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GAETANO BRUNETTI (1744–1798)

STRING QUARTETS

Carmen Veneris

Lindoro NL-3011, 2012; one disc, 61 minutes

Recordings of the music of Gaetano Brunetti remain few in number, and this would appear to be just the second release featuring his string quartets. In 2001 the Schuppanzigh-Quartett (CPO 999 780-2) gave us two works from the Op. 2 set of 1774, together with two chosen from the series of twenty quartets written between about 1784 and 1793. While Brunetti grouped his first thirty quartets into the standard sets of six, no such groupings are known for the later works, and the sequence of their composition is unknown. Germán Labrador's catalogue of 2005, *Gaetano Brunetti (1744–1798): catálogo crítico, temático y cronológico* (Madrid: Asociación Española de Documentación Musical), suggested a chronological order for the quartets as well as the rest of the composer's output, and those two later works played by the Schuppanzigh group now carry the numbers L187 (in A major) and L192 (in B flat major). The Spanish period-instrument group Carmen Veneris replicate the pattern of this earlier recording, offering two works from the 1770s, Op. 2 No. 4 and Op. 3 No. 6, and then two later works, L196 in B flat major and L199 in D major.

While much remains up in the air about the final twenty quartets, we can be quite specific about when the first two sets were composed. In 1774 the King of Spain and his retinue, according to the usual pattern, stayed at the royal palace of La Granja from 20 July and went from there to the Escorial, being based there until 2 December. The autograph of the first quartet of Op. 2 indicates that it was composed at La Granja, and that of the first work of Op. 3 acknowledges 'San Lorenzo [de El Escorial]'. For Labrador, who has supplied the notes for this new recording, this suggests that the twelve quartets were written in something like nineteen weeks (4).

If composition was as rapid as that, then on the evidence of this disc it did not do much harm: the two earlier works arguably make a stronger impact than the two later ones. That said, Carmen Veneris have selected what I would judge to be just about the two least interesting of the later quartets. The last sixteen of these have recently been published in a scholarly edition, *Gaetano Brunetti: Cuartetos de cuerda L184–L199*, edited by Miguel Ángel Marín and Jorge Fonseca (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 2012), and were reviewed by me in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 11/1 (pages 127–132). The editors point out that Brunetti's use of minor keys in this genre is low even by the standards of the time; just five of the fifty works are based in the minor mode, and all but one of these derive from the initial burst of production from the mid-1770s (*Gaetano Brunetti: Cuartetos de cuerda L184–L199*, xxvi).

Carmen Veneris choose one of these five works to open their programme, Op. 2 No. 4 in A minor (L153). If this appeals above all the other works performed on the disc, this is not a coded way of saying, as we often read, that the minor mode releases the composer's 'personal feelings' that are suppressed by the normally dominant major mode. In fact, one might argue that choosing minor typically narrowed the range of compositional options and affects; it often, for instance, meant using venerable compositional techniques and relying on an *agitato* topos that is itself an expressive convention. Such factors do come into play with Op. 2 No. 4 – the minuet, for instance, sounds strongly archaic in its initial gambit of close imitation, creating a rhythmic *imbroglio* that leaves the listener struggling to grasp any dance beat or sense of grouping. But where this work scores over L196 and L199 is in its capacity to make its points concisely, and to surprise the listener; the later works suggest an almost too settled typology in their succession of movements and overall proportions. This is especially apparent in the finale of the A minor quartet, a virtual moto perpetuo that rushes by and leaves a chilling aftertaste. In his booklet notes Labrador, while acknowledging the effectiveness of the *pianissimo* ending, suggests that the movement is too short ('un movimiento demasiado breve para el potencial que parece demostrar Brunetti'; 5). It does in fact take just ninety seconds to play in the current rendition, but such cryptic utterance seems to me just right for this



work. The more predictable approach taken by Brunetti in his later quartets may in fact form part of a broader development. Of his symphonic production Teresa Cascudo writes: 'We can observe a change from the greater fragmentation and structural complexity of the works composed between 1779 and 1784 to the structural clarity and instrumental richness of those composed in 1789–90.' (See 'Iberian Symphonism, 1779–1809: Some Observations', in *Music in Spain during the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Malcolm Boyd and Juan José Carreras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149.)

Near the end of the exposition section in the first movement of Op. 2 No. 4 Brunetti uses a repeated fanfare-like figure decorated by triplets that strongly resembles one used by Haydn at an equivalent point of the finale of his Quartet Op. 9 No. 2 (in bars 21–22 of that movement and then transposed at bars 53–54). This is all the more intriguing since the material cannot be accounted for as common coinage. Many of the likenesses claimed between works by different composers of the time – and it has long been a favourite game to play – in fact involve the shared use of formulas and schemata and have very little to recommend them. Haydn's Op. 9 was published no later than 1772, and it is not far-fetched to imagine that they were known to Brunetti by 1774, especially since it is clear that there was a virtual delivery line of Austrian symphonies to the royal palace in Madrid. Where symphonies went, quartets may well have followed.

The consistently broader and more relaxed manner of the later works, understood by Cascudo as involving a drive for greater clarity, can be summed up by what typically happens in the second tonal area of sonata-form movements. While broad symmetrical paragraphs involving the singing style or the brilliant style are common in this position, Brunetti takes this to an extreme. In the initial Allegro maestoso of L196 the second theme, which will come to dominate the movement at the almost total expense of the first theme, is first heard from bar 22 in what turns out to be an expanded sentence structure. It is then repeated from bar 46 as melodic leadership passes to the second violin, but with a different, longer expansion. After the final structural cadence, at bar 69, the theme's head-motive returns courtesy of a clever phrase overlap, once more on second violin, to close off the first section. Immediately after the double bar the material is heard once more, yet again on second violin, yet again in F major, meaning that we have heard no fewer than four playings of the theme in short order. Such repetitiveness is more than matched at the equivalent point of the Allegro moderato of L199, where an extended fourteen-bar phrase first heard in bars 24⁴–38¹ returns in its entirety at bars 46⁴–60¹, although the two violins do swap their roles to provide variety for two of the performers. The Carmen Veneris group seem unable to accept such apparent redundancy and simply cut out the large-scale repetition.

While this might seem an understandable decision, it rather points to a larger truth, that the group seems more at home with the two early works they have chosen. They characterize them more persuasively, not just the A minor quartet but also Op. 3 No. 6 in G major, which is from a set of two-movement works and consists of a variation movement followed by a catchy finale. In the later pieces the playing can sound rather timid, especially in the lower parts, which admittedly do not always have very interestingly shaped subordinate lines: Germán Labrador spends a good part of his commentary lamenting the dominance of the first violin. Yet there are many other aspects to celebrate, whether as commentator or as performer. These include the unaffected lyrical sweetness of the slow movements, the pure cantabile style offering a suitable embodiment of the highest galant ideals, and the bracing popular manner of the two finales. While the Allegro vivace of L199, with its brilliant interlacing of the simplest possible motive (a rising third played in minims), holds up well enough in this performance, the finale of L196 really needs much more elan.

The lack of conviction in some of these accounts – not helped by indifferent intonation from time to time – is all the more surprising given that Carmen Veneris play on period instruments. Given that such performers should by definition be 'historically aware', one certainly expects some niceties when it comes to ornamentation. Yet the group is surprisingly literal in its approach to repeated sections or passages. One exception comes at bar 66 of L199/ii, where first violinist Miguel Romero Crispo translates the start of a repeated cadential phrase into a flourish to bring the movement to a convincing end. In the first movement of L199, on the other hand, there are several occurrences of a line that consists of successively higher octave couplings of a single pitch, the final note of which drops precipitously down to a low pitch that is quickly



followed by a cadential trill. This surely represents a skeletal notation of the schema dubbed Grand Cadence by Floyd Grave (see 'Freakish Variations on a "Grand Cadence" Prototype in Haydn's String Quartets', *Journal of Musicological Research* 28/2–3 (2009), 119–145), with the approach to the high note needing to be filled in by means of a brilliant run or arpeggio, but here it is blankly played as written. A more common question one would have for the performers is why they always seem to play appoggiaturas short when long execution would often create a smoother sense of musical line. In spite of these reservations, one can only welcome the recorded debut of four more works by this still largely unknown composer.

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JOHANN CHRISTOPH PEPUSCH (1667–1752)
CONCERTOS AND OVERTURES FOR LONDON

The Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen / Robert Rawson
Ramée RAM 1109, 2012; one disc, 59 minutes

When attempting to explain why it is that much of Pepusch's music has been undeservedly overlooked, many will cite Sir John Hawkins, who found him to be 'a learned, but a dry composer, and . . . apparently deficient in the powers of invention' (*A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, volume 5 (London: T. Payne and Son, 1776), 404). What they will not cite are Hawkins's favourable comparison of Pepusch's cantatas to the works of Scarlatti, his assertion that he was 'one of the greatest theoretic musicians of the modern times' or the fact that he was remembered on the continent primarily as a fine composer of concertos. The Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen, who as the present sleeve notes inform us intend 'to explore the neglected repertoire of public concert life in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', here present six of Pepusch's concertos, which until now had remained unrecorded. Framed by Pepusch's well-known overture to *The Beggar's Opera* and his less well-known one for *Venus and Adonis*, these concertos succeed in showing why it was that Pepusch was so highly regarded as a composer in this field. Written in the opening two decades of the eighteenth century, these works demonstrate strong influences from the Italian styles of Corelli and Vivaldi in addition to more English pastoral shades. Though not hugely innovative, Pepusch's music is by no means lacklustre; still less so as a result of the invigorating treatment it receives from these tickle-fiddling players. The ensemble has excellent proportions and there is a wonderful delicacy to the recording, with one player to a part creating an intimate character that is perfectly suited to music such as this, written for such small-scale and relatively personal settings as Thomas Britton's public concerts. The continuo playing is intuitive and well balanced, though it is a pity that it was not enhanced by either a theorbo or arclute, which was common practice in this period and would have added greatly in a percussive way to the general sonority.

The earliest of the concertos here presented is that in B flat major; written most probably before 1707, it stands as a likely candidate for the earliest extant example of a concerto composed in England. It is also the only one that can be associated with Thomas Britton's concerts at 'The Small-Coal-Man's Musick Club', whose participants, fittingly, were described by Ned Ward in his *Compleat and Humorous Account of all the Remarkable Clubs and Societies in the Cities of London and Westminster* as a 'Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen' (seventh edition (London: J. Wren, 1756), 299). Though labelled as a 'Concerto Grosso', it is in truth a solo violin concerto. It is no surprise to discover from Robert Rawson's illuminating booklet notes that all but the first movement are rearrangements of an earlier violin sonata. The influence of Corelli is evident throughout. Soloist Tassilo Erhardt performs admirably, providing delicious graces in the slow movements and showing a fitting and lively manner of attack for the Vivace and Allegro. The