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Bach and the South German Tradition Vol. II

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 01.02.2012)

The album title given in the above headnote is a bit confusing. Volume 2 suggests this is a second release of Baroque organ works by composers of a South German school, while the only companion disc I find listed is titled “Bach and the North German Tradition,” which, by the way, does not appear to have been reviewed here. So, this then would appear to be not a second volume of organ works by South German composers, but a second volume of organ works by German composers, the first of which features, along with Bach, North Germans Buxtehude and Böhm.

This is primarily a disc of organ music, but according to Martin Neu’s informative booklet note, Pachelbel’s fugues to the Magnificat were composed as organ versets for a Vespers service in which the Magnificat’s verses were performed alternately by the cantor and the organ. The present recording offers a more or less—in reality, less than more—realization of such a performance, calling upon tenor Wilfried Rombach to chant or intone the alternating verses. I say “less than more” because a 1651 description of the procedure by Sigismund Theophil Staden, organist at the Nuremberg Church of St. Lorenz, gives an account in which a choir of boys was also involved in alternating with the organ and cantor.

On the disc, Bach’s Fugue on the Magnificat comes at the end of Pachelbel’s work, taking the position of the “Gloria Patri,” so it too features a bit of chanting by Rombach. Why Pachelbel didn’t provide for this last verse himself is not explained by Neu, but I gather that he decided Bach’s fugue made a fitting conclusion and simply tacked it onto the end. There’s no indication of any actual connection between Pachelbel’s Magnificat and Bach’s fugue.

The rest of the program is pretty standard Baroque organ fare. Muffat’s Toccata sexta is the sixth number in a set of 12 toccatas composed and collected under the title of Apparatus musico-organisticus. Johann Caspar Kerll (1627–1693) is represented by one of his surviving keyboard works, the Toccata I. Today, Kerll is recognized mainly as a composer of organ music and an important forerunner of Bach, but much of his music, including 11 operas and many of his vocal works, are lost.

Johann Jakob Froberger (1616–1667) was regarded in his day as Germany’s leading keyboard virtuoso, organist, and a composer whose influence extended far and wide. Generally credited with being the father of the keyboard suite, he is represented on the current disc by his Capriccio XII.

The Bach works are familiar, the Trio Sonata in C Major, being No. 5 from his set of six trio sonatas for organ, BWV 525–530. The Toccata and Fugue in F Major, BWV 540, may not have reached the staggering number of recordings—some 300!—of the

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Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565, but with over 50 of its own it hasn't gone begging. Neu splits the toccata and the fugue apart, presenting the toccata on the first track of the disc and the fugue on the last.

Two different organs are used for the recording, and they're both beauties. The Froberger and Kerll pieces are performed on the historic choir organ by Blasius Bernauer (1776) in Laufenburg, Switzerland, while the remaining works are played on the new Metzler organ (2005) in Stuttgart-Obertürkheim. Specifications for each instrument are given in the booklet.

The recording is nothing short of magnificent, and Martin Neu demonstrates more than ample technique and musical intelligence in the application of his organs' stops and registrations. I must make note, however, of just one issue regarding the accompanying booklet, and it's something I've mentioned once or twice in the past, though I don't recall if it was in connection with this particular label. The booklet's paper has been treated with some chemical that stinks to high heaven. It's probably not toxic to inhale, but if you've ever experienced the odor emanating from a mill that processes wood pulp for paper products, you'll know the sickening smell I'm describing. Setting the booklet business aside—and I mean as far aside as possible—Neu's Audite SACD is strongly recommended for excellent playing and superior recording.

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