinaire*) give rise to many plaintive melodic and harmonic moments. Flint's refined playing would almost certainly have won the approval of the 17th-century critic Jean Le Gallois who, in his famous 1680 letter to Mademoiselle Regnault de Solier, provides us with vivid descriptions of Chambonnières's manner of playing (see D. Fuller, 'French harpsichord playing in the 17th century—after Le Gallois', *Early Music*, iv/1 (1976), pp.22–6). Excerpts from this letter are reproduced by Flint in her essay, which broadly traces Chambonnières's illustrious career from the provinces to Paris, and to his ultimate fall from grace.

Flint's **Elizabeth Jacquet de La Guerre: Complete works for harpsichord** (Plectra PL21003, issued 2010, 133') has many features in common with her Chambonnières

disc, including the use of another historical Ioannes Ruckers instrument (also restored by John Phillips) and her scrupulous treatment of the musical details. The harpsichord used here was originally built in 1627 with two non-aligned keyboards and two registers. It was subsequently modified (*ravalé*) by Nicolas Blanchet in 1707 to its present-day disposition of two aligned keyboards and a compass of GG/BB-c''', but without altering the form and structure of the original instrument. It is thus a perfect fit for La Guerre's harpsichord music, published in two collections in 1687 and 1707. In this recording, one manuscript piece, the 'Menuet de Mlle La Guerre' from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Vm⁷ 137321, is inserted between the two suites of the 1707 volume. In her performance, Flint brings out the expressive potential of La Guerre's music to the full, although with a certain abstinence from virtuosity. In my view, pieces such as the Italianized Tocade (disc 1, no.27), La Flamande and the ensuing Chaconne (disc 2, nos.1 and 7) could have been delivered with more fire, but on the whole Flint's nuanced dance rhythms, flexible timing and sensitive touch make for very enjoyable listening. Notes by Catherine Cessac critically place La Guerre's harpsichord music in the wider context of the culture and background of its time.

Three discs bring into focus the music of Balbastre, although each offers a different selection of works and interpretation. Although Balbastre's life and works have been extensively studied, his real identity has been something of a mystery until recently. Evidence presented by Erik Kocevar (in *Grand Jeu* (Dijon), xxxii–xxxiv (2000), pp.9–11) unequivocally identifies this musician as Claude Balbastre (1724–99), who has often been mistaken for his younger brother Claude-Bénigne (1727–before 1737) (I am indebted to Bruce Gustafson for clarifying remaining doubts on the identity of Balbastre). The music on all three CDs, whether said to be by Claude or Claude-Bénigne, in fact belongs to the same composer (Claude Balbastre). In **Balbastre: Pièces de clavecin (1759)** (Chandos CHAN0777, rec 2005, 76'), Sophie Yates presents the Dijonnais's *Premier livre* (1759) in its entirety. The book, consisting of 17 pieces of wildly contrasting character, precisely captures the mid-18th-century Parisian sensibility, such as the composer's use of fanciful titles, whether to honour his patrons (as in the opening overture 'La de Caze') or to create musical portraits of dignitaries or his acquaintances, thereby following in the footsteps of Couperin and Rameau. Both Balbastre's music and what we know of his preferences for keyboard instruments (principally from Charles Burney, who visited his residence in 1770) call for an instrument with sharp contrasts but also plenty

of nuances in between. As I have remarked elsewhere (*Eighteenth-Century Music*, ix/1 (2012), pp.144–6), the double-manual harpsichord by Andrew Garlick, which is a replica of an instrument by Jean-Claude Goujon (Paris, 1748), is an excellent choice for Yates, whose competent, elastic and imaginative playing successfully forges convincing performances that convey a clear message of profundity rather than frivolity.

In **Claude-Bénigne Balbastre: Music for harpsichord** (Naxos 8.572034–35, rec 2008, 150'), Elizabeth Farr brings together Balbastre's manuscript and printed works into one collection. Her compilation includes all 17 works of the *Premier livre* (1759), an identical selection to that on Yates's CD; a number of pieces extracted from the *Livre contenant des pieces de different genre d'orgue et de clavecin* (1749; see the facsimile reprint (Geneva, 1999) with an important introduction by Denis Herlin); four transcriptions of Rameau's opera *Pygmalion* (1748); the *Prélude* (1777); and the famous 'Marche des Marseillois et l'air Ça-ira' (1792). Farr recorded on a sumptuous harpsichord by Keith Hill that is (extraordinarily) equipped with a 16' stop. This instrument was not based on any historical prototype, as no such instruments from Balbastre's time have survived. Hill's motivation for building this instrument was simply a desire to hear what the music would sound like on a Ruckers-type harpsichord fitted with a 16' stop. To my ears, the added resonance is a mixed blessing. Although some pieces, such as the toccata-like *Prélude* (disc 2, no.15), benefit from the gain in power and the expanded range of timbres, others suffer from the heavier keyboard action, as reflected by Farr's tempos, which are noticeably slower than those of Yates and Zimmer (below). The overture to Rameau's *Pygmalion* is a case in point: Farr takes roughly one minute longer than the other two. At this speed, the feel of four beats to a bar, rather than two (as implied by the time signature), is almost inevitable, and only Farr's exceptional musicality prevents the music from sounding sluggish.

Catherine Zimmer's 'special interest in exploring unknown territories' has led to the release of **Rameau, Balbastre, Royer: Aires d'opéra accomodés pour le clavecin** (L'Encelade ECL1001, rec 2010, 76'). The pieces in this anthology are mostly derived from a late 18th-century manuscript entitled 'Recueil d'airs choisis de plusieurs Operas accomodés pour Le Clavecin par Mr. Balbastre, Organiste de la Paroisse St. Roche de Paris' (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Vm⁷ 2108). This miscellaneous collection contains 48 pieces of great variety (for a detailed inventory, see B. Gustafson and D. Fuller, *A catalogue of French harpsichord music 1699–1780*

(Oxford, 1990), pp.296–8). It is the principal source for Rameau's 'Petits marteaux' (no.19), and contains one piece by Domenico Scarlatti (no.18), entitled 'Air de Scarlaty' (κ95). Many of the operatic transcriptions are probably among those that Balbastre showcased at the Concert Spirituel between 1755 and 1782. From this collection, Zimmer extracts her own selection of concert pieces, competently performed with sharp contrasts, a certain youthfulness and expressive gestures on the beautiful French double-manual harpsichord by Martine Argellies, a replica of a mid-18th-century Goujon judiciously tuned to the d'Alembert-Rousseau temperament. The three Royer pieces at the end are a sort of encore, and will surely win Zimmer more fans. My only quibble is with the liner notes, which provide only sketchy details of the background of the music and the sources.

That operatic transcriptions are an inexhaustible pool from which harpsichordists can draw repertory for performance is further demonstrated by Christophe Rousset in **Jean-Philippe Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*** (Ambroisie AM152, rec 2007, 63'). This opera-ballet, premièred in 1735, was published by Boivin as four concerts. Rousset concurs with Gustafson and Fuller (1990) that not all of the pieces in this collection were intended for the harpsichord. In this recording, Rousset has challenged himself to include some 30 pieces, including those previously foregone by editors and players because of seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Rousset's challenge is at least partially lessened by the splendid 1761 Jean-Henry Hemsch harpsichord, currently housed at Cité de la Musique in Paris, which has largely survived in its original state. Its full specification of 61 notes (FF–f'''), three registers (2 × 8', 1 × 4', buff stop, *peau de buffle*) and sophisticated sonorities demonstrate the best of the mature French school of harpsichord building. The success of Rousset's performance is largely the result of his impeccable musical and technical prowess, and he evokes similar qualities observed in my earlier review of his recording of Joseph-Nicolas-Pancrace Royer (*Early Music*, xxxviii/1 (2010), pp.160–4). The liner notes provide insightful comments on individual pieces (by Rousset) and detailed information on this unique instrument (by Éric de Visscher).

Ewald Demeyere rescues from obscurity an unusually rich literature in **18th-century Flemish harpsichord music** (Challenge Classics CC72528, rec 2011, 74'). As Demeyere comments in his scholarly notes, the Flemish repertory is known mainly through the music of Joseph-Hector Fiocco (1703–41) (interested readers may refer to *Early Music*, xxxvi/4 (2008), pp.654–5, for my review of Demeyere's recording of Fiocco's *Pièces de clavecin*

(c.1730)). With this album, Demeyere breaks new ground by bringing forth hidden gems by anonymous and obscure figures such as Josse Boutmy (1697–1779), Dieudonné Raick (1703–64), F. I. de Boeck (1697?–1775?), Ferdinand Staes (1748–1809) and Charles-Joseph van Helmont (1715–90). The disc contains eleven groups of works selected from the manuscript and printed collections of the Antwerp Conservatory Library, adeptly performed on the exquisite Joannes Daniel Dulcken harpsichord in the Vleeshuis Museum, Antwerp. A mix of Italian and French influences is blended into the musical language of the Flemish masters, but distinct melodic, harmonic and timbral idioms set this repertory clearly apart. The Glockenspiel allegro (no.11), for example, refreshingly evokes the sound of the carillon accompanied by the musette, bringing to mind 'La Castelmoré' by Balbastre. The 'Flemish andante texture' (no.13) is another delightful feature developed by Flemish composers. The musical selections of the obscure de Boeck (nos.14–16) are characterized by their captivating rhythms; those of Raick (nos.6–9) by a joyful verve. In all, kudos is due to Demeyere for reviving interest in the varied Flemish harpsichord repertory.

The last two albums demonstrate opposing concepts of chamber music in 18th-century France. For both aesthetic and practical reasons, composers ranging from Jacquet de la Guerre to Jean-Joseph Mondonville allowed flexible instrumentation in their chamber collections. In the preface to his *Concerts Royaux* (1722), for example, François Couperin leaves the choice of instruments (strings, winds or a combination) to the discretion of the players. The music can also be performed by harpsichord alone. This fluidity between solo and chamber music is exploited by Emmanuelle Guigues and Sylvia Abramwicz (violons da gamba), Bruno Procopio (harpsichord) and Rémi Cassaigne (theorbo and Baroque guitar) in **Portrait d'Iris: Suites pour viole de gambe et pièces de clavecin** (Paraty 409.212, rec 2009, 68'). The chamber portion consists of the two gamba suites (1728) and the last (14th) concert of *Les Goûts-réunis* (1724). The solo harpsichord music consists of nine pieces arbitrarily chosen from different *ordres* and loosely organized into two conglomerations. The performance, whether solo or chamber, highlights many qualities associated with Watteau's famous painting that inspired the CD's title: gracefulness, elegance, femininity and nuanced dance movements. The seamless ensemble is most evident in the first suite of the 1728 *Pièces de viole* (nos.9–15): while the gamba solo takes on a leading role, the continuo group contributes many improvisatory gestures and florid realizations.

Aapo Häkkinen, Petri Tapio Mattson and Mikko Perkola present a quite different notion of chamber music in **Jean-Philippe Rameau: Pièces de clavecin en concerts (1741)** (ALBA ABCD318, *rec* 2010, 66'). Although Rameau still permits alternative instrumentation in this collection, there are two fundamental differences from Couperin's music. First, the continuo part is entirely removed. Second, and more importantly, all three instruments are allocated an equal share of the virtuoso solo material, which is boldly executed with style and confidence by this excellent group. Of particular interest is the decision to forego the option of playing some of the pieces on the harpsichord alone, even though Rameau sanctions such a practice in his 'Avis' and provides alternative solo harpsichord versions for three of the pieces ('La Livri', 'L'Agaçante' and 'L'indiscrete'). Although the inclusion of the harpsichord solo versions would perhaps have lent greater variety to the sonorities, the excitement generated by the synergy and confluence exhibited in this collaboration is an achievement that will be envied by many.

Websites

ALBA www.alba.fi

Ambrosie www.ambrosiemusic.com

Challenge Classics www.challenge.nl

Chandos www.chandos.net

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