

BMC 35 - *Baroque Music for Strange and Diverse Instruments*

We open this disc with a Sonata by Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739) taken from his Opus 2 which he published at the age of 26. Originally published by Sale of Venice in a version for recorder and harpsichord, the Opus 2 Sonatas were re-printed in about 1715 by Vivaldi's publisher Estienne Roger of Paris, and again subsequently by John Walsh of London in a transcribed version for the German Flute which was then becoming fashionable.

If the term "diverse instruments" brings to mind the name of Vivaldi this is hardly surprising since Vivaldi seems to have written for every Baroque instrument imaginable, and he was not apparently to be challenged by the Hurdy-gurdy.

We feature on this disc two Sonatas from Opus 13, *Il Pastor Fido* or the Faithful Shepherd. Published in Paris in 1737 – *Avec Privilège du Roy* – these Sonatas were intended mostly for domestic use, and Vivaldi aimed at the widest possible market by specifying, in addition to the continuo bass, a choice of Bagpipe, Hurdy-gurdy, Flute, Oboe or Violin as the main instrument – from which it may be deduced that the Baroque composer was generally a deal less concerned about matters of instrumentation than his modern-day counterpart.

While we follow the Marcello with No 5 of this set performed on the Hurdy-gurdy, we thus feel no compunction in returning to this set later on in our program with a transcription for Harmonica.

The **Hurdy-gurdy** might be referred to as a violin for people who can't play the violin. Violin-like in its basic shape, the hurdy-gurdy was carried on a strap slung round the neck. A handle turns a wheel inside which contacts the (3 to 6) strings and sets them vibrating. The musician plays the melody by pressing on the string with a tangent, adjusting the position, and thus the length, to produce different notes. Several strings are left to vibrate freely thus creating a drone effect similar to the bagpipe. The hurdy-gurdy, like the oboe and recorder, was popular with shepherds, hence its inclusion in this pastorally-entitled Opus. Strangely perhaps, the hurdy-gurdy became popular among the French aristocracy, providing a more commercial motivation for its inclusion in a Paris-published set!

The **Accordion** was always regarded as a folk instrument – until it was given solo bass for the left hand, at which time its potential as a portable rival to the organ became a reality. Though the accordion clearly cannot compete in volume, Jan Prucha demonstrates its capability for drama, as well as contrapuntal clarity, in two pieces by the artist's fellow Czech composers, Bohuslav Cernohorsky (1684-1742) and Jan Zach (1699-1773), more of whose works can be heard on our disc devoted to Bohemian music, BMC 27.

The **Hammered Dulcimer** is a rectangular box, open at the top, equipped with a set of strings which the player strikes with a pair of leather-covered hammers. Known in central Europe as the **Cimbalom**, this instrument is the basis from which other Baroque keyboard instruments were developed. It was subsequently equipped with a keyboard (clavier), the keys attached to jacks which plucked the strings. The clavier-cimbalom became the clavicembalo, or harpsichord.

Bach's friend and colleague, Saxon master organ builder Gottfried Silbermann built a number of dulcimers, as well as harpsichords and clavichords when organ-building was slack. In conjunction with Bach who made a number of technical suggestions, the basic cimbalom box-with-strings would receive a set of hammers worked from a keyboard, and thus the *Forte-piano* was born. Frederick the Great of Prussia ordered a number of them – stories vary from 7 to 14 in his Potsdam Palace! - and it was on an instrument such as this that Bach, on a visit to Potsdam, improvised on a theme given him by the King which would later be worked out and presented to the King as "*The Musical Offering*".

Like the Cimbalom, the **Zither** is an ancient and very basic instrument, the major differences being in size, and that the Zither is of course plucked. The sound is clear and rounded, giving an especially strong and supportive base. Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783) served for most of his life as Cappelmeister to the Dresden Court. The Elector of Saxony was at that time, through marriage, also King of Poland, and the two territories thus united under a single head became one of Europe's most prosperous and influential territories. Dresden reflected this

status in its buildings and in the cultured life at Court. Hasse made his mark with his Operas, which were equally well-known and popular in Italy as in Dresden. His reputation in this field was enhanced by his marriage to Faustina Bordoni whose star status brought her independent engagements as well as acting as her husband's *prima donna*. Bach visited Dresden from time to time, either to inaugurate an organ or make a presentation at Court, or simply to sample a little light opera, or as he termed it, "the Dresden Ditties". On his visits he would stay as Hasse's guest, the hospitality being returned when Hasse came to Leipzig, probably for the Leipzig Fair.

Baroque keyboard players longed for an instrument with the power of the harpsichord, but possessing the variable touch of the clavichord. This they were to find in the *Forte-piano*. Some musicians with an inclination for invention must have wondered if it could be possible to combine with strong initial pluck of the harpsichord with the sustaining power of the organ, and the combination of harpsichord with chamber organ in one instrument was, though rare, not unknown.

The **Claviorganum** heard on this disc is a reconstruction by the performer, Michael Thomas, in the possession of a private collector in whose home it was recorded by Oryx. The 2-manual harpsichord is an English instrument by John Crang, with unusually long casework and with a great depth of sound, built in 1745. An inscription clearly states "*This Organ and Harpsichord were a present from Beeston Long Esq to his Sister Mrs. Drake*". It remained intact as a Claviorganum until 1953 when tragically its two components were separated. Searching long and hard for a suitable replacement, Michael Thomas finally discovered a Snetzler organ of 1748, which he carefully integrated into the organ's original position below the harpsichord, thus reconstructing as nearly as possible Beeston Long's wonderful present to his Sister. The pluck-with-sustaining capability, as well as the far greater variety of registration, can clearly be heard in this noble Fantasia and Fugue.

We complete our program with two Bach arrangements for Brass Ensemble recorded in Liverpool for Oryx in 1975. The instrumentation requires no introduction as it has been popular for many years; perhaps likewise it needs hardly be said how readily the pure music of Bach lends itself to almost any transcription which human musical ingenuity has yet devised.