



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Bach: Sonatas & Partitas. Fabio Biondi. Naïve.

“On one staff, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.”

Brahms wrote these words about Chaconne, the final movement of Bach’s Partita No. 2 for violin solo. This feeling is widely shared. Almost all violinists see Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas as one of the summits of their repertoire. Surely when I, with the confidence of youth, chose the Chaconne from the second Partita as the centerpiece of my graduation recital from undergraduate school, I was conscious that I was presuming to approach one of the high points of music altogether. When the LP made recording these extended works plausible, a veritable flood of albums appeared. By now there is an almost baffling multiplicity, modern virtuoso style and historically informed performances (HIP, as people have come to call this approach) as well.

Biondi is a specialist in Baroque music and the founder of the Baroque ensemble Europa Galante. Now at age 60, he is presenting his mature view of these works. For all of his position as a Baroque expert, these recordings are intermediate between the completely modern and the obsessively historic. He eschews the half-tone-flat (A=415Hz) pitch

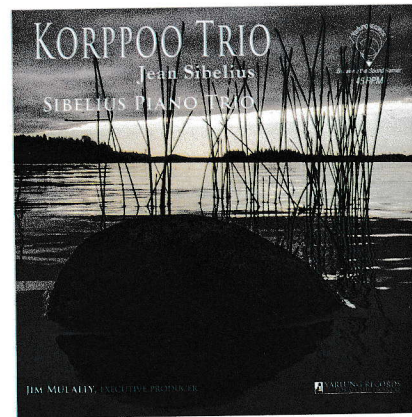
common with the historically minded performers. (This is not to say that the performance is uniformly “in tune”: quite a few of the more demanding passages have lapses of intonation precision by the standards of, say, Mullova.) He is far from the vibrato intensity of say Hilary Hahn’s recordings, but he uses more than the vibrato-less Baroque ideal. And notably, he adds elements of improvisation and ornamentation of his own, especially on the repeated material. These are performances with a definite identity and individuality to them, in sometimes surprising ways. The musical ideas are unusual—this is neither the standard modern virtuoso view nor the standard HIP approach. Biondi presents a flexible and personalized view of the works, with his own versions of things like arpeggiation of chords (bariolage). He also uses a great deal of rhythmic freedom and tempo variation, and even rubato, with abundant agogic accents.

The recording was made using Schoeps M2 capsule microphones, which are extraordinarily flat in response. The tone revealed by this tonal transparency is, however, somewhat different from usual mainstream violin sound, having a somewhat whistle-y quality much of the time.

The recording has a pleasing ambience, but don’t expect the sonic magnificence of the sonically incomparable recording of the second partita done by Kavi Alexander of Water Lily Acoustics of Arturo Delmoni’s performance of the second partita, with its cathedral-like acoustic grandeur.

If you are looking for an unusual view, you will enjoy the individualistic flourishes here, but for a single version for the ages, I would try Mullova for something along the lines of HIP but with truly virtuoso technique. For a modern view, try Ehnes or Tetzlaff; from former generations, try Grumiaux or Szeryng; or, if you want something distinctive but very deep, try Szigeti. There are many riches to explore. **Robert E. Greene**

Further Listening: Bach: Sonatas and Partitas, arr. for eight-string guitar (Paul Galbraith)



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Sibelius: Korppoo Trio. Sibelius Piano Trio. Yarlung (LP).

With some planned recording sessions shelved because of the pandemic, Yarlung has been taking the time to issue some of their existing recordings on 45-rpm platters. Mark Lehman reviewed the original 2-CD set that included this trio in Issue 268, calling Yarlung’s work “the epitome of sonic realism.” Hold onto your earlobes, because the vinyl knocks the CD into a cocked hat. The clarity is still there, but the vinyl—mastered by Bernie Grundman—offers more of the hall’s resonance, a more relaxed atmosphere, and a much sweeter tone. I’m gobsmacked at the difference. The sole, minor drawback is having to flip the disk mid-Andante. Sibelius was 22 when he wrote this fresh, outdoorsy trio for himself and his siblings. He was a fine violinist and wrote himself a fairly showy part, though the whole trio is clearly meant to be put together without too much struggle. He nods Beethoven’s way several times but never strays from his own path; some trills and tremolos in the Andante are spine-tinglingly inventive. The outer movements are positively perky, a quality I had yet to hear from Sibelius. I like a richer violin sound, but otherwise the performers are fantastic. Don’t miss this. **SE**

Further Listening: Sibelius & Delius: String Quartets (Fitzwilliam Quartet/London/LP)

Avik Acoustics
 avik-acoustics.com
 Absolare
 absolare.com
 Acoustic Signatures
 acoustic-signatures.com
 Acoustic Soundscapes
 acoustic-soundscapes.com
 Aesthetix
 aesthetix.net
 Analog Manufaktur
 sierrasound.com
 Anthem
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