



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 ‘tendremments’. 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.

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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



lover, the shepherd Acis. She loves him and he loves her, and everything seems set for happiness ever after, notwithstanding the warnings of another shepherd, Damon, that too much haste and too much passion will end in tears. (This outcome is, in fact, hinted at in the overture, which rushes along merrily until it is stopped suddenly by a diminished seventh.) Damon's forebodings are borne out with the eruption of Polyphemus – a Cyclops and the personification of Mount Etna – into the lovers' world. This giant is also in love with Galatea, and none too pleased with her preference for Acis: in a jealous rage, he squashes the poor shepherd flat with a huge boulder. Galatea, shocked and distraught, is at a loss until the helpful chorus suggests that she turn Acis into a stream.

Owing to the small scale and bucolic nature of the work – not to mention the listenability of its music – *Acis and Galatea* is constantly in danger of being treated superficially by performers, or made 'twee'. But its themes of love, separation, jealousy and murder are, in fact, both fundamental and dramatic, and the characters in the story have deeper personalities than are often portrayed. Polyphemus, for example, could so easily appear as a buffoon, but he is actually frighteningly brutal: not only does he commit murder, but he is also willing to rape the object of his desire – as becomes evident from the words 'beauty by constraint possessing' sung by Coridon, a minor character. The wonderful libretto, written by several of the best poets of the day, including Alexander Pope and John Gay, reaches into the heart of Enlightenment thought about reason and emotion. It makes a distinctive contrast between youthful ardour and passionate jealousy on the one hand, and constancy and contentment on the other: the former two, being extreme emotions, are destructive (Acis loses his life and Polyphemus his love), but the latter, more moderate, are successful (Damon's counsel is proved right, and Galatea transforms Acis into a vital and beneficial part of his landscape, giving him immortality into the bargain).

As with many works by Handel, *Acis and Galatea* survives in several versions, but it is the original 1718 version that is recorded here, with the five soloists doubling as the chorus. This version includes a character who is usually omitted in recordings, Coridon, who advises Polyphemus, just as Damon counsels Acis. The informative accompanying notes and the performance alike indicate that John Butt undertook a considerable amount of research in the course of this project, with the result that he has produced one of the best performances of *Acis and Galatea* on disc. The dynamics are carefully attended to, and the instrumentalists bring out all of Handel's effects and contrasts; there is also some very effective use of the continuo cello. On a point of even finer detail, the recording itself gives a fully dramatic experience simply by varying the spaces between tracks. (Butt goes so far as to point out in his notes that there should be no break between Parts I and II, and that by downloading the recording one can overcome the problem of discontinuity caused by having to change discs.)

The tempos are, in the main, excellently judged. At the end of Part I, the lovers' proclamation of their bliss ('Happy we') is taken at such a breathless presto that the collision into Part II's sombre opening is shattering, as it should be. The chorus 'Wretched lovers' is also performed at an ideal tempo – often it is taken too fast, possibly owing to some directors' misunderstanding of the significance of the semiquavers, which most likely depict the eruption of Etna and so do not need to hurtle. They can, in fact, be more emotionally overwhelming for the listener if they are played more slowly. By choosing not to rush this chorus, Butt uses his ensemble's sound to emphasize the massiveness of the giant and the colossal effect he will have on the lovers. The slower tempo also allows the high tenor tessitura to ring out in some of Handel's most extraordinary chorus writing. Similarly, the death of Acis and the subsequent chorus of horrified bystanders are also beautifully executed: Acis's last breaths and the chorus are truly adagio, not the andante at which many conductors take them (although I personally feel that this chorus could be taken at an even slower tempo). Damon's aria 'Shepherd, what art thou pursuing', accompanied by a relentless, running bass line, is nicely brisk, as if Damon can hardly keep up with Acis; and Polyphemus's first entry ('I rage') is splendid, conveying the giant's emotional helplessness.

Although Butt's tempos are largely commendable, and although he avoids completely the awfulness of 'homogenous Handel' (where the faster arias are taken too slowly, and the slower arias too quickly), some of his speeds can approach the realm of sluggishness. While a relaxed tempo may work in 'Hush ye pretty



warbling choir' (the recorder's repetitive birdsong is highly irritating for Galatea, whether particularly rapid or not), it works less well in the other movement with a recorder solo, 'O ruddier than the cherry', sung by Polyphemus. This last aria makes Polyphemus so lumbering that he does border on buffoonery (although the strings' attack hints at his underlying menace), and it also encourages bass-baritone Matthew Brook to overemphasize the 'i' in 'ruddier'. Brook's rendition of 'Cease to beauty to be suing' is also too heavy. In his notes, Butt draws a connection between the time signatures of Galatea's and Acis's music, but fails to see a link between Polyphemus's 'Cease to beauty to be suing' and Acis's 'Love sounds th'alarm' (which is also too slow). The former is in 3/4 while the latter is in 3/8, and although these time signatures present basically the same triple metre, they highlight the difference between the lissomness of the youth and the clunking-fistedness of the giant (which is rather laboured if taken too measuredly). 'The flocks shall leave the mountains' is taken at a very deliberate andante, which lends it gravitas, and which perhaps makes the impending disaster more horrible, but in my opinion it is a little too slow – the voices struggle to cope (especially Polyphemus, having to elongate 'cannot'), and Butt makes the orchestral postlude representing Polyphemus's murder of Acis into a rather obvious accelerando. Had he taken the whole trio a little faster, he could have avoided this predicament, as again the semiquavers should not rush, for they represent the unstoppable rock bearing down on the hapless shepherd. The other problem with the slowness of some of Butt's tempos is that his singers are not quite up to the task. All are pleasing on the ear, but Galatea is a little on the thin side (for example in 'As when the dove'), Acis sounds as though he is still a choral scholar – professional but lacking in dramatic effect – and Damon could do with more lyricism. However, it must be acknowledged that this is nit-picking, as all of them offer some delightful moments. Death brings out the best in Nicholas Mulroy (Acis), whose final rendition of the phrase 'sheds delicious Death' in Part I is lovely (although I am not sure that he quite conveys its double meaning); his portrayal of the dying Acis is properly pathetic, in the true eighteenth-century meaning of the term. In all, this is a thoughtful and highly successful interpretation of *Acis and Galatea*, and one that reminds the listener of the profundity of Handel's short and sweet work.

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JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)

THE CREATION

Sandrine Piau (Soprano), Mark Padmore (Tenor), Neal Davies (Bass), Peter Harvey (Baritone), Miah Persson (Soprano)/Chetham's Chamber Choir/Gabrieli Consort & Players/Paul McCreesh
Archiv Produktion 00289 477 7361, 2008; two discs, 109 minutes

In the beginning was Deutsche Grammophon. Only such a major label, one suspects, could have taken on so monumental a project as Paul McCreesh's gloriously successful recording of Haydn's *The Creation* in English. From the very opening bars of the performance, I heard some of the most luxurious period-instrument sounds that I have ever experienced in a recorded medium. Perhaps it was the herd of some ten cellos, or the many flocks of violins. On the other hand, it could have been a result of microphones numberless, or just a glorious heavenly hierarchy of engineers and producers. But however the magnificent sound was achieved, this is a recording of *The Creation* where heavy beasts tread, tigers leap, eagles soar and the heavens tell. So it is all the more disturbing to learn that McCreesh and the German recording label have recently announced the end of what has been a most fruitful partnership (one that has seen the release of some thirty recordings over fifteen years): the Gabrieli Consort & Players' most recent contract was not