



Notari & Fontana - Early baroque music from the Basilica Palatina Mantova

aud 97.797

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Recommended

The disc under review here does not come with a title. The frontispiece just mentions the names of the two composers whose music is performed. On page 3 of the booklet we find the addition "Early Baroque Music from the Basilica di Santa Barbara, Mantua". That does refer to the venue where the recording took place, as the two composers have nothing to do with Mantua whatsoever.

Those who have a fairly good knowledge of baroque repertoire, will undoubtedly know Giovanni Battista Fontana (1589-1630) and have almost certainly heard music from his pen. He is one of the most famous composers of the early baroque period. When this repertoire was discovered, in the early days of historical performance practice, his sonatas were among the most frequently performed and were recorded several times. In particular recorder players, always on the look for music, found his sonatas irresistible. Although Fontana was a violinist by profession and may have conceived his sonatas for his own instrument in the first place, it is fully legitimate to play them on other instruments. The title of the collection from which they are taken - the only printed edition of his works - specifically mentions the possibility of using other instruments. Composers were mostly rather pragmatic and were interested in a wide dissemination of their works, which was more likely if they did not confine themselves to writing for one specific instrument.

In contrast to Fontana, Angelo Notari (1566-1663) is hardly known. His name now and then appears in anthologies, but for the only disc that has ever been devoted entirely to him, we have to go back to 1994, when Anthony Rooley and his ensemble The Consort of Musicke recorded the only collection of his work that was printed: Prime musiche nuove, published in London in 1613. Notari was born in Padua and became a member of the Venetian Accademia degli Sprovisti. Otherwise nothing is known about his life before he settled in England in 1610 or 1611. By 1618 he was in the service of Prince Charles.

The collection of 1613 was one of the few sources of Italian music in the monodic style that were available in England. It must have played an important role in the dissemination of the latest developments in Italian music, which was embraced by a few English composers, especially in their songs. The music on the present disc is not taken from this collection, but rather from a manuscript in the British Library,



which may well have been compiled by Notari and may include some pieces from his own pen. It mainly consists of compositions by Claudio Monteverdi and other representatives of the 'new style'. Some of these are arranged for other scorings, in particular instruments.

The programme that Julia Fritz recorded focusses on original pieces that may have been written by Notari himself. These are mostly specimens of the genre known as diminutions: a (vocal) line is split up in notes of shorter value and ornaments are added to what the original composer had written. Numerous such diminutions were written in the last decades of the 16th and the first decades of the 17th century. Several treatises were published from which up-and-coming performers could learn how to play diminutions. An example of a vocal piece that was often the subject of diminutions is Cipriano de Rore's madrigal *Ancor che col partire*. In the track-list one will also find well-known titles of a popular song (*La Monica*) and melodic formulas, that were frequently used as the foundation for virtuosic variations, such as *Il Ruggiero* and *La Romanesca*. These formulas could be used either in the upper voice or in the bass.

The recording of pieces by Notari is rare, and that alone makes this disc an important addition to the many that are devoted to early Italian baroque repertoire. There is another factor that strongly contributes to the attractiveness of this disc: the organ of the Basilica di Santa Barbara in Mantua is one of the most interesting historical organs that has been preserved more or less intact. Italian organs of that time have a unique palette of colours that one won't find in organs elsewhere. And its disposition is certainly no match for the positive organs that are usually played in recordings of this kind of repertoire. Notable is that several of the black keys are split. There are different keys for D-sharp/E-flat and G-sharp/A-flat. This way it was possible to achieve the then favoured pure thirds in meantone temperament, even in more distant tonalities. Obviously it limits the freedom of the player of a wind instrument, which has few possibilities of being retuned (in contrast to string instruments). For this recording Julia Fritz made use of her own collection of recorders which fit the pitch (a=466 Hz) and the 1/4 comma meantone temperament of the organ.

All these factors - interesting repertoire, appropriate instruments, temperament and pitch - are of no use, if the performances are uninteresting. This repertoire may be of high quality and stylistically intriguing, but it is certainly not easy to perform, both technically and with regard to interpretation. I am happy to say that this disc is as exciting as I was hoping it would be. It has been a long time since I have heard Fontana's sonatas, and it has struck me how good they are and how nice they are to listen to, if they are played well. And here they are played extremely well. Julia Fritz produces a penetrating but beautiful tone, which blends perfectly with the organ, which itself is a joy to listen to. Johannes Hämmerle knows exactly how to use it in such a way that it helps to make the music shine. Add to that the excellent singing of Magdalena Harrer, who is impressive in her diminutions, and the fine harp playing by Reinhild Waldek, and you have a disc to treasure. It helps that Notari's pieces are really great stuff. It is a mystery to me why his music is receiving so little attention. Its inclusion here is another reason why this disc deserves a special recommendation.

RECOMMENDED

Giovanni Battista FONTANA (1589-1630)
Angelo NOTARI (1566-1663)
Early Baroque Music from the Basilica di Santa Barbara, Mantua
 Julia Fritz (recorder)
 Johannes Hämmerle (organ)
 Magdalena Harer (soprano), Reinhild Waldek (harp)
 Rec. 2020, Basilica di Santa Barbara, Mantua, Italy
 Texts without translation included
AUDITE 97.797 [71:43]



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Johan van Veen
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