



According to the website of the Gabrieli Consort & Players (<<http://www.gabrieli.com>>), McCreesh and his ensemble will perform *The Creation* on tour in 2009, thus offering a major contribution to the many events that commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Haydn's death.

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JAMES NARES (1715–1783)

INGENIOUS JESTINGS. JAMES NARES: EIGHT HARPSICHORD SETTS

Julian Perkins (harpsichord)

Avie AV2152, 2008; one disc, 76 minutes

James Nares was organist of York Minster for some twenty years (1735–1756) before moving to the Chapel Royal, and it was during his time at York that he published his first collection of harpsichord music, *Eight Setts of Lessons for the Harpsichord*, which was issued by John Johnson in 1747. Similar collections of 'lessons' had been published by several other composers in preceding years, including those by Richard Jones (1732), Thomas Chilcot (1734), Henry Symonds (1734), John Christopher Smith (c1732 and 1735) and John Alcock (1741), but Nares's collection is perhaps the most impressive among these, besides containing two lessons more than the usual six.

Nares's collection was published by subscription, and the subscribers included some notable names. Julian Perkins's CD booklet mentions Thomas Arne, William Boyce and George Frideric Handel; other notable composers who subscribed were Alcock, Charles Avison, Willem De Fesch, Maurice Greene, Barnabas Gunn, William Hayes, Johann Christoph Pepusch, John Stanley, John Travers and Worgan (either James or John), while the publishers John Walsh and John Johnson each ordered seven copies. They were surely not disappointed, for there is some fine music in the collection, and the fact that it was reissued ten years later may attest to its commercial success. Interestingly, this compact disc itself was also issued by subscription, thus reviving the eighteenth-century practice; the subscribers' names are duly listed in the booklet, and even include one modern-day James Nares.

One of the most striking features about the collection is the structural variety displayed by the eight 'setts'. Although each 'sett' has either three or four movements, they form an interesting hybrid between the traditional baroque suite and the not-yet-developed classical sonata. Lesson 6, consisting of an Allemand, Courant and Gavot, is the most retrospective and perhaps the earliest to be composed, whereas Lesson 5 is positively forward-looking in its three-movement structure of Allegro, Larghetto and Allegro, which was still quite rare in England at the time. The other six lessons are all more transitional, starting with a non-dance movement but finishing with a dance. Lesson 5, besides its modern structure, contains an extraordinary passage in its slow movement, where the music gradually modulates up several semitones enharmonically from A minor to B flat minor to B minor to C minor to C sharp minor before settling back in A major.

Among the more modern influences that are present in these works, the most conspicuous is that of Domenico Scarlatti, whose first keyboard publication had appeared in London less than ten years earlier. Several of Nares's movements contain characteristic Scarlattian features, such as rapid scales and arpeggios, hand-crossing, wide leaps and sudden pauses. The first and last movements of Lesson 8 are particularly prominent in this respect. Nares's collection is in fact the first English one to show unmistakable signs of Scarlatti's influence.

The recording also includes a suite by Handel (HWV447), neatly placed in the centre between Lessons 1–4 and 5–8. Even though it was written less than a decade before Nares's 'setts', Handel's suite sounds distinctly



earlier in style, partly because of its more sophisticated textures such as are typical of Handel's keyboard music. The inclusion of this work in the programme was an excellent idea, for it helps the listener to place Nares's lessons in context. The 'setts' stand up well against one of the finest English harpsichord compositions of the time, as well as sounding more modern.

The instruments used by Julian Perkins are a single-manual Kirckman harpsichord of 1764 and, even more appropriately, the double-manual royal harpsichord built by Burkat Shudi for Frederick Prince of Wales in 1740 (Handel's suite had been written for the prince's sister the previous year, and may have been played on this instrument). Perkins exploits the latter's various possibilities for variation in registration with considerable skill, and his performances are thoroughly convincing. He includes all the repeats throughout the collection, often adding tasteful ornamentation in the repeat (and occasionally in the first hearing). The speeds are all well judged, with sparkling allegros but sensitive and expressive playing in movements such as the G minor Largo of Lesson 3.

In the booklet the trilingual text offers ample information by Perkins about Nares and his 1747 collection, along with a lucid account of the instruments by Christopher Nobbs and a brief biography of Perkins. Finally, the back cover appropriately shows Philip Mercier's famous painting from 1733 of the Prince of Wales making music with his sisters. This first complete recording of these works would be a worthy addition to any CD collection.

BARRY COOPER



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NICOLA PORPORA (1686–1768)

OR SÌ M'AVVEGGIO, OH AMORE: *CANTATAS FOR SOPRANO*

Elena Cecchi Fedi (Soprano)/Auser Musici/Carlo Ipata

Hyperion CDA67621, 2008; one disc, 55 minutes

This recording presents a stimulating interpretation of unfamiliar repertory that is of considerable musicological interest. Admirers of Nicola Porpora will discover that they are treated here to a fine performance of his cantatas for soprano by Elena Cecchi Fedi, whose clean and clear diction is impeccable, and the chamber ensemble Auser Musici, whose members excel themselves in their virtuosity (the contributions of cellist Alessandro Palmeri and of flautist-director Carlo Ipata are especially worthy of note). Furthermore, the advice and scholarly expertise of Italian musicologist Stefano Aresi, who wrote the disc's accompanying essay, offers a virtual guarantee of the highest level of historical accuracy in this well-informed performance. (In fact, Aresi's recent critical edition of the disc's title-piece was sponsored by the Società Italiana di Musicologia, and was published with a facsimile of the autograph to coincide with the international conference 'La Cantata negli anni "italiani" di Handel', held in Rome in October 2007.)

Because musicologists have tended to focus on Porpora's operas and sacred music, the cantatas of this renowned composer and pedagogue have often been relegated to the sidelines. Yet it has long been recognized that the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century cantata genre acted as an experimental 'testing-ground' for opera composers. It is illuminating, therefore, to revisit Porpora's works for solo voice and basso continuo (sometimes with extra instruments) and to consider why he was regarded as such a great master of composition and vocal technique, and why the nineteenth-century scholar Francesco Florimo went so far as to call him 'the father of the recitative'. This disc, it seems, offers the first recorded versions of any of Porpora's cantatas, and as such begins to fill a significant gap in the Porpora discography, as well as providing some hard evidence to substantiate claims for the composer's greatness.