



instruments, the *Deuxième Concert* was published by Rameau in several versions. In this arrangement by Trio Dauphine the harp part is adapted from the bass viol part, but the scoring is not always convincing. 'La Boucon' seems a missed opportunity to make use of the harp as a continuo instrument and 'L'agaçante' loses some of its affective bite. In a chromatic passage during the second menuet, I was distracted by the sounds of pedalling on the harp, which could have been avoided by giving this section to the harpsichord. These are minor quibbles, though, and the trio demonstrates fine ensemble playing throughout. The disc finishes on a high note with 'Non, je n'aimerai jamais', a lover's fervent declaration of his fidelity and virtue, which is given a spirited delivery.

The liner notes provide the texts of the chansons in both the original French and in English translation. Biographies of the composers and thoughtful background on the French chanson and the French single-action harp are also included. Unfortunately, much of the English translation is clumsy and contains numerous errors and incomplete sentences.

This disc contains many pleasures for the listener and must be commended for its originality in exploring an area of repertory that has been previously neglected. The performers certainly make a convincing case for the beauty, grace and charm of Laborde's chansons, and I hope that their valuable work will spark further interest in this genre and its performance practice.

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GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685–1759), JOHN CHRISTOPHER SMITH (1712–1795)

SMITH & HANDEL

Julian Perkins (harpsichord)

Chandos 0807, 2015; one disc, 78 minutes

In this premiere recording of *Six Suits of Lessons for the Harpsichord*, Op. 3, by John Christopher Smith, British harpsichordist Julian Perkins 'seeks to reappraise Smith' (8), a musician better remembered as George Frideric Handel's amanuensis than as a talented composer in his own right. The title of the recording, *Smith & Handel*, a provocative reversal of the normal order of master and assistant, telegraphs the artist's approach to this reappraisal. Though Perkins could easily have sought to bring Smith out of Handel's shadow by exploring his lesser-known historical connections (with, for example, his teachers J. C. Pepusch and Thomas Roseingrave) or novel stylistic resonances (with, for instance, the works of Domenico Scarlatti or C. P. E. Bach), he opts instead to present a fresh reading of Smith's best-known relationship.

Handel thus serves as the opening act for Smith's Op. 3. Perkins begins the programme with the Overture from the opera *Riccardo Primo, re d'Inghilterra*, arranged by Handel himself – an appropriately theatrical introduction for the often-histrionic *Suits of Lessons*. The selection of the French-style Overture obliquely reinforces Smith's subservience to Handel: as Perkins notes, Smith's father, who was Handel's previous amanuensis, copied out *Riccardo Primo*. As a prelude, it sets a classical stage for the modern drama of Smith's lessons, though Perkins's performance is anything but staid. The bass line, bounding along under Perkins's clipped touch, anchors exuberant embellishments on the repeat of the first section. A repeated-note ornament calls to mind both a Monteverdian *trillo* and a trumpet fanfare.

Published in 1755, Smith's Op. 3 was a marked departure from the composer's *Suites de Pieces Pour le Clavecin*, Opp. 1 and 2, which had been issued in the 1730s when Smith was in his twenties. These earlier works are conservative in style and resemble Handelian suites, each consisting of four to six movements



made up of a mixture of stylized dances, 'free' movements and sometimes a fugue or set of variations. By contrast, the lessons of Op. 3 resemble sonatas in the later eighteenth-century sense, with each lesson comprising three or four movements with nary a courant and just one allemande in the whole collection. In the two decades between the publication of Op. 2 and Op. 3 Smith had acquired considerable experience as a composer of music for the stage (among the works that he wrote during this period are the operas *Dario* and *The Fairies* and the oratorio *The Seasons*), and Op. 3 reveals the composer's penchant for translating opera-scale drama to the intimate medium of the keyboard. Compared with the earlier suites, one of the most striking aspects of the Op. 3 lessons is the formal tension that Smith often creates over the course of a movement through the return and transformation of thematic material (for example, in the first movement of Lesson 1 the opening motive recurs as an interruption near the beginning of the second section). Op. 3 also features musical ideas that emerge directly from idiomatic keyboard techniques (as in the repeated-note figure that pervades the third movement of Lesson 2 and the hand-crossing of the second movement of Lesson 5) and a harmonic vocabulary expanded to include extravagant chromaticism and jarring direct modulations (to mention just one of many, the shift from C major to A flat major in the first movement of Lesson 3).

Perkins brings all the personality of a *primo uomo* to the performance, channelling it into a wide range of characters, from the plaintive *Larghetto* of Lesson 1 to the maniacal final *Allegro* of Lesson 2. These convincing, stylized characterizations are rooted in his exceptional ability to make dramatic sense out of minute details on the page. Though Perkins uses a rich vocabulary of touches throughout the recording, at times he reverts to a default clipped, mannered touch, which is at best flamboyant and at worst strangely choppy. Like a star singer, Perkins fully asserts his agency by lavishly altering repeats, not only adding embellishments but entirely recomposing figuration. The liberties enhance the drama of the performance considerably: as the repeat begins, I listen with anticipation for what new virtuosic flights the performer will take, as if Perkins were Senesino singing a *da capo* aria. (The self-conscious defence of the 'possibly controversial ornamentation' (11) that Perkins lays down in the liner notes seems incongruous given the *sprezzatura* that he displays in performance.) The exquisite decoration of the offbeat quavers in the repeat of the first section of the *Andante allegro* of Lesson 3 is but one of many moments that evoke a virtuoso singer on the stage. Substantial recompositions, as in the first repeat in the *Allegro* of Lesson 1 or the final variation of the *Minuetto* in Lesson 5, explore new registers or play with listeners' expectations by reversing the direction of figuration previously heard. Perkins liberally fills in harmonies and shows off the bass register of the harpsichord by adding low octaves. This is usually effective, though the improvised lower octaves on the pedal points in the second movement of Lesson 2 extend the piece's register in a way that makes the surrounding fugal sections sound as though they are missing a bass voice.

The use of two harpsichords, both prepared by Mark Ransom, helps to draw out the variety of Smith's lessons. Perkins avails himself of a Franco-Flemish-style double-manual harpsichord by Ferguson Hoey (1982) and a single-manual English harpsichord made by 'Mabyn et Gulielmus Bailey' (c1770), whom he identifies as Alexander Mabyn Bailey and his father William, both members of an incipient Royal Society of the Arts. This recording is apparently the first to feature the Baileys' instrument. The juxtaposition of the harpsichords on the recording makes for a variegated palette of timbres, which Perkins exploits to dramatic effect, for instance, in the first movement of Lesson 1, played on the Hoey instrument, where extroverted themes played on the coupled 8' + 8' + 4' registration on the lower manual are juxtaposed with an intimate Ramellian theme on the single 8' register of the upper manual. The solo 4' register sparkles like a tiny silver gadget in the third movement of Lesson 5. The buff on the Bailey harpsichord is effectively applied for the *style brisé* second movement of Lesson 3 – the sole allemande in Smith's Op. 3.

The two harpsichords are tuned in complementary temperaments, the Bailey in Vallotti and the Hoey in Young, which comfortably span the tonal spectrum of Op. 3 from one extreme (A major; Lesson 1) to another (C minor; Lesson 2). As Perkins colourfully explains, 'The suites in flat keys are played on the fruity English harpsichord while those in sharp keys are played on the powerful French instrument' (6). The temperaments



serve the music well, with the exception of passages in the Capriccio [*sic*] of Lesson 6, in D major. Here the F sharp major harmonies in both halves of the movement clash with the Young temperament of the French harpsichord (the temperament makes for a wide major third between F♯ and A♯). It is perhaps not a coincidence that this is one of only two movements in which Perkins takes neither the first nor second repeat. F sharp major chords occur also in the Allegro of Lesson 1, but here the tension is momentary and suits the harmonically dynamic passage.

In the essay on Smith included in the liner notes, Perkins justifiably disputes Michael Burden's assessment of Smith's music in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as 'attractive but undemanding' ('Smith, John Christopher', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com) (13 March 2017); quoted here on page 11) in light of the gymnastic hand-crossing, tricky written-out ornaments and other technical challenges that Op. 3 presents. In rehabilitating the composer's reputation, Perkins notes affinities between Smith's Op. 3 and the works of other composers, including C. P. E. Bach, Rameau and even Beethoven. The strongest resemblance of all, though, is with the sonatas of Scarlatti, whose idiom, Perkins speculates, Smith picked up from his teacher Thomas Roseingrave. He identifies Smith's Op. 3 with what he calls the 'Anglo-Scarlatti style', characterized by 'a comic interplay between the baroque and rococo' (11). This strikes me as a sensibility more likely to belong to Perkins himself than to eighteenth-century composers, and the success of his performance of Op. 3 attests to the fruitfulness of this way of approaching the music. The essay concludes with the (surprisingly) glib assessment that Smith was 'a not unworthy successor to Handel' (12), thus re-emphasizing the contingency of Smith's career on his master. This message is at odds with Perkins's playing, which is among the most lucid testimonies we have to Smith's greatness as a composer in his own right.

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