

{Recording review  
danielkswalden@gmail.com}  
{note to setter: please replace {flat} with the accidental}

**Daniel Walden**

**Expanding the conversation: new recordings of Italian Baroque and *galant* repertory**

The ubiquitous titans of late 17th- and 18th-century Italian string music—Corelli, Vivaldi, Tartini, Locatelli, Scarlatti, *et alia*—take a back seat in this recent spate of recordings in order finally to leave room for some of the lesser-known craftsmen to shine. The composers recorded here have attracted renewed musicological interest in recent decades, yet many of them have remained woefully underrepresented in discographies until now. Each of these albums presents a distinctive case for why recuperation is timely.

Four of these albums constitute individual portraits of composers experimenting with the *galant* style. Their names will likely be unfamiliar to casual listeners, and a great many of the pieces on these recordings are in fact world premieres. This may be because these works had previously fallen into the gap separating the safer, more familiar territories of ‘Baroque’ and ‘Classical’. It may also be because they demand a particular type of attention. Those thirsty for Baroque melodrama or narrative may find this music superficial or trifling, while those with a taste for Classical formalism or intellectual rigour might consider its schematic architecture lacking in complexity, even dinky. The artistry of this music resides at the surface, with focus directed towards the compositional craft with which all tastefully formed component parts have been balanced to one another. It is the musical answer to *sprezzatura*, that essential quality of ‘studied carelessness’ typical of the courtly environment whence it came—of a world in which appearance was everything.

One such case study is Duo Sarti’s recording of Giovanni Battista Somis, **Sonate da camera Opus II per violino e cembalo** (Tactus TC 681908, *rec* 2015, 80’), featuring 12 sonatas that manage to combine virtuosic showmanship, cosmopolitanism and poise despite their pared-down instrumentation. Somis was a foundational figure for the development of the Piedmontese violin style, and his influence was felt broadly through Germany and France: Jean-Marie Leclair was a star pupil of his when in Paris as a member of the ducal entourage, while Johann Georg Pisendel dutifully copied each of these sonatas by hand for study and performance. Roberto Noferini (violin) and Chiara Cattani (harpsichord) bring great passion to their performance, attempting to convince listeners that this is music that should be ‘regarded as a cornerstone of violin literature’, as Cattani claims in her informative liner notes. The structure of these works is generally formulaic: first movements are lyrical Adagios or Largos, peppered with moments of chromatic surprise; second movements are bolder, featuring flashy passagework and densely contrapuntal writing; third movements are more restrained, well humoured and capricious. Cattani’s continuo is remarkably inventive throughout, although Noferini’s control of both intonation and line occasionally falters at technically challenging moments. The *galant* style comes naturally to him, however, and each sonata concludes in a strong manner.

Not all of these CDs make claims like Cattani’s about canonicity—indeed, far from it. Open the liner notes to Ensemble Armoniosa’s recording of Giovanni Benedetto Platti’s **Six trio sonatas** (MDG 903 1978-6, *issued* 2016, 65’), and you will find the acknowledgement that this is music by someone who ‘is not to be numbered among the great composers of this epoch’. But do not let that deter you, for this selection from the 22 trio sonatas written for the unusual

combination of violin and cello with continuo is not without its own modest merits. Platti was born 1697 in Padua, entered the Schönbron court in Würzburg in 1722, and remained there until his death in 1763. He served for several decades alongside another, far better known artist from the Veneto: Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, who was hired in the 1750s to complete frescoes at the courtly palace in the Würzburg Residence. The ceiling of the Imperial Hall is furnished with Tiepolo's largest and most lavish fresco, and Platti must have been present when it was painted. Look in this music for any analogue to Tiepolo's auroral pinks, blues and yellows in this recording, and you may be disappointed, as Platti's musical palette is somewhat drab by comparison. But Francesco and Stefano Cerrato (violin and cello) do the best they can with an incisive performance of the solo lines that clearly articulates the formal architecture. Five of the six sonatas are in four sections, alternating between slow and fast movements, with the sole exception of a three-movement Sonata in C minor, WD694, that is presented in a striking fashion without any chordal continuo. This proves to be one of the highlights, alongside the final two tracks, highly contrasting, which present the lyrical Siciliana and speedy Gavotta of the Sonata in A major, WD683, bringing the disc to an ebullient close.

Cello retains centre stage in a disc featuring Nicola Porpora and Giovanni Battista Costanzi's **6 cello sonatas** (Brilliant Classics 95708, *issued* 2016, 57'), performed by Adriano Maria Fazio on solo cello with Katarzyna Solecka (violin), Anna Camporini (cello) and Pedro Alcacer (harpsichord). Porpora's main career was as an operatic and vocal composer, zigzagging across London, Dresden and Vienna as he sought various positions in aristocratic retinues. In this capacity, he was a competitor to Handel and Hasse and a teacher to Farinelli and Haydn. But he was also a composer of instrumental music, author of a considerable number of sonatas, *sinfonie* and concertos emblematic of the *galant* style. Each of the sonatas recorded here comprises a similar structure: four compact movements, alternating slow and fast, featuring melodic lines restrained in virtuosity yet evocative of the vocal style. Adriano Maria Fazio presents the solo line with considerable facility, but he is not always well matched. The first exchange of *amoroso* melodies that opens the Sonata no.1 in C major is lacking in chemistry between Fazio and Solecka, and the situation from there is not helped by a series of unusual decisions that seem to have been made during the production, editing and mastering process. Fazio is close-miked throughout, but the rest of his ensemble blurs into the background, stifling the possibility of meaningful communication between players. No explanation for this choice is to be found in the note from the album's producer contained within the liner notes. He merely tells us that the guiding principle of this CD, whose cover is graced by a mysterious shirtless man (is it Fazio?), was to 'illuminate the fertile nudity of one's own mystical *core* through sonic collisions'—whatever that means. We can only guess that the performers stayed fully clothed during the recording process.

Porpora's successor at the Conservatorio di Santa Maria di Loreto, the Neapolitan composer Francesco Durante (1684–1755), is featured in Ensemble Imaginaire's presentation of the composer's complete **Concertos for strings** (Brilliant Classics 95542, *issued* 2017, 98'). Durante is best known as a mentor to one of the most important generations of operatic composers—Pergolesi, Jommelli, Traetta, Paisiello, among many others—as well as an essential source for the rules of *partimenti*, but this album presents one the strongest cases yet for the high calibre of his compositions in their own right. Conductor Cristina Corrieri distinguishes her approach to the works both by presenting all nine concertos, including a sprightly Concerto in B{flat} recorded here for the first time, as well as by opting to feature only one musician to a part. The result pays off tremendously, as her lithe band of musicians performs with verve and

impeccable ensemble. Durante comes across as a composer of considerable contrast: juxtapose the tender opening of the first movement of Concerto no.1 to the acerbic wit of its final movement. Most impressive is the rollercoaster ride of the first movement of Concerto no.8, 'La Pazzia', whose total length stands at more than the three movements of the entire Concerto no.5 in A major combined. This recording should serve as a touchstone for future performances of the *galant* style.

The three compilation albums featuring UK-based ensembles are far more heavily weighted to the Baroque. Let us begin with a CD of many beginnings. Charivari Agréable's **Avanti l'opera: an A-Z of Italian Baroque overtures** (Signum Classics SIGCD383, *rec* 2013, 63') presents an overview of overtures to Italian operas from the later Baroque. A = Tomas Giovanni Albinoni, Z = Pietro Andrea Zani, but there are plenty more alphabetical stops along the way: Giovanni Bononcini, Antonio Caldara, Giovanni Legrenzi and Alessandro Scarlatti among quite a few others. Kah-Ming Ng, director of the Oxford-based ensemble, explains in the liner notes that his idea was to provide 'a sampling of a rich, yet untapped, genre—of independent instrumental works, lucidly crafted for the purpose of turning heads'. His musicians play with equanimity and aplomb, with especially strong showings from the winds including natural trumpeters Simon Desbruslais and Will Russell. The final result is consistently grit-free, but also rather curious, as placing so many head-turners in a row may be the auditory equivalent of crying wolf too many times. Exceptional moments still manage to stand out: among these are the softly sustained opening of Bernardo Pasquini's *L'Idalma*, the capricious strings that introduce *Gl'inganni felici* by Carlo Francesco Pollaro, and the hushed middle section of Alessandro Scarlatti's *La caduta di Decemviri*, accompanied with great sensitivity on guitar by Richard MacKenzie.

A very different sort of balance is struck in the programme for La Serenissima's spectacular latest recording, **The Italian job** (Avie AV2371, *issued* 2017, 76'), most recent winner of the 2017 Baroque Instrumental Gramophone Award. The bigger names of the Baroque have returned, although the works representing them are lesser known: Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Concerto in E (D51), the dramatic *Sinfonia to Santa Beatrice d'Este* by Arcangelo Corelli showcasing strings alone, and two concertos for winds by Antonio Vivaldi, a composer without whom of course no Serenissima project would be complete. Ringleader Adrian Chandler has put together a large ensemble that miraculously manages to sound supple throughout Antonio Caldara's *Sinfonia* in C major, a work rife with rhythmic play, yet has no trouble stomping its foot in Vivaldi's rollicking Concerto 'alla rustica' in G major, RV151. The solo playing in the concertos is invariably first rate. Peter Whelan (bassoon), Gail Hennessy (oboe) and Rachel Chaplin (oboe) elicit fantastic variety from their instruments, yet it is Chandler's performance of the Tartini that particularly stands out, especially for the compassionate lyricism of the 'Grave: Tortorella bacie...' set against a gently undulating ensemble composed only of upper strings. The whole album is brought to a close with Torelli's outsized *Sinfonia* in C major for a battery of four trumpets, timpani, two oboes, two bassoons, two violins, two cellos and continuo band, written to fill the acoustic of the Basilica di San Petronio in Bologna. An appropriately monumental close to an altogether smashing album.

Chandler has joked that the name of his recording alludes to the famous 1969 comedy thriller because he takes after the character Charlie Croker, striving to 'blow the bloody doors off' the Baroque. One might certainly say this is also achieved by Rachel Podger and Brecon Baroque's **Grandissima gravita** (Channel Classics CCS SA 39217, *issued* 2017, 69'), featuring fiery renditions of five violin sonatas by Tartini, Vivaldi, Pisendel, and Francesco Maria

Veracini. The name of the album is taken from a performance instruction in the introduction of Veracini's Sonata in G minor, op.2 no.5, beginning with an austere melodic line that in Podger's hands exerts such a powerful gravitational force that it seems to warp the rest of the recording into its field. These sonatas are remarkably varied, at turns solemn and joyous, monodic and densely contrapuntal, sparse and virtuosic. Her ensemble, consisting of Alison McGillivray (cello) Martin Świątkiewicz (harpsichord) and Daniele Caminiti (lute and guitar) renders ardent performances; Pisendel's Sonata for violin and harpsichord in C minor is particularly strong, with its deep pedal tones and sparkling accompanimental textures. This music has never sounded so exhilarating.

Mark Seow's quirky liner notes to this disc consist of an imaginary dialogue among all four composers of the sonatas explaining how they took after both Corelli's models and one another. The manifold connections among these five works are even more richly imagined in Brecon Baroque's performances. Place this album alongside the other six reviewed here, and the confabulation suddenly transforms into a colloquium testifying to the virtues of this remarkably fertile period of musical history, and featuring a colourful cast of characters ranging from firebrands, conservatives, contrapuntalists, melodists, and courtiers to rebels. One can only hope that other performers will follow the lead of these artists by continuing to add to the conversation.

### **Websites**

*Avie* [www.avierecords.com](http://www.avierecords.com)

*Brilliant Classics* [www.brilliantclassics.com](http://www.brilliantclassics.com)

*Channel Classics* [www.channelclassics.com](http://www.channelclassics.com)

*MDG (= Dabringhaus und Grimm)* [www.mdg.de](http://www.mdg.de)

*Signum Classics* [www.signumrecords.com](http://www.signumrecords.com)

*Tactus* [www.tactus.it](http://www.tactus.it)