

## Recordings for all seasons

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John Cunningham

### Recordings for all seasons

This review covers a sextet of recordings from 2013 to 2021, traversing repertoire from the early 16th to the early 19th centuries. Male and female composers are represented, well-known and obscure (to varying degrees). The genres and instruments are diverse, as is the range of performance contexts from which they arose: domestic, salon, café, theatre, royal courts, and pleasure gardens. Some of the music will be familiar to many but the batch also includes several world premiere recordings. While a single thematic thread is thus difficult to find they are, however, all exemplars of high quality.

Given the range of these recordings it seems apt to begin with Forma Antiqua's **Opera Zapico** (Winter & Winter, 910 206-2, *rec* 2013, 61'), a collection of opera pieces, Monteverdi to Mozart, arranged as instrumentals by the Zapico brothers: Aarón (harpsichord, organ), Daniel (theorbo), and Pablo (baroque guitar, archlute), with an excellent supporting cast. The disc includes reimaginings of arias from Mozart, Rameau, Caldara, Landi, Handel, José de Nebra, Cavalli, Monteverdi and Purcell. The disc also includes arrangements of JC Bach's *Artaserse* overture and the chaconne from Purcell's *Fairy Queen*; it ends with a rendition of Belinda's 'Thanks to these lonesome vales' (*Dido and Aeneas*), the chorus sung by the El León de Oro choir. The recording is well produced; the arrangements and performances are modern, lively and imaginative. Widely known arias such as 'Batti, batti, o bel Masetto', and Dido's lament, are given alongside less well-known numbers such as the delightful 'Quella Clizia innamorata' from Caldara's *Il più bel nome*. Naturally much of the emotion of these works derives from the singer and the words, which is hard to replicate (for example, even with the wistful cornetto on 'Lascia ch'io pianga'), but there is nevertheless a certain evocative charm throughout the recording. Despite being a 'Limited-Deluxe-Hardcover-Edition' the disc includes no programme notes, and the booklet offers limited information overall: a missed opportunity to explain the rationale behind this eclectic selection.

The second disc, **Routes du café** (Alpha 543, *issued* 2019, 72'), represents a similar timeframe and geographic spread, but in the name of coffee! In this remarkable offering Ensemble Masques blend east and west, reflecting on coffee's origins in Turkey and subsequent conquering of Europe. The brief liner notes give a fascinating introduction to the cultural impact of coffee. The programme brings us through Paris, London, Constantinople and Leipzig, cities in which the café took strong hold. In each Turkish music is interspersed with local music, highlighting cultural exchange. In Paris we hear the cantata 'Le café' by Nicolas Bernier (1664–1734), who succeeded Charpentier as master of the choristers at Sainte-Chapelle. His cantata is lavish in its praise of coffee, whose 'scent alone is enough to conquer / Mortals who have not experienced your charms'. Its Italianate style presumably reflects Bernier's studies with Caldara. The cantata is bookended by pieces on oud and ney flute by Nâyî Osman Dede, a Sufi contemporary of Bernier and Marin Marais, whose 'Saillie du caffè' from the *Troisième livre de viole* rounds out the Parisian sojourn. The London connection rests on Samuel Pepys' recollection of a meeting with Matthew Locke at the Turk's Head coffee house, represented by a fine rendition of the wonderfully brooding fantasia in D minor from the *Consort in Four Parts*: with its contrasting sections and lively polyphonic interplay it is perhaps an ideal illustration of the sort of caffeine-fuelled debate enjoyed at such establishments. This is prefaced by two new pieces by violist Kathleen Kajiokla inspired by the style of 18th-century Ottoman composers. A brief excursion to late 19th-century Constantinople follows with a piece for the yayli tambur (a type of long-necked bowed Turkish lute) by Tanburi Cemil Bey (1873–1916). Inevitably, perhaps, all coffee roads lead to Bach's famous cantata *Schweigt Stille, plaudert nicht*, BWV211, a humorous disagreement between a father and his daughter over her caffeine habits. The singing is highly enjoyable, individually and in the final trio: Hana Blažíková (soprano) gives a particularly charming performance. There are, of course, many recordings of Bach's cantata (particularly with Emma Kirkby) but this more than holds its own. Overall the disc is a wonderful blend of styles, instruments and musical cultures. The performances are of a high standard and thoroughly enjoyable throughout, vocal and instrumental: the disc offers a refreshingly imaginative blend of works well worth a listen.

When Bach composed his satirical reflections on coffee in early 1730s Leipzig his great contemporary Handel was well-established in London, the site of our next two discs. By 1720 Johann Christoph Schmidt moved with his young family to London, where he (as the anglicized John Christopher Smith) became Handel's amanuensis. His son, of the same name, would later undertake the same role. The younger Smith was also a well-respected composer in his own right, perhaps best known for his operatisations of David Garrick's Shakespearean adaptations of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer*

*Night's Dream* in the 1750s. Smith also wrote several oratorios, which, as so many of his contemporaries in London, have been overshadowed by Handel. In 1740 Smith composed *The Seasons*, based on the same text as used over sixty years later by Haydn: the epic poem *A Hymn on the Seasons* by the Scottish poet James Thomson. As this wonderful recording, **John Christopher Smith: The Seasons** (Christophorus, chr 77382, issued 2014, two discs: 40' and 54'), demonstrates *The Seasons* is an imaginative work that evocatively portrays various depictions of nature. The music is inevitably influenced by Handel, and solidly composed throughout. The performance is overall very enjoyable, especially as the work builds to a climax in the second of the discs. The choral numbers tend to lack clear diction, though the soloists (Emma Kirkby, soprano; Tim Mead, countertenor; Hans Jörg Mamel, tenor; Markus Simon, bass) more than make up for it. Smith's *Seasons* is well worth the listen on its own merits but also adds to our aural picture of early 1740s London when Handel was writing his most famous works.

Born in 1710, two years before the younger Smith, Thomas Augustine Arne was the finest of the native composers working in what might be misleadingly called Handel's London. After his first major success, with the masque *Comus*, in 1738, by the early 1740s Arne was riding high and writing many of the songs for which he is remembered today. The masque *Alfred* (which includes 'Rule Britannia') was staged in 1740, followed by his ever-popular songs for several Shakespeare plays given at Drury Lane. In March 1742 his setting of another masque, Congreve's *The Judgement of Paris*, was given at Drury Lane as an afterpiece to Handel's *Alexander's Feast*. In the 18th century the masque was effectively a short opera in English, with plots typically based on pastoral or classical characters, with comic subplots, scenery and dancing. *The Judgement of Paris* was given only twice in London, though Arne revived it in Dublin in the summer. Congreve's text is best remembered for the 'Music Prize' of 1701, which hastened the departure from London of Gottfried Finger. It is regrettably all too common for English stage works of the 18th century to survive incomplete (if at all), thus hindering modern performances. The full score Arne's setting of *The Judgement of Paris* is lost; it was, however, published in 1744 in the usual short score format, omitting recitatives and all but one of the choruses. Thus for this premiere recording of **The Judgment of Paris** (Dutton Vocalion, cdx 7361, issued 2019, 68') The Brook Street Band, led by John Andrews, turned to the late Ian Spink's masterful 1978 edition, which includes reconstructions of the missing sections (*Musica Britannica*, vol. 42). Arne was rightly proud of the G minor overture and included it as the last of his 1751 collection of overtures. The plot needs little recapitulation. Engaged by Mercury (Anthony Gregory), the shepherd Paris (Ed Lyon) adjudicates a beauty contest between Juno (Gillian Ramm), Pallas Athena (Susanna Fairbairn) and Venus (Mary Bevan) – Venus, of course, prevails and secures the golden apple. The cast is excellent, though Bevan, who shines as Venus, perhaps has the advantage of additionally having some of Arne's finest music in the work (for example, 'Nature fram'd thee sure for loving'). Some of the most enjoyable moments come in Arne's ensembles, such as the trio 'Hither turn thee'. There is much to enjoy in this work, and much to lament in the loss of many of Arne's other stage works. While it is not a masterwork on a par with, say, *Artaxerxes*, it is an excellent illustration of Arne's gift for melody, and of Ian Spink's gift for reconstruction.

Arne also enjoyed a great deal of success at London's pleasure gardens, particularly the grandest of them all: Vauxhall. There throughout the summer months concerts were given each evening, with Arne's songs regularly performed. The next disc, **From Palaces to Pleasure Gardens** (Regent, regcd526, issued 2019, 71') brings to life another aspect of musical life at the gardens, namely the organ. As David Gammie explains in his highly informative liner notes, in the 1730s a bandstand was erected for the orchestra, with a pavilion later added to house a rather grand organ. In this fascinating recording Thomas Trotter plays the 1735 organ of Christ Church, Spitalfields; the organ was built by Richard Bridge, one of the leading organ builders of the day, and restored in 2015. The recording includes into two types of pieces: voluntaries and those suited for performances at 18th-century pleasure gardens. While palaces are unsurprising locations for organs, it is perhaps not the instrument that comes first to mind in relation to the London pleasure gardens. Handel's organ concertos, first performed between the acts of his oratorios in the late 1730s, led to a wave of imitations by native composers: Trotter includes a sparkling performance of his own transcription of op.7 no.4. The disc opens with a reduction by Thomas Billington (d.1832) of a Corelli concerto grosso, arranged by Trotter. The late date of the transcription is testament that Corelli's fame lived longer in England than almost anywhere in Europe. The final concerto takes us from the pleasure gardens to the palace: the last of six concertos published by Johann Christian Bach as his op.1. Originally for harpsichord and strings and dedicated to King George III's wife, Charlotte, the concerto ends with variations on 'God save the King'. The rest of the disc comprises voluntaries by James Hook, Johann Christoph Pepusch, John Stanley and William Russell. Voluntaries

were typically improvised pieces often heard in a liturgical context but also outside it. Born in Norwich in 1746, Hook became organist first at Marylebone Gardens and then at Vauxhall, where his voluntaries may have been performed. Those of Stanley and Russell (both church organists) were most likely intended for church use. German-born Pepusch came to London around the turn of the 18th century and remained until his death, famously setting the tunes for John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. The voluntary is his only surviving keyboard work; as Gammie tells us, its twelve movements provides a stark change of approach to the usual two-movement format as heard in the works of the English composers on the disc, and in the repertoire more widely. Throughout the disc Trotter's playing is technically wonderful but also full of panache and sensitivity at crucial moments.

The final disc is **In the salon of Madame Brillon: Music and Friendship in Benjamin Franklin's Paris** (Acis, apl40158, *issued* 2021, 76), which takes us to the late 18th-century Parisian salon of Anne-Louise Boyvin d'Hardancourt Brillon de Jouy (1744–1824), courtesy of The Raritan Players (Dongmyung Ahn, violin; Rebecca Cypress, harpsichord and square piano; Sonya Headlam, soprano; Eve Miller, cello; Yi-heng Yang, square piano; Steven Zohn, flute). Brillon was a composer and performer, and the dedicatee of works by Boccherini, Johann Schobert and others. In his *Present State of Music in France and Italy* (1773) Charles Burney remarked on her skill on the harpsichord, as well as her personal charm. She was an important figure in the cultural life of Paris, and cultivated a wide social network. Her friends included Benjamin Franklin, who lived in the French capital, while serving as ambassador to France between 1776 and 1785, before becoming president. Brillon built up a substantial music collection in her library. The disc is an imaginative reconstruction of the soundscape of her salon, mixing works dedicated to Brillon (Boccherini, Rigel, Schobert), with those composed by her and those she may have played but certainly knew (Clementi). This encompasses several genres: Boccherini's op.5 no.4 for keyboard and violin; Clementi's op.2 no.3 for keyboard and violin / flute; Rigel's op.14 no.2 for forte-piano and keyboard; Schobert's op.6 no.2 for keyboard, violin and bass. Alongside these works are world premiere recordings of works by Brillon herself. Almost 90 of her compositions survive, though none were published in her lifetime. Among them here are a movement for harpsichord and piano; a keyboard sonata; and five songs for voice and square piano. The playing throughout the recording is excellent. The juxtapositions (professional/amateur, male/female) work well. Rebecca Cypress's liner notes are excellent (Cypress also directs the ensemble): they remind us of the value of the physical entity that is lost amidst the convenience of streaming services. Cypress refreshingly argues that the neglect of Brillon's works is best understood not simply as a mark of her gender but rather because 'it has been difficult for scholars and performers to come to terms with [her] compositions' and her 'decidedly unstudied approach to composition'. The point is well made and taken. It is true that the instrumental pieces include a number of unexpected turns, but in truth the pieces are no less enjoyable for them. The highlights of the disc were, however, Sonya Headlam's expressive renditions of Brillon's songs. Having only scratched the surface of Brillon's works on this disc, the appetite is whetted for more.