**Christian Goursaud**

Playing with Historical Time

It is somewhat unusual that a review article appearing in *Early Music* should justifiably devote as much space to the discussion of 20th- and 21st-century compositions as is necessary for this batch of six recordings. Yet there is good reason here, since these discs are the fruit of provocative and enterprising artistic projects that interrogate the relationships between early and new music, albeit with some strikingly different approaches and priorities. In the first two discs, new music is allowed to influence old music and vice versa in the performances of some excitingly experimental artists. In the second two, early music is used as the inspiration for entirely new compositions. Finally, modern repertory is reimagined though the use of historical instruments to remarkable effect.

The level of control and precision in the playing of the young Franco-American harpsichordist Justin Taylor (*b* 1992) in his second solo release, **Domenico Scarlatti; György Ligeti: Continuum** (Alpha 399, *issued* 2018, 69′), is quite stunning, and the collocation of Scarlatti and Ligeti in the programme is revelatory. That the three Ligeti pieces included here—*Continuum* (1968), alongside *Passacaglia Ungherese* and *Hungarian Rock* (both 1978)—represent the entirety of the composer’s output for the instrument is a strength of programming that might profitably have been mentioned in the liner notes. To place a compelling account of Scarlatti’s quirky Sonata in C minor, k115, directly before the *Passacaglia* proves an inspired idea, since the mean-tone temperament that Ligeti requires for the latter piece causes its first note (*c'''*) to sound, with octave equivalence, appreciably flatter than k115’s final *C*. Taylor’s programming cleverly allows Scarlatti’s music (whose chromatic passages are fairly spicy in their own way) almost to participate in the *Passacaglia*’s simple opening melody, prefiguring its shifting, ambiguous tonal centres and gradual denaturing into crazed parody*.*

The decision to present the first six Scarlatti sonatas that are recorded here in two groups of three is successful; each group has the fast–slow–fast profile towards which Scarlatti eventually worked in his own groupings. It is refreshing that this organization has not been restricted by over-reliance on key-matching within these groups. There is a larger group of five sonatas preceding Ligeti’s *Continuum*, before the lengthy k481 functions as an epilogue to a programme that integrates the music of these two chronologically distant composers into a hugely impressive unitary gesture. The recorded sound, captured in the Théâtre des Quatre Saisons in Gradignan, is intimate and honest—at times, particularly in the most energetic performances, high in the instrument’s register, we hear the most wonderfully authentic audible artefacts of the mechanics of this most committed of performances.

Released on the same label, and packaged just as attractively, is **Azahar** (Alpha 261, *issued* 2016, 82′), an inventive and convincing recording by the vocal and instrumental collective La Tempête under the direction of Simon-Pierre Bestion. Founded in 2015, Bestion’s project is to create immersive, spatialized and staged performances that draw on early and modern musical repertories while challenging traditional modes of presentation in concert and on recording.

Six of the *Cantigas de Santa María* of Alfonso el Sabio, the 13th-century Spanish composer and monarch, form the backbone of the programme, which also includes Machaut’s *Messe de Notre-Dame*, Stravinsky’s Mass and the *Cantigas* (1953–4) of the French composer Maurice Ohana (1913–92). Numbering over 400 in total, the Alfonsine *Cantigas de Santa María* form the majority of the extant Iberian monophonic song repertory to 1450. Despite the large acoustic of Notre-Dame du Liban in Paris, the chant delivery is fairly rapid, and Bestion takes a freely inventive approach to variation in texture, to harmonization and to orchestration. In the liner notes, which are delivered in the format of an interview, Bestion relates that he has ‘taken the risk of harmonising some of [the *Cantigas*] in a “medieval” style, but also using richer harmonies to converge with the style of Ohana and his own *Cantigas*, playing in this way with historical time’. The singing is muscular and not devoid of vibrato and portamento.

The polyphonic singing in Machaut’s *Messe de Notre-Dame* is accurately described by Bestion as ‘full-on and open—like the polyphonic singing of Corsica, the Basque country, or Georgia. It’s quite a guttural kind of singing … I don’t like voices that are too smooth’. He acknowledges the indebtedness of his interpretation to Ensemble Organum’s release under Marcel Pérès (Harmonia Mundi hmc 901590, *issued* 1996, 57′), and the similarities are evident even down to the ornamented chant intonations in La Tempête’s account. The approach takes on a different meaning on this disc, though; just as Taylor cleverly blurs the lines between the harpsichord music of Scarlatti and Ligeti, so does Bestion’s programme give the impression of bringing something of Spanish medieval chant—or at least a constructed version thereof—to Machaut’s Mass.

It is difficult to fault the logic in bringing these works together in a single recording. Quotations from Maurice Ohana in the liner notes amplify the close relationship between his *Cantigas* and Alfonso el Sabio’s monophony, while there are parallels between the instrumental involvement in Ohana’s work and Stravinsky’s Mass. Despite Stravinsky’s claim that he did not hear Machaut’s Mass until after the composition of his own, the similarities that have been noted in the literature are easily enough to warrant their programming together on this disc. Here, the rhythmic incision and clarity of ensemble that is required of a successful performance of the Stravinsky is sadly lacking. This disc must surely divide opinion; it is certainly not one for the purists. It is undeniably, however, a confident, purposeful and beguiling artistic product of admirable integrity.

Contrast is achieved in Gothic Voices’s **Mary Star of the Sea** (Linn ckd 541, *issued* 2016, 74′) not primarily between music old and new, which co-exist here quite comfortably, but rather between music of measured rhythmic vitality, like the splendidly capricious *Ave decus seculi* of Richard Smert (*fl* 1428–77), and that of unmeasured rhythmic freedom, like the monophonic *Crist and Sainte Marie* of Godric of Finchale (*c*.1065–1170). Lying somewhere in between is the ensemble’s 2015 commission *Stond wel, Moder, under rode*, a reaction by the British-Norwegian composer Andrew Smith (*b* 1970) to the anonymous 13th-century chant that is also included on the disc. Smith’s is mainly homophonic, mostly syllabic music of great harmonic power and subtlety that responds to the text with considerable delicacy and intelligence. The piece’s meaning is enhanced through repeated melodic and harmonic gestures that lend it structure and rhetorical power. It is questionable, therefore, whether to split the work in two and to place two other tracks in between was to act in the greatest service of a composition of just over nine minutes in length. The exemplary performance on this disc is at once controlled and dramatically expressive, with great dynamic contrast, clearly delivered text and a sure sense of poetic line.

Composed in 1994 for the Hilliard Ensemble, and also included in this programme by Gothic Voices, is the striking and intense eight-minute *Music for the Star of the Sea* by the American composer Joanne Metcalf (*b* 1958), which is is performed flawlessly and with great panache on this disc. That it is constructed around a cantus firmus, and uses hocket and false relations demonstrates that it was designed to sit among such medieval music as surrounds it in this attractive programme, wherein the piece’s increasing chromatic intensity reads as a natural extension of the earlier repertory to which it pays homage. This detailed and nuanced—yet highly dramatic—recording by Gothic Voices compares very favourably indeed with the premiere on *A Hilliard songbook: New music for new voices* (ECM new series 1614–15, *issued* 1996, 119′). Catherine King’s solo in Metcalf’s *Il nome del bel fior* (1998) is technically exquisite, and the ensemble effort in Smert’s 15th-century carol *Ave decus seculi* is of the highest order. The wonderful 14th-century English cantilenas *Stella maris illustrans omnia* and *Letetur celi curia* are well worthy of inclusion here, but are perhaps better served in tuning, intensity and unanimity by the Gothic Voices recording *Masters of the Rolls* (Hyperion cda67098, *issued* 1999, 59’).

**Upheld by stillness: Renaissance gems and their reflections—Volume 1: Byrd** (Harmonia Mundi hmw906102, *rec* 2015, 78′), the debut disc from the vocal ensemble ORA Singers, directed by Suzi Digby, results from the group’s remit to commission new choral compositions in response to specific Renaissance music. Here, five composers respond to Byrd’s *Mass for Five Voices* in gratifyingly different ways. The finest match of music and voices is in the title track, *Upheld by Stillness*, in which Owain Park (*b* 1993) reflects on the Sanctus and Benedictus. The composer sets Kathleen Raine’s poem *The World*, whose opening line, ‘It burns in the void’, is delivered with crystalline elegance by the sopranos. Their perfectly tuned, biting semitonal clashes prefigure some widely spaced bitonal chords that are unleashed later in the motet, all delivered by ORA with hugely impressive tuning, balance and breath control.This composition responds not only to the mellifluous unfolding of Byrd’s model but also to the older composer’s ecstatic setting of the word ‘hosanna’*,* as a sweeping harmonic progression precedes a ‘stock-in-trade’ Byrdian cadence and finally a deft restatement of the opening material.

The responses to the opening and closing parts of the Mass Ordinary are the most literal in their representation of Byrd’s material. *Kyrie after Byrd* by Roxanna Panufnik (*b* 1968) is a taut and sophisticated reaction that begins by quoting the opening line of the Superius of its model, above a powerful chord progression of great ingenuity and beauty. Panufnik moves deftly between triadic consonance and strong, well-prepared dissonance. The choir responds superbly; the almost vibrato-less yet relaxed and resonant ensemble sound is well balanced and the dynamic ebb and flow demanded by the piece is well executed. The sopranos are particularly to be congratulated for some outstandingly focused and blended singing. The reverberant acoustic of St Albans, Holborn serves this music well, especially when the final *Kyrie* {you changed Sanctus and Benedictus from italic to roman above, as I now realize is EM style – should this be roman also?} is cut short in a moment of great impact, before the work’s ethereal codetta. The *Agnus Dei* {again, roman or italic?} by Charlotte Bray (*b* 1982) responds to Byrd’s setting by interrogating the intervallic content of his counterpoint, a process that allows tone clusters of increasing complexity to coalesce in a short, open-ended work that is commendable for being of a length broadly similar to its model.

Bearing a dedication to the Byrd scholar and choral director David Trendell, who died just a few months before the recording of this disc, the *Laudate Dominum* setting by Francis Pott (*b* 1957) draws upon Byrd’s *Gloria* {again, roman or italic?}. This is a rhythmically vigorous, brilliant and somewhat tricksy piece in changing time signatures, with dense counterpoint that makes reference to Byrd’s points of imitation within a quite different aesthetic. Pott’s gift for effectively deploying original and affective harmonic gestures is attested to in a profound moment of repose at the words ‘Hymnus omnibus Sanctis eius’. Alexander L’Estrange (*b* 1974) reflects not so much on the musical content of Byrd’s *Credo* as on the recusant Catholic composer’s personal faith, setting John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet XVIII* along with fragments of texts by the Jesuit martyrs Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell. Within the context of the disc overall, it is refreshing to hear some beautiful and understated solo passages sung over L’Estrange’s artful, gently dissonant harmonies during this long, subtle setting that is not without moments of drama and passion.

These are competent performances of Byrd’s and De Monte’s polyphony by ORA Singers, though clarity in the inner parts is often hampered by the generous acoustic and the balance is not always readjusted as the individual lines rise and fall in pitch. Occasionally a rhetorically successful corporate decision is taken; for example, the decrescendo at the words ‘et flevimus’ in *Super flumina Babylonis*, but there is little interpretative work at play between contrapuntal lines. Though the recording of Byrd’s Mass is richly sonorous, it is difficult to find reason to recommend it above the existing recordings in a crowded discography. Here, though, it serves as a useful point of reference when listening to the superb new compositions engendered by Digby and ORA Singers’ laudable project.

French vocal music of the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries is heard in fresh instrumental arrangements in **Songs without words: Torchsongs transformed** (Navona nv6195, *issued* 2018, 58′), recorded by the trio Les Délices led by Baroque oboist Debra Nagy. Most successful here is a new arrangement of Télaïre’s lament ‘Tristes apprêts’ from Rameau’s *Castor et Pollux*, which sends the harpsichord and viola da gamba to their resonant lower ranges, capitalizing on the composer’s own rich accompaniment; this affords the solo oboe more space to gain expressive purchase on the melody than elsewhere on the disc. Mélisande Corriveau’s viola da gamba playing in Marais’s brief yet intense Prelude in A minor is worthy of special mention.

While Les Délices should rightly see a historical parallel between the playing of Baroque vocal music by solo instrumentalists and analogous approaches to modern love songs, too often the jazz and pop arrangements here strip out the individual qualities of the original performances. The relatively free rhythm and lush harmonies of Johnny Mandel’s *Emily* and Errol Garner’s *Misty* do lend themselves well to broken-chord accompaniment on the harpsichord, played by Eric Milnes. Sadly, however, works that demand a groove, such as Edith Piaf’s 1957 *La Foule* and Patsy Cline/Willie Nelson’s 1961 *Crazy* are less successful; the group sounds as though it is attempting to swing under duress. Nagy’s version of The Beatles’s *Michelle* is saved by Corriveau’s wonderfully understated rendition on the viola da gamba of George Harrison’s lyrical guitar solo.

Thilo Hirsch, a performer-scholar based at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis and his ensemble arcimboldo have also been performing newer music on older instruments in their remarkable release **‘Bogenhauser Künstlerkapelle’: Forgotten avant-garde of early music** (Audite 97.730, *issued* 2017, 58′). Hirsch’s objective here is to recreate the performance practices of the Bogenhauser Künstlerkapelle (Artists’ Band of Bogenhausen), a group of musicians whose repertory during their career 1899–1939 included Arcadelt, Corelli, J.S. Bach, Rameau, Chopin, and Bavarian folk music played on four early 18th-century recorders, *Bogengitarre*, trumpet marine and timpani. This ensemble came into existence through the interest of one Heinrich Düll (1867–1956) in playing the unfamiliar Baroque recorders in a collection of early instruments owned by his family. These recorders were then known as ‘beaked flutes’.

It is fitting that Pierre-Louis Dietsch’s four-part *Ave Maria* (1842), which was controversially presented as having been composed by Arcadelt before its exposure as a rather free arrangement of the older composer’s three-voice chanson *Nous voyons que les hommes*, should appear in this repertory and on this disc, given the piece’s 19th-century popularity. However, its simple attribution to Arcadelt in the liner notes seems, without further discussion, a little odd. Two thirds of the way through *Ave Maria*, the phrase ‘Sancta Maria’ ends on an A major sonority and is immediately followed by C major at the beginning of the first iteration of ‘ora’. In many performances, one could quite well expect the ensemble to lift here, but on the present recording there is a frankly bizarre slide from one harmony to the next in all three recorder parts that move. This seems to be a one-off gesture in the recording, resulting perhaps from a marking in the original ensemble’s partbooks, from which Arcimboldo have been working. Though Hirsch’s liner notes are generous in their explanation of the history of the Künstlerkapelle and the process of reconstructing the instrumental forces with exactitude, here and in other cases, more explanation of the specific repertory included on the disc would have been appreciated. It is somewhat disarming that this curious consort should work as well for music of the 16th to the 18th centuries as it does for the anonymous *Tyrolienne*; the success of this fascinating recording lies in the modern players’ connection with the humour and joy of their forebears, rediscovered through historical research.