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FRANCESCO SUPRIANI (1678–1753)

PRINCIPLES TO LEARN TO PLAY THE CELLO

Guillermo Turina (baroque cello), Eugenia Boix (soprano), Tomoko Matsuoka (harpsichord)
Cobra 0053, 2016; one disc, 62 minutes

The original title of the compilation from which this recording draws, one of the earliest surviving Italian tutors for the cello, is *Principij da imparare à suonare il violoncello e con 12 Toccate à solo*. A copy of the manuscript is kept in the Biblioteca Conservatorio di Mostra San Pietro a Majella, Naples (MS 6841). The title-page of the manuscript gives the composer's name as Francesco Scipriani, which is also used in *Grove*; this name, however, could also be read as Supriani. Curiously, in other documents, a range of alternative names/transliterations turn up, including Scipriano, Sciprini, Sopriano and Supriano. The liner notes also mention Soprani as another alternative, which seems unlikely given that word's Italian meaning.

Whichever spelling of his name is correct, 'Supriani' was an important figure in Naples in the first decades of the eighteenth century. As a virtuoso cellist, he helped the cello to emerge from its traditional rank of continuo and reach the elevated status of a solo instrument. He and another renowned Neapolitan musician, Francesco Alborea (probably his student), are believed to be among the first cellists to extend the range of the instrument by using the thumb position.

The liner notes claim that Supriani's tutor, which was written c1720, was the first of its kind written especially for the cello. This may be so, but it has to be noted that while Jean Zewalt Triemer's better-known treatise on *Elementary theory and rudiments of playing the violin and violoncello* was only published in 1739 and Michel Corrette's *Méthode pour apprendre le violoncelle* another two years later, the actual pedagogical content of Supriani's work is restricted to a few pages, in which he introduces the fundamental terminology of music as much as that of cello playing. Some rudimentary scales and other exercises follow before the twelve solo pieces mentioned in the title are presented.

The CD's title is catchy, but misleading: of the twenty-seven tracks, only three originate from Supriani's tutor. Another five relate to it in that they are recompositions of toccatas from the manuscript, while the rest of the tracks offer an appealing and wide-ranging selection of Supriani's other works. The choice of the title, which therefore appears to be on thin ground, may have a possible second meaning: the Spanish cellist Guillermo Turina, the *spiritus rector* behind the project, may have considered this an opportunity to demonstrate baroque principles of learning to play the cello. And demonstrate he does, as the toccata movements in particular reveal his technique to be as accomplished as his musicality is appealing.

The title 'toccata' is somewhat unusual in a solo string work. Presumably the composer would have used it in a generic way to indicate a fast-moving, even virtuosic composition written in a free style. Each of Supriani's pedagogical toccatas explores a different aspect of cello playing: for example, Toccata Seconda offers help with practising octaves and frequent string-crossings, and Toccata Quarta with the evenness of oscillating, trill-like notes. The technical skills required to play the pieces, their multifaceted characters and the independent soloistic style are reminiscent of other, slightly earlier, late seventeenth-century Italian compositions: *ricercari* for solo cello by Gianbattista degli Antonii and Domenico Gabrielli. Thus direct comparison to the temporally closer and more renowned, yet stylistically much more sophisticated, solo cello suites by J. S. Bach would be misguided.

Of the twelve toccatas, Turina has elected to record Nos 5, 7 and 12, but not the probably best-known work, No. 10. What makes Supriani's set different from those of his contemporaries is his idea of recomposing each toccata in a highly elaborate fashion and providing it with continuo. (The idea of juxtaposing an original movement and its richly ornamented variation was made famous by each of the four dance movements



and its *double* in J. S. Bach's first Partita for Solo Violin, BWV1002. Supriani's recompositions, however, were not published along with the tutor.) Thus *Toccata settima* becomes *Toccata settima con diminuzione*, and, informatively, two of these related compositions are featured on the CD. This offers a fascinating insight into the performance practice of the time in southern Italy, and I would have welcomed hearing several of the other pairings. As it is, only Nos 5 and 7 include both versions, No. 12 is performed in the toccata original, whereas the elegantly florid versions of Nos 9, 10 and 11 are played without their original solo version.

Turina's soloistic treatment of the toccatas shows that he considers them compositions intended for performance rather than study. The consistent trochaic metre and the recurring triads in No. 7 inspire triumphant fanfares in his playing. At the same time, the gigue-like character of No. 12 would have worked better with more forward motion and a bolder sense of dance-like movement, perhaps emphasizing the natural pulse of the metre; No. 5 also would make a stronger impact if played with more daring fantasy. The ornate recompositions receive a distinctly rubato performing style, which is refreshing. These five movements are often so generously and imaginatively decorated that one can hardly recognize the original unaccompanied versions on which they are based. Though we know the recomposed 'con diminuzione' versions to be from Supriani's hand, I cannot be certain about which of the ornamentations are authorial and which may be the product of Turina's artistic imagination. Turina's playing effortlessly alternates between longer and shorter bow strokes, without applying conventional legato, which is marked carefully in the only published score (*Principij da imparare à suonare il violoncello e con 12 Toccate à solo*, ed. Raffaele Sorrentino (Boscotrecase: Centro di Ricerca e di Sperimentazione Musicale, 2014)). This is a consistent feature of his playing of the toccatas, hinting at a conscious artistic decision. His elegant playing notwithstanding, this feels unnecessarily restrictive, as by the early eighteenth century, legato had become one of the regularly, if not consistently, used articulation marks written out by composers and employed by musicians.

The CD opens and finishes with cello sonatas accompanied by the harpsichordist Tomoko Matsuoka. Both sonatas follow the standard slow-fast-slow-fast four-movement structure of the time. The first, *Sinfonia di violoncello à solo*, is in C major, with its third movement written in A minor ('sinfonia' in the late seventeenth century was used interchangeably with 'sonata'); the second is in A minor with the penultimate movement similarly in the relative key, this time C major. To have one movement out of four in a different tonality is not common in a baroque sonata. It offers the chance to highlight the movement in the divergent key. The performers could have made more of this opportunity, for example, by emphasizing the melancholic soliloquy of the C major sinfonia's *Larghetto*. It is a soulful performance, but in places I missed a more daring emotional involvement from the players. Similarly, the siciliano first movement of the A minor sonata would have gained from its characteristic lilt being a bit more pronounced. Both fast movements of this sonata have the same 12/8 metre, but the players have performed the last movement considerably faster than the earlier one. This results not only in these two movements having a very different pulse, but also in the second one sounding almost like a (deliberate) caricature of the first.

Bookended by the sonatas and internally divided by the toccatas, three secular cantatas receive their world-premiere recordings, thus fulfilling an important role in the discography of Supriani. In these vocal items the Spanish soprano Eugenia Boix, whose singing is a great asset and justifies the eclectic nature of the compilation, joins the ensemble.

The microphone set-up for harpsichord and cello seems here to be very similar to that used for the sonatas. Boix's voice is powerful, but she uses it circumspectly, and that results in a more or less even sonic balance between the three artists; in a live performance, the human voice would usually sound stronger. None the less, many delightful moments light up these tracks. In 'Chi m'involva da te, mio bel tesoro' Boix's use of vibrato is exemplary; the gentle, natural vibration warms up a few notes, but never becomes intrusive. It was, therefore, somewhat puzzling that in the first cantata, 'Il mio cor che sta in catene', a more obviously modern operatic vibrato colours the phrases, at times becoming almost measurable, for example, on the final word of the first aria, 'libertà'. In the da capo sections, tasteful ornaments by all three players add to the charm of the aria; of



those, Boix's offering 'dall'empia' an octave higher at the end of the final aria in 'Chi m'invola da te, mio bel tesoro' is particularly elegant.

Principles To Learn To Play The Cello is a worthy and carefully prepared CD, which manages to delight while being informative at the same time.

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