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FRANZ XAVER HAMMER (1741–1817)

THE LAST GAMBIST: SONATAS FOR VIOLA DA GAMBA

Simone Eckert (viola da gamba) / Hamburger Ratsmusik

Christophorus CHR 77303, 2008; one disc, 76 minutes

Along with the recorder and the lute, the viola da gamba is known to be a genuine historical instrument: that is, one that was never modified to cope with the public concert, large halls and changing taste. It used to be considered an instrument of the Renaissance and Baroque, and until recently the least explored part of its repertory was paradoxically the one closest to us in time: the music of the classical period. The most widely celebrated gambist, Carl Friedrich Abel, was also thought to be the last, both in his own lifetime and posthumously. On his death in 1787, his obituary observed that ‘his favourite instrument was not in general use, and would probably die with him’ (Walter Knape, ‘Carl Friedrich Abel’, *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com>). However, a whole range of music of the classical period has recently been rediscovered, published, performed and recorded. Simone Eckert, the performer and writer of liner notes for this disc, can therefore justly describe Franz Xaver Hammer as ‘the last gambist’, or, at least, the last member of a long line stretching back over three centuries of performer-composers for the instrument. Less than thirty years after Hammer’s death, the early music revival had begun, and viols were again being used in London to play old music.

For many listeners, this may therefore be the first experience with the sound of classical music played on the viola da gamba. However, there is no intrinsic reason why the instrument cannot be used for post-baroque music; it lacks the aggressively accented bow strokes of instruments from the violin family, but its volume is quite sufficient for a chamber music venue. For a recording, considerations of volume or power are irrelevant: according to the canon of the ‘historically informed’ early music movement, the recording should merely try to capture a possible and credible performance scenario from the period of the music.

This recording, in which the solo viola da gamba of Simone Eckert is accompanied variously by a cellist, a theorbist and a keyboardist, certainly achieves this goal. Eckert compensates for any lack of variety in Hammer’s music by using the resources of the continuo group in different combinations, all of them historically plausible and musically successful. The default combination seems to be harpsichord, theorbo and violoncello, carefully balanced so as never to swamp the solo gamba. She is also accompanied by cello alone, theorbo alone, by harpsichord and theorbo without cello and in the last sonata by the fortepiano. The combination of gamba and fortepiano has been tried with success on works as early as the sonatas of J. S. Bach, and I would perhaps have liked to hear it in more than just four of the twenty-one tracks on the CD, especially as Karl-Ernst Went plays with such vigour and rhythmic drive. It would also have been interesting to read details of the actual instruments in the continuo group, especially in the area of keyboard instruments, where regional styles and changes over time are so significant.

Considerable space is given in Eckert’s liner notes to a discussion of the sources and the instrumentation specified in them. It seems that three of the five Hammer sonatas presented here call for ‘Viola da gamba con Violoncello’, and the other two simply specify ‘Basso’ for the bass part. None of the bass parts is figured. It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret these instructions; even the apparent clarity of the former inscription may be deceptive. This problem arises with much late gamba music, including that of Abel, Andreas Lidl and Joseph Zyka. This was the end of the thoroughbass period, so performances either with or without keyboard continuo instruments were possible. Eckert does not tell us which three of the five sonatas specify the cello; presumably the one which is played with the cello alone is one of them. In any case, the changes of accompaniment, which sometimes occur within a sonata, are not obtrusive. The continuo musicians play together very precisely, and the instruments generally blend into a cohesive whole, with none standing out from the group.



Apart from introducing a new playing style, which it is to be hoped was based on respect for original sources, the main achievement of the early music movement has been to bring us the music of little-known and undervalued composers. This recording was made in 1999, and the current release is presumably a re-issue of the 2001 CD *Franz Xaver Hammer: Sonatas for Viola da Gamba*, but it remains, as far as I can tell, the only recording of Hammer's music available. The sonatas are typical of the period, generally charming and uncomplicated. The movements range from one to six minutes in length, and use many of the titles one would expect: Moderato, Adagio cantabile, Menuetto, Scherzando. The harmonies are generally simple, with typically slow harmonic rhythm. Eckert refers to 'the expressive "sensitive style"' ('die Expressivität des Empfindsamen Stils') in relation to the slow movements; however, to my mind, the extremes of this characteristically north German style are fairly foreign to Hammer, who worked under Haydn at Eszterháza. One could speak of Mozartean charm and a few Haydnesque moments of *Sturm und Drang*: unexpectedly rich chords in an otherwise unchallenging harmonic landscape. Eckert fills out the time on this complete recording of the Hammer sonatas with a fine performance of two well-known pieces for solo gamba by Abel from the Drexel manuscript in the New York Public Library, an Adagio and an Allegro, both in D minor. They fit in well stylistically with Hammer, and the meditative, improvisatory style of the Adagio makes it one of Abel's most beautiful works.

The high level of technical difficulty of Hammer's sonatas places him firmly in the tradition of the virtuoso-composer. The many charming melodies are energized by the large chords and passages in thirds which are typical of the idiomatic virtuoso gamba style, and the pitch range is well over three octaves. Eckert copes with these challenges well; she makes it sound easy, which must always be the aim of the virtuoso. At first hearing one observes that her sound is not as richly smooth as those great viol gurus of an older generation, Wieland Kuijken and Jordi Savall. She uses an eighteenth-century German-style viol by Johann Ulrich Eberle of Prague, which has a different sound from the French viols played by those masters, but which is historically appropriate for Hammer's music. The different sound may also be the result of a more close-miked approach by the producer. Whatever the reason, the music really sounds like the product of horsehair on gut, a quality which is quite pleasant once a taste for it is acquired. Eckert plays the works with an appropriate (never excessive) degree of rhythmic freedom and a good, sensitive understanding of the phrasing. She also adds cadenzas in slow movements where they are required.

We have come to expect thorough and well-researched liner notes for baroque and classical music recordings, and the current notes are no exception. Presented in the usual three languages, the essay begins with a long quotation from E. T. A. Hoffman's two-volume novel, *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr: Nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1820–1822). Hoffman amusingly recounts in this work a few of his childhood musical experiences, including the 'pleasant and alluring' but also unrhythmical viola da gamba playing of an older relative. Eckert uses this to introduce the theme mentioned in the first paragraph of this review, namely the end of the era of the gamba and the misconceptions concerning this historical event. She also quotes assertions from Goethe and Schilling that Abel had been the last virtuoso on the instrument. The notes then proceed to an interesting biography of Hammer, dealing with his time at Eszterháza, Pressburg and finally at the court of Mecklenburg-Schwerin in Ludwigslust. The manuscript source of the sonatas is found in the Mecklenburg State Library in Schwerin, one of the most important north German collections of eighteenth-century music. There is also a detailed discussion of the source manuscript, in which the sonatas are numbered from one to five. Since the sonatas are all in either D major or A major and the numbering is not provided in the playlist, it is, unfortunately, not always possible to relate the discussion of a sonata to the playlist. It is clear, however, that the order of pieces on the CD does not correspond to the manuscript numbering. Finally we are provided with biographical information on Simone Eckert and the other members of Hamburger Ratsmusik, along with two black and white photographs, from which the cellist Dorothee Palm is unfortunately absent. The jacket artwork is worth a mention: a beautiful detail from an eighteenth-century painting showing the bowing hand and ruffled sleeve of Antoine Forqueray.



This is a recording which could find a place in the collection of any viola da gamba enthusiast or anyone who has a taste for unusual classical music. While Hammer is neither the finest composer of the period nor the finest to write for the gamba, he has a voice which is charmingly different from others. Simone Eckert and Ratsmusik certainly do justice to his works; and after all, fans of Hammer (who apparently liked to call himself Xavier Marteau) have nowhere else to go!

MICHAEL O'LOGHLIN



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JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)

SCOTTISH AND WELSH SONGS

Lorna Anderson (soprano), Jamie MacDougall (tenor) / Haydn Trio Eisenstadt

Brilliant Classics 93769, 2003–2008; eighteen discs + CD-ROM, more than eighteen hours

Haydn's 429 settings of Scottish and Welsh songs are not often performed, and it is unsurprising that this eighteen-CD set from Brilliant Classics (which includes a nineteenth disc containing a PDF file with notes and full song texts) is the first complete cycle recorded. It might be easy to let slip snide remarks about the need for a comprehensive recording of these settings. But the cycle should not need justification any more than we might question why it is necessary to have complete sets of all hundred-plus Haydn symphonies, for example. There is much uninspired music here, to be sure, but what matters is that there are also many gems – poignant, rousing or comic – and, given the different levels on which this music works, different listeners will be drawn to different songs, with the lot to choose from. Furthermore, the best moments here are new to most listeners who otherwise know Haydn's work well; thus the set offers the joy of discovery as a bonus.

So it is a treat that the performances on these CDs are so beautifully done. The Haydn Trio Eisenstadt has made a project of performing and recording all the piano trio works of their namesake, and, far from pushing through with a sense of bored duty, they bring a sense of nuance to every note they play – with beautiful musicianship, hushed pianissimos and delicate phrasing throughout. Meanwhile, Lorna Anderson and Jamie MacDougall sing with excellent intonation and sensitivity, both linguistically and musically. They are variously tender, brash and playful as the texts and melodies demand. The sound is well balanced, with the voices forward but not overwhelming, the timbres warm and vibrant.

The trio plays modern instruments. I know of two first-rate earlier recordings of a selection of these settings played on period instruments. One is by the Scottish Early Music Consort (also featuring Lorna Anderson), and the other is by Mhairi Lawson with Olga Tverskaya, Rachel Podger and Oleg Kogan. (The latter is still available on the Opus 111 label.) Although these older recordings feature only four and six of Haydn's settings respectively, they show the potential for different valid and interesting interpretations of this repertory. Lawson's singing, for example, has a more bell-like timbre compared to Anderson's richer, more robust voice. Indeed, timbre in general seems to be a variation that is underexplored in this repertory. We know that trained Italian singers had great success with Scottish songs at the time, inspiring the collectors who commissioned Haydn, but, given that there are nineteen hours of music presented here and the fact that these songs originated outside the classical tradition, there is room for more experimentation with vocal timbres in general. Similarly, in all the recordings made of these songs (including the present complete one), the singers tend not to add ornaments, a characteristic which is largely in keeping with demands from some Scottish writers at the time that these tunes not be 'Italianized'. Of course, the writers' very ire at this practice, along with the notation in various other collections of Scottish song, indicates that many singers were