

L'Unique: Harpsichord Music of François Couperin, Jory Vinikour (harpsichord)
Cedille CDR 90000 194 (2020), recorded 2019, 79'
Handel, Great Suites, Chaconne, Babell Suite, Erin Helyard (harpsichord)
ABC Classics 481 5711 (2017), recorded 2017, 79'

The distinguished American harpsichordist, Jory Vinikour, resident in Paris since 1990, offers Ordres 6, 7 and 8 from Couperin's *Second Livre*. These contain some of Couperin's best-known movements, and demonstrate the composer's move away from traditional dances to character-pieces. The highly-varied Ordres 6 and 7 consist entirely of character-pieces; conversely, the majestic and serious Ordre 8 in B minor - which includes the celebrated Passacaille - is the last Couperin wrote containing only traditional dances (although the opening allemande and closing gigue have titles).

Vinikour's performances are impeccable, fastidious and subtle. Every ornament is precise and neatly executed, speeds are apposite, *inégalé* is stylish, he uses the resources of his Taskin copy (Tony Chinnery, 2012) imaginatively, and he is expressive but never over-indulgent. In short, he seems to have uppermost in his mind Couperin's own statement that 'j'ayme beaucoup mieux ce qui me touche que ce qui me surprend'. It therefore seems rather churlish, and perhaps rash, to say that I find some of the playing slightly understated and obedient; a little more give and take would at times have been welcome. It's interesting to compare, for example, Christophe Rousset's flexible, lingering approach to the ubiquitous *Les Baricades Mystérieuses* with Vinikour's much 'straighter' reading.

Vinikour does not eschew adding a little to Couperin, particularly when leading into *petites reprises*, and in some rondeau repetitions. Despite Couperin's table-thumping insistence in the preface to the *Troisième Livre* that what he has written must be observed to the letter 'sans augmentation ni diminution', I think he was overstating the case here to make his point. At all events, Vinikour's additions are modest, and I can't imagine that even Couperin would object. Julien Dubruque's liner notes (translated by Vinikour) contain a few inaccuracies, and

he makes too much of the 'experimental' nature (because of temperament issues) of the key of B flat (Ordre 6), at that time. Couperin was not (as he claims) the first in France to use this key in keyboard music. To name but two, the Bauyn manuscript contains a suite by Chambonnières in B flat; and Grigny's organ hymn *Veni Creator* (1699), although modal, is effectively in B flat. Despite minor quibbles, Vinikour's thoughtful contribution to the Couperin discography is highly welcome.

Give his dislike of music which surprised him, Couperin would surely have been outraged by William Babell's arrangements of Handel! The Australian harpsichordist Erin Helyard evidently relishes them, however, and plays the Suite in F with an appropriate lack of inhibition. Babell was a busy and successful London musician, a virtuoso harpsichordist whose speciality was playing well-known Handel hits - the most famous being *Lascia ch'io pianga* in extravagantly embellished reincarnations. He divided opinion in his own time - Burney was very critical, but Hawkins thought that he deserved his success - and Babell certainly knew Handel's own playing. Could it be, as some believe, that he reflects something of Handel's own improvisatory style? Anyway, it is all tremendously diverting, particularly the final movement based on the aria *Sulla ruota di fortuna*, where some of Helyard's extra interpolations - very much in the spirit of the enterprise - outdo even Babell and will no doubt shock some listeners. I have a Handelian friend who would use the word 'preposterous'.

The CD is largely devoted to excellent performances of three of Handel's 'Great Suites': that in F (with its opening Adagio heavily embellished à la Corelli by Handel himself), and those in E (including the 'Harmonious Blacksmith') and in F sharp minor. Helyard approaches these sophisticated and endlessly varied works with just the right spirit of adventure and daring, ornamenting copiously, adding cadenzas and building on Handel's sometimes incomplete notation to create exhilarating performances. The final work on the CD, the Chaconne in G HWV435, offers him even more scope for improvisatory flights of fancy. He plays on a wonderful Kirkman of 1773, one of four (apparently) in Australia. It has a pedal-operated machine stop, permitting the addition and subtraction of registers while playing; Helyard makes full and effective use of this. Overall, this is an extraordinarily refreshing release.

John Kitchen