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FRANCESCO GEMINIANI (1687–1762)

SONATES POUR VIOLONCELLE AVEC LA BASSE CONTINUE OPUS V

Bruno Cocset (violoncello), Luca Pianca (theorbo)/Les Basses Réunies

Alpha ALPHA 123, 2008; one disc, 67 minutes

Are we ready for Francesco Geminiani? French cellist Bruno Cocset's recent recording of Geminiani's *Sonates pour violoncelle avec la basse continue*, Op. 5, which were first published in 1747, offers a considered performance of these pieces and features beautiful playing. I would claim, however, that the performers on this disc have adopted an ideal of beauty that is quite uncritical – one, indeed, that might have little in common with Geminiani's own understanding of the concept. As such, this new release from Alpha raises the question of whether our forms of ideological critique are yet sufficiently well developed for us to embrace this composer and his music whole-heartedly. Cocset's recording forms, by default, part of a Geminiani revival that is gradually gaining momentum, and stands alongside recent recordings of the same repertory for cello by Jaap Ter Linden (Brilliant Classics 93646, 2008) and Alison McGillivray (Linn CKD 251, 2005), as well as recordings of Geminiani's works for violin(s) and orchestra by such eminent performers on period instruments as Andrew Manze and Ryo Terakado. (The latter violinist also directed a recording of Geminiani's controversial pantomime *The Inchanted Forrest*.) A host of facsimile editions, as well as some modern editions of varying quality, are soon to be superseded by a newly launched critical edition of the composer's complete works, a series directed by Christopher Hogwood and published by Ut Orpheus Edizioni (Bologna): the Francesco Geminiani *Opera Omnia*. But in spite of performers' growing interest in the composer, and despite the appearance some sixteen years ago of Enrico Careri's pioneering biography *Francesco Geminiani (1687–1762)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), scholarly engagement with Geminiani has remained somewhat patchy. This state of affairs might be to blame – at least in part – for any shortcomings in the beautifully played and well-intentioned recording reviewed here.

It seems a truism to say that the modern revival and regular performance of works by an eighteenth-century composer reveal far more about the present than the past, but in the case of Francesco Geminiani the tension between the composition and performance of his music as a series of historical events and its current status in the canon is heightened. Here, the questions 'Why Geminiani?' and 'Why now?' become problematic in light of the questions that were raised about the composer during his own lifetime. The most readily available and frequently cited documentation of Geminiani's life comes from Charles Burney's *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London: author, 1776–1789), in which some rather jaundiced observations about the composer's fame would have us believe that a strong lobby against the man was already in place before his arrival in London in 1714. Writers had a field day recounting the stories of Geminiani's ineptitude at the court of Naples, where he allegedly failed to lead the orchestra because he could not keep time, being 'so wild and unsteady a timist' (Burney, *A General History of Music*, volume 4, 641) that his playing wreaked havoc on the ensemble and caused rebellion amongst the musicians. The problem, however, was an interesting one: if we want to credit him with any musical ability at all, we have to recognize that it was his libertine excess rather than incompetence that sat so uneasily with his colleagues.

During the eighteenth century, then, opinion on Geminiani was already divided, and it seems that this division stemmed mostly from Geminiani's refusal to be typecast. When we piece together what little information exists about Geminiani, he emerges as an early proto-romantic libertine: elusive, eclectic and erratic. The many musical influences that are detectable in his music – and we should note that no one identifiable influence ever wholly dominates his manner of expression – suggest that he developed a personal compositional style that was divorced from 'school', from categorization according to 'performance space' (church, chamber and theatre) and from 'national style'. The questions surrounding Geminiani become even more complex if we raise them in the context of our traditional music-historical narratives. Even if we

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(just about) accept the fusion of performer and composer, and if we no longer belittle the recycling of musical material, the nature of Geminiani's transcriptions of his own and others' music still presents problems for us. In his transcriptions, Geminiani appears to turn himself from performer to composer as he transcribes virtuosically improvised flights of fancy into an intricate notation that is either descriptive or prescriptive, depending on the perspective of our reading. He invents new expression marks such as the sign for 'swelling the sound' in the attempt to provide as much performance direction as possible, and publishes his revised *Concerti grossi* in score. While this format is impractical for performance, it suggests a desire to educate, and this reading can be supported by consideration of his didactic works, which were published in the form of no fewer than six treatises.

However, the problem that lies at the heart of our attempts to understand Geminiani is how we should approach his famously odd musical style. Described by William Hayes as 'a mere Hodge-Podge: an unintelligible Mass of Learning' (*Remarks on Mr Avison's Essay on Musical Expression* (London: printed for J. Robinson, 1753), 123), Geminiani's style of performance seems to have been characterized by a rhythmic fluency combined with jagged and edgy phrasing, displayed in a predilection for disjunction, disunity and seeming disarray in his compositional language. Burney criticized him largely on the grounds of his inept melodic writing, his asymmetrical phrases and his melodic confusion. Even in our own times, I would claim, the difficulty and near impenetrability of Geminiani's melodic language has to some extent impeded the revival of his music, albeit on the basis of our own slightly different expectations. Throughout his *History*, Burney assessed 'ancient' composers' virtues through their notated music, and took particular pains to observe the melodic language encapsulated in each musical page. Melody, according to Burney and many of his contemporaries, was the very element of invention that could display genius, as all other elements of composition could be acquired through diligent study. Today, the lack of unified melody presents a problem from a slightly different angle: in the wake of historical performance, we have embraced the idea that the *performer*'s ingenuity relies largely on the ability to ornament in the correct taste and style, yet with great invention. As such, we have whole-heartedly accepted the notion that the text is but a skeleton to be fleshed out by our own imagination, which in turn is fuelled by historical study. Geminiani's overzealous dictating of ornaments and expression, then, has been accepted as an exemplary standard of prescriptive notation for its time, yet beyond its pedagogical usefulness it has become a nuisance for his own compositions, which are often considered unperformable by modern-day professional musicians who have ambitions to display their own ingenuity.

If we keep both ideologies in mind, however, this jagged melodic language might still provide a hint of what Geminiani was really attempting to accomplish. For Geminiani, unity lay in the performance, it seems, and the score provided less of a skeletal framework than a force by which unity could be created beyond the boundaries of the page. What other end could his excessive tempo rubatos and accelerandos have served but to highlight certain passages and to underline or counterbalance the irregular phrasing of his notated melodies? Such exacting directions for performance, then, direct performers – above all else – to control the music by their own strength of vision. As such, Geminiani's idea of performance might not have been so far from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's unification of the musical event through the performer's voice and his physical motion; we must bear in mind, however, the caveat that whereas Bach's ideal was the semblance of a momentary improvisation, Geminiani's was the semblance of total control, a performer's form of the 'work concept' in which each element of the event is controlled by the performer's larger vision.

Bruno Cocset opts for the more classical beauty of regularity, only highlighting the jagged so as to let the recurring regularity appear even more soothing. If beauty of sound is what distinguishes good performers today, then we can hardly blame Cocset for displaying his truly sumptuous tone to best advantage, but it does sit uneasily with Geminiani's eschewal of unity. Cocset aims for and achieves continuity of tone to the extent that the beautiful timbre of his 'tenor de violon' (a small cello tuned an octave below the violin) – in Sonata No. 11 from Geminiani's Violin Sonatas Op. 1 and in his wonderfully affecting arrangement of the second 'tendrement' taken from Geminiani's *Pieces de Clavecin tirées des differens Ouvrages* [*sic*] (London, 1743) – is barely distinguishable from that of his cello. In the cello sonatas, moments such as the cadenzas in the third

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movement of Sonata No. 5 in F major erupt joyously, and the enthusiasm with which they are performed here is infectious. Equally enticing, admittedly, are the lovely colours and beautiful sound elicited from the keyboard, particularly in the first of the two inserted 'tendrements'. Yet even here the dissonant passing notes hint at an instability and disquietude that remain unexploited by the performer. Only the craziest of the six cello sonatas, Op. 5 No. 4, truly convinces: here, it seems, the players are finally forced into an acceptance of grotesque beauty by the movements' unusual brevity, the sharp juxtapositions of tempo and texture, and the da capo movement with the explicitly 'ad libitum' cadenza that culminates in the abrupt arrival of a brief courtly minuet. Neither Cocset nor his continuo team can help but respond to this musical disarray, and they do so convincingly, with Cocset's cadenza and brutal chords working to thrilling effect.

Cocset's overarching desire for traditional beauty is highlighted by his considered choice of instrumentation for his continuo group, which includes theorbo, harpsichord, cello and violone. Here he creates an eclecticism that is de rigueur in today's performance of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century repertory – an eclecticism that creates the image of unity in variety. As such, each consecutive piece is accompanied by a different combination of instruments, but particular prominence is given to the theorbo. Two sonatas (Op. 5 Nos 3 and 5) are accompanied by theorbo alone, and Luca Pianca enters into the spirit of both Cocset's beauty of sound and his quietly virtuosic display. In his execution of the figured bass line, however, the counterpoint between the two parts is often lost within his elaborate realization, as his instrument simply does not have the power in its bass register to sustain its fundamental line. A similar lack of contrapuntal clarity causes problems in Sonata Op. 5 No. 2 in D major, in which the recording engineers' neglect of the continuo cello leaves it struggling to be heard. The potential of the second cello's sustained bass line, which allows the theorbo to proceed with its adorning figurations, is not fully realized. These examples emphasize that the bass group's eclecticism does no favours to Geminiani's intricate counterpoint and irregular phrasing; rather, it shifts the focus of diversity in unity on to tone colour instead. Moreover, the use of the bass group to make the sonatas sound more distinctive on the one and same disc again points beyond Geminiani to our modern practices in performing and, even more, in recording this repertory.

Cocset and Les Basses Réunies craft an almost symphonically unified work in this recording, encompassing the unusual instruments, the composer's Italian and French influences, and the fantasy, beauty and monstrosity (Sonata Op. 5 No. 4) of the composer's style, while the compact disc as a material object is unified through the soloist's own accompanying texts, a fitting parallel between the music and the album's cover image, and acknowledgment of the soloist's patrons. As such, Cocset seems to have exercised almost total control over an artistic whole here. But whether this clashes or chimes with Geminiani's vision of artistic unity I leave for the listener to ponder.

WIEBKE THORMÄHLEN

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GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685–1759)

ACIS & GALATEA HWV49A (ORIGINAL CANNONS PERFORMING VERSION, 1718)

Susan Hamilton (soprano), Nicholas Mulroy (tenor), Thomas Hobbs (tenor), Nicholas Hurndall Smith (tenor), Matthew Brook (bass-baritone)/Dunedin Consort & Players/John Butt

Linn Records CKD 319, 2008; two discs, 95 minutes

Acis and Galatea is perfection in miniature. Written in 1717–1718 for James Brydges at Cannons, it requires just five singers and not many more instruments. The story, set in Sicily, concerns the nymph Galatea and her

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