



RECORDINGS

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ATTILIO ARIOSTI (1666–?1729)

THE STOCKHOLM SONATAS I: LESSONS AND SONATAS FOR VIOLA D'AMORE

Thomas Georgi (viola d'amore), Lucas Harris (theorbo/archlute/guitar), Joëlle Morton (viola da gamba/great bass viol)
BIS CD 1535, 2006

This is a most enjoyable disc from a skilful performer who seems to revel in the rarity of his instrument and its repertory, ably supported by some excellent continuo playing that manages to be characterful yet unobtrusive, and imaginatively prominent in all the right places. Originally a violinist, American viola d'amore player Thomas Georgi takes the opportunity to present a rewarding portrait of the instrument, both in the performances, for which he uses no fewer than three different instruments with clearly distinct configurations, and in the uncommonly informative (and extensive) liner notes. Add to this almost seventy minutes of music from the Bolognese composer Attilio Ariosti (1666–?1729), who in the 1720s was among the 'renowned triumvirate' of composers employed by the Royal Academy in London, and the result is a significant addition to the recorded repertory of early music. The composer's obscurity today belies his contemporary importance: Burney's 'triumvirate' ranked him alongside Handel and Bonocini, and Ariosti was renowned not only as a composer and virtuoso performer on the viola d'amore but also as an important literary figure and as a diplomat who had access, at various times in his life, to the highest circles of the European aristocracy.

Given the comparative obscurity of the instrument and the composer to which this disc is devoted, there is a reassuringly familiar sound to Ariosti's solos, which are evidently the work of a talented composer who learnt a great deal from his education in Bologna in the 1670s. Such familiarity does not give way to dull routine, however. This is the early eighteenth-century sonata at its best, and there is plenty here to interest those for whom the novelty of the viola d'amore alone is insufficient inducement to seek out this recording. The character of Ariosti's solos is best appreciated in the pleasingly lyrical adagio and witty *Giga* movements that frame the majority of the works; as Georgi comments, the last movement of 'Sonata 7' (track 26) in particular reveals a sense of humour uncommon in the music of Ariosti's contemporaries. There are several other memorable moments too, such as the distinctly rustic tone of the *Allemanda* in *Lezione* III (track 9), and a surprising chromatic turn in the first movement of *Lezione* IV (track 12).

A note about the identity of these works is perhaps needed here, since the title of the disc is potentially somewhat ambiguous in isolation (though perfectly clear from the liner notes). *The Stockholm Sonatas I* reflects the fact that all of the works performed on this disc are to be found in the *Recueil de Pièces pour la Viol d'Amour*, a manuscript of some twenty-one solos by Ariosti copied in London in the 1710s by the Swedish composer Johan Helmich Roman. In fact, though, almost all of the music is also found in Ariosti's much-demanded printed collection (the subscriber list runs to an almost unparalleled twelve pages!) of *Cantates and a Collection of Lessons for the Viol d'Amore*, published in London in 1724. Georgi adds just four movements from the *Recueil* towards the end of the disc, using them to supplement the four movements of the printed *Lezione* VI, which he splits up to create two distinct works. The resulting 'Sonatas', so called to distinguish them from the printed *Lessons*, represent Georgi's reconstruction of two complete solos from the list of contents provided in the *Recueil*; these, Georgi suggests, were dismembered in the selection of movements to be included in the *Lessons* in order to make the resulting works more suitable for performance on the violin.

Ariosti's efforts to make his publication attractive to the violin-playing public are perhaps the best known feature of the *Lessons* today. The works are notated according to a complicated and unique system which uses multiple clefs to enable them to be played on a retuned violin by performers used to four strings tuned in



fifths. Ariosti's 'accordatura' tuning and notation thus enabled players to perfect the music on the familiar violin, before graduating to its performance on the viola d'amore without having to learn new fingering patterns. As a result, Ariosti's style of performance can be recovered in some detail, including his idiosyncratic penchant for playing in the higher positions, which Georgi preserves in his own performances.

The difference in tone that results from this performance practice is audible in the last two 'Sonatas' on the disc, which contrast Ariosti's high-position fingerings with a more conventional style on the repeats. It is far less obvious, however, than the difference between the instruments Georgi performs on, which is a particularly welcome feature of the recording. Three of the *Lessons* are performed on a 1783 instrument with six playing strings and six sympathetic strings by the Neapolitan maker Thomas Eberle, which Georgi believes is the closest set-up to that used by Ariosti himself on the basis of surviving iconographic evidence (there is a portrait in the British Museum). Two more, however, showcase a Viennese instrument with the six metal playing strings and no sympathetic strings favoured in northern Europe in the early eighteenth century. Despite its probable distinction from Ariosti's favoured model, this instrument is chronologically closer to his solos (it is dated 1721) and is likely to be more similar to the instruments played by Roman's Swedish compatriots. While the difference in timbre caused by the absence of the sympathetic strings is significant, to my ear it is if anything the darker, more resonant tone of this instrument that sets it apart more from the later Eberle. For the two reconstructed 'Sonatas' Georgi reverts to a modern seven-string configuration on a 1772 Eberle with sympathetic strings and a much more rounded, projected timbre. The result is an altogether more flamboyant feel to these performances, enhanced by the substitution of the great bass viol instead of the viola da gamba. The corresponding loss of intimacy is perhaps regrettable, though the additional weight given to the bass line is well judged.

The performances are always polished and engaging, with a superb sense of line from all three players and an enjoyably playful attitude towards the many moments of dialogue between the viola d'amore and bass. On track 14 (the Corrente from *Lezione IV*) I felt that a slightly steadier tempo would have improved the intonation during the long passages of figuration in the first strain, but this was exceptional: in general Georgi is fluent and accurate, allowing him to indulge in quite complex divisions which are conceived with a genuine appreciation of the style and tone of the music, and executed with flair. The elaborations of the numerous *petites reprises* are particularly attractive. The varying of the continuo group, which alternates theorbo and archlute and leaves two tracks with plucked continuo alone, is a welcome source of variety, and the use of strummed guitar for the closing *Giga* of each work adds a pleasing rhythmic and timbral vibrancy to these movements, even if it does become somewhat predictable when listening to the set from beginning to end. Overall, then, a firm recommendation; I will return to Ariosti's solos with great pleasure in the future.

ALAN HOWARD



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BALDASSARE GALUPPI (1706–1785)

LA DIAVOLESSA

Kremena Dilcheva (Alto), Matthias Viewig (Baritone), Tom Allen (Tenor), Johnny Maldonado (Countertenor), Bettina Pahn (Soprano), Egbert Junghanns (Bass), Doerthe Maria Sandmann (Soprano)/Lautten Compagny Berlin/Wolfgang Katschner

DeutschlandRadio Berlin LC8492, 2004; two discs

This is a valuable new addition to our understanding of eighteenth-century opera and our repertory of available recordings. *La Diavolessa* was composed in 1755 by Carlo Goldoni and Baldassare Galuppi and