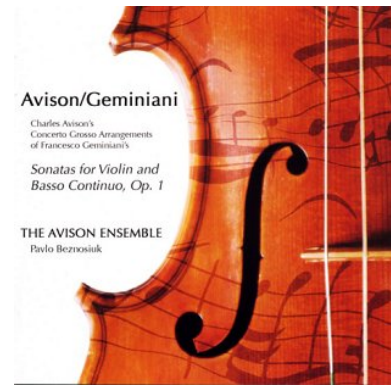


Avison

ENSEMBLE

reviews

CHARLES AVISON CONCERTI GROSSI AFTER GEMINIANI



THE AVISON ENSEMBLE
PAVLO BEZNOSIUK (DIRECTOR & VIOLIN)
2 CDs on Divine Arts, dda 21210

... brisk and lively performances
... one of the finest baroque ensembles now in
existence
... an exceptional issue in every way

EARLY MUSIC NEWS

Richard Maunder

Avison's recently rediscovered arrangements as seven-part concertos of Geminiani's Op. 1 violin sonatas continue an honourable tradition dating back to Geminiani's own arrangements of Corelli's Op. 5 sonatas. They make very convincing concertos and are a welcome addition to the repertoire (Avison omitted Geminiani's Op. 1 No. 11, but Beznosiuk has skilfully remedied the deficiency). This is music of outstanding quality and originality: Geminiani has the rare ability to do the unexpected while making the result sound completely natural, and Avison's ingenious and technically assured versions do much to enhance the appeal of these pieces.

The performances are outstanding. The band (strings 3/3/2/2/1 plus harpsichord) is richly sonorous; the ensemble is faultless; the tempi are seemingly infallibly judged; the phrasing is subtle and expressive; and virtuoso solos are dispatched with aplomb. What more could one possibly want? It's a real pleasure to have two absolute winners from The Avison Ensemble to review in the same issue. They must surely be one of the finest baroque ensembles now in existence.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

Elizabeth Roche

These discs throw fascinating light on the 18th-century English musical public's insatiable appetite for Italian concerti grossi. Avison's recently discovered transcriptions of 12 solo violin sonatas by one of London's most popular expatriate Italian musicians were perfectly calculated to satisfy this demand. With Avison's thorough grasp of the Italianate concerto style, it is hard to believe that the pieces were not originally conceived in this form.

In these spirited performances, the full tutti sound enhances Pavlo Beznosiuk's beautifully characterised playing of the first concertino violin part, whether in yearning slow movements or sparkling giges.

GOLDBERG EARLY MUSIC MAGAZINE

Brian Robins

Newcastle-born Charles Avison's concerto grosso arrangements of Domenico Scarlatti sonatas are now fairly familiar, but these concertos arranged from Francesco Geminiani's set of 12 Sonatas and Continuo, op. 1 (1716) are likely to be new to most listeners/ They are in fact recent discoveries, having only come to light as recently as 2002. As the excellent booklet note reminds us, it should come as no surprise that Avison should have been drawn to these sonatas, given the mutual admiration he and Geminiani had for the other's works. Geminiani's publication followed the standard format of including 6 sonate da chiesa followed by 6 sonate da camera, a pattern followed by Avison, who was largely faithful as to matters like tempo and harmony. There is, however, a striking departure in the case of the final movement of No. 6 in G minor, where Avison concludes with an Andante followed by an extensive set of variations not included in the sonata and scored only in two parts. They are played here by violin and cello.

The performances of this immensely appealing set of concertos are outstanding. The Avison Ensemble includes some of Britain's finest period instrument players, but what is remarkable is the rich depth of the playing. The broad sonority of some of the movements of the da chiesa concertos is especially impressive, while there is real warmth and expressive sensitivity in such movements as No. 2/iii of the gracious opening Vivace of No. 9 in F. An exceptional issue in every way.

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

Robert Levett

Cellist Gordon Dixon formed the Avison Ensemble with the intention of bringing to light the music of Charles Avison and other lesser-known British contemporaries of Handel. This period instrument ensemble has already recorded Avison's Opp. 3, 4

and 6 Concertos for Naxos; a further release on Divine Art will contain Avison's Op. 9; the six cello concertos by the eighteenth-century Newcastle composer John Garth were reviewed last month. Many listeners will already be familiar with Avison's orchestral transcriptions of some of Domenico Scarlatti's harpsichord sonatas but none will be familiar with these, Avison's concerto grosso arrangements of Francesco Geminiani's Op. 1 Sonata for violin and basso continuo. They are well worth becoming acquainted with, especially given the outstanding quality of this world premiere recording.

Mark Kroll's excellent booklet note contains some essential facts, which I'll summarize briefly here. In his day, Avison (c1709-70) was considered northern England's leading musician. While studying in London, he made the acquaintance of Francesco Geminiani, who had moved to the city in 1714; the two became firm friends and Avison remained a tireless advocate of Geminiani's music in England for the rest of his life. In 2000 and 2002 two of Avison's workbooks were discovered; the second of these contains the composer's concerto arrangements of Geminiani's Sonatas for violin and basso continuo, Op. 4 and these concerto grosso arrangements of the same composer's Op. 1. Somewhat inexplicably, Avison arranged only 11 of the 12 sonatas; Pavlo Beznsiuk, one of the soloists and the director of the Avison Ensemble on this recording, has plugged the gap by arranging the missing item (no. 11).

Most of the works here exhibit the usual sonata da chiesa slow-fast-slow-fast layout in the number and order of the movements and are scored for the seven-part string ensemble apparently favoured by the Avison. The concertino group comprises two violins (Beznsiuk, who seems to have the bulk of the work, and Simon Jones). More often than not, the second concertino violin plays what was the lower note of a double stop in the original sonatas, but sometimes the parts are more equally shared – this seems especially true in Beznsiuk's arrangement.

This two-CD set is a delight from start to finish. The playing is brisk and light, the textures clear and the overall ensemble well nigh perfect. Beznsiuk is on stunning form (when is he not?), his fresh, improvisatory approach well suited to communicating a sense of adventure and discovery in what is "new" Early Music. The faster movements feature exquisite passagework, as in the first Allegro of Concerto no. 2 in D minor, the first Vivace in no. 8 and the exciting middle Allegro in the three-movement Concerto no. 12 in D minor. The beautifully ornamented slow movements are equally impressive – take the opening Affettuoso of the B flat Concerto no. 5 or the Amoroso, also from no. 12. A real highlight, though, is the extended set of two-part variations (here realized by violin and cello without accompaniment) that forms a 'trio' section between the final Andante and its repeat in the Concerto no. 6 in G minor.

Recorded sound and overall presentation are also of the utmost quality. I recall being deeply impressed with the Avison Ensemble's Naxos releases; this latest enterprise only confirms that here, surely, is a band whose strength of vision and outstanding artistry would have pleased not only its namesake but also Geminiani, beyond all measure.

THE CONSORT

Robin Bigwood

For a composer who died only twenty years or so before Mozart, the style of Charles Avison (1709-1770) is unashamedly high baroque. His meeting with Geminiani in London in the 1720s, and the friendship between them that flourished thereafter, established the link with the Italian style in general, and Corelli in particular, which Avison espoused throughout his career. He was far from indiscriminate though – in his *Essay on Musical Expression* he remarkably described Vivaldi as 'only a fit amusement for children', and his reverence for the 'genuine Air and true Harmony' of Corelli and Geminiani was undiminished even well into the 1760s, as is recorded in the preface to his op. 9 concertos.

In this context, the restraint and balance found in Avison's *Twelve Concerti Grossi* after Geminiani's *Sonatas for Violin and Basso Continuo* op. 1, given its first recording on this new CD, is not unexpected. The first six concertos are of the *da chiesa* model while the last six are *da camera* and include dance movements, although these are never explicitly named. An arrangement of *Sonata no. 11 in A minor* is missing from the workbook in which the rest of the sonatas were found in 2002, so here it is presented in a stylish arrangement by Pavlo Beznosiuk.

Throughout the recording, the Avison Ensemble responds to Avison's full 7-part texture with warmth and flexibility. Pavlo Beznosiuk's violin playing is also impressive, with finely judged phrasing, and ornamentation that is both inventive and expressive but never resorts to the 'tumultuous' style that Avison himself so disliked. The unexpected *Minuet and Variations of the G minor sonata* are particularly enjoyable, and also feature some wonderfully articulate cello playing, not directly credited but presumably by Richard Tunnicliffe. The sound quality is superb too, capturing the supportive but never overbearing acoustic of the Jubilee Theatre in Newcastle.

ALLMUSIC

Dave Lewis

Charles Avison was one of the most significant figures in eighteenth century English music, though his reputation has suffered owing to the prominence of Handel during his time and that his most famous work is the *12 Concerto Grossi* arranged after various movements of Domenico Scarlatti. Although the orchestration, manner of arrangement, and even the addition of several non-Scarlatti movements confirm this set as an original effort on Avison's part, Scarlatti is nevertheless the one who benefits from its fame. The Avison Ensemble was founded in the 1990s, spurred on by a cache of newly discovered Avison manuscripts; however, the group got a real boost with the further discovery in

2000 and 2002 of Avison 's personal workbooks, containing over 600 pages of music by Avison and others. They have developed a new rubric for Avison — "the greatest English composer of orchestral concertos" — and, additionally, it should be mentioned that Avison remained a stalwart of Baroque instrumental style long after domesticity and the Classic moved the Baroque out of the mainstream. Indeed, Newcastle-based Charles Avison may have been the Baroque's last outpost.

From the workbooks come Avison's arrangements, into Concerti Grossi , of Francesco Geminiani's Op. 1 Violin Sonatas . The chain of musical recycling here is perilously deep; Geminiani himself was best known during his lifetime for his arrangements of Corelli's violin sonatas into Concerti Grossi. Avison had studied with Geminiani and remained a lifelong friend of the composer, an Italian who plied his entire musical trade in England. Although cellist Gordon Dixon was the founder of the Avison Ensemble and served as executive producer of Divine Art's Charles Avison: 12 Concerti Grossi, after Geminiani's sonatas, violinist Pavlo Beznosiuk leads the group and is its principal soloist. Beznosiuk will be remembered for his work with the Parley of Instruments , the Academy of Ancient Music, and many other period groups; for this project, Beznosiuk has also contributed a complementary Sonata No. 11, as Avison himself seems not to have gotten around to arranging that one for his typical, seven-part ensemble. The difference between Beznosiuk 's work and Avison's is minimal, indeed, if apparent at all.

Beznosiuk is strongly dedicated to the Avison Ensemble and to the composer after whom it is named; he has decided to record all of Avison 's instrumental music, in addition to some selected pieces from never heard composers that Avison documented, such as Englishman John Garth. As to this Divine Art recording, it is apparent from the first note that these are first-rate eighteenth century concerti grossi, and the Avison Ensemble plays them in a relaxed, very easygoing fashion. It is pleasant, but ultimately one wants the music to take wing, as the potential seems to be there in Avison's score. However, it never does — the pace, while never rigid, never really takes off, and slow movements tend to register with a bit more import than the allegros — and there are far more allegros than there are other kinds of movements.

Nevertheless, this is a worthy undertaking that whets one's appetite for what might be in store with future instalments of the Avison Ensemble's traversal of the work of its namesake.

MUSICWEB

Johan van Veen

It still happens now and then that music manuscripts are discovered. Sometimes they contain music which is known to have existed and somehow has gone missing. Sometimes these manuscripts contain music which was hitherto completely unknown. That is the case with the Concerti grossi by Charles Avison

recorded here. We know he arranged keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti as concerti grossi, and we also know about his admiration for Francesco Geminiani. But nobody knew that Avison also arranged violin sonatas by his hero as concerti grossi. "They were discovered in the second of two of Avison's workbooks that suddenly appeared in the years 2000 and 2002 respectively. Consisting of more than 600 pages of music hidden from view for over two centuries, these two books add significantly to Avison's repertoire and reputation", Mark Kroll writes in the programme notes.

Francesco Geminiani was born in 1687 in Lucca, and probably received his first musical education from his father, who was a violinist. It is assumed that among his later teachers were Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti, but although he is thought to have been in Rome from 1704 to 1706 there is no firm evidence for this. That he was close to Arcangelo Corelli is a fact, since in the foreword to 'A Treatise of Good Taste in the Art of Musick', which was published in 1749, he refers to discussions with Corelli about his music. In 1714 he left Italy for England, probably because he didn't see any real chance of a career either in Rome or in Naples, where he also spent some time. And as England had attracted other musicians from Italy before it was a logical choice to try to find employment there.

In England he found fertile soil: admiration for Italy and the Italian music was widespread, and there were ample opportunities to perform and to teach. In England Geminiani found his first patron in the person of Baron Johann Adolf Kielmannsegg. It was he who arranged a public performance with the king in attendance, in which Geminiani was accompanied by Handel at the harpsichord. It was also Kielmannsegg to whom Geminiani dedicated his 12 sonatas for violin and b.c. opus 1. This collection had considerable success, and as the sonatas were stylistically close to Corelli he could convincingly present himself as Corelli's pupil.

Charles Avison was born in 1709 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the north of England, where he received his first musical training from his father, who was one of the city waits. From 1724 to 1735 he stayed in London to further his musical education, and then returned to Newcastle, where he stayed the rest of his life and played an important role in musical life. During his time in London he met Francesco Geminiani, who made a lasting impression on him. His admiration for the Italian master was such that in 'An Essay on Musical Expression', which was published in 1752, he claimed Geminiani to be a better composer than Handel. This caused a vivid debate as many of his colleagues strongly disagreed and defended Handel against what they considered an unfair attack.

The influence of Geminiani is reflected in Avison's own compositions, like the Concerti Grossi op. 6 - also recorded by the Avison Ensemble. His admiration also made him arrange the sonatas opus 1. He turned them into concerti grossi for seven instrumental parts, divided into two groups: the 'concertino' - consisting of the instruments who play the solo sections - and the 'ripieno', the full ensemble. The manuscript contains only ten concertos, as it seems Avison didn't arrange the Sonata No 11. For this recording Pavlo Beznosiuk made his own arrangement of this sonata. As much as I admire the result I don't see the point. If one wants to

present the arrangements by Avison, then why fill in what he - for whatever reason - left out?

The Twelve sonatas by Geminiani are of the two then-usual types of 'sonata da chiesa' (Sonatas 1 - 6) and 'sonata da camera' (Sonatas 7 - 12), although the tempo indications don't show any difference. The sonatas of the second half contain several dance movements, but are still referred to as vivace, andante or allegro.

Although Geminiani remained his hero all his life Avison wasn't a conservative composer, let alone a Geminiani clone. In his Concertos op. 6 mentioned above he composed four concertos in which he made use of the modern sonata form. And in these arrangements of Geminiani's sonatas opus 1 he doesn't slavishly follow his model either. The most interesting example is the Concerto grosso No 6 in g minor, which ends with an andante. Here Avison adds a lengthy passage of his own, a theme with variations in two parts, after which the original andante by Geminiani is to be repeated. Avison refers to the andante as 'menuet', and this last movement is in fact a combination of menuet and trio - one of the most popular forms of the emerging classical style. The way this theme with variations should be played is a bit of a problem. Mark Kroll sees performance on a harpsichord as a possibility, but considering the scoring of these concertos this seems rather odd. The option followed here, violin and cello, is much more convincing. The structure of this last movement remains rather unsatisfying, though: the duet is very long (more than 200 measures) meaning that the other instruments have to keep silent for about 10 minutes.

This set of concerti grossi is an important discovery. Not only is it a fine tribute to the art of Geminiani, but it also reflects the admiration for the master, not just by Avison, but by English music-lovers at large. It also reflects the quite usual practice of showing one's admiration by arranging music of one's hero. Geminiani once did the same, when he turned Corelli's sonatas for violin and bc op. 5 into concerti grossi.

These performances are good but I have some reservations with regard to the sound, which I find a little sharp and - in the long run - a bit tiresome. Somewhat more variety in phrasing and articulation, more dynamic shades and in general a little more warmth and passion would have done this recording considerable good. I would advise listeners to assimilate this set gradually, and not at a sustained stretch as I have done. These concertos give plenty of evidence of Avison's great qualities as a composer, and one can only hope other compositions – such as his chamber music and vocal works - are to be explored in due course.

AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

Crawford

Avison has enjoyed some renewed popularity in the past few years, with a good deal of the credit for that going to Gordon Dixon, executive director of the Avison

Ensemble; he one day found some old music in the back of a cupboard that turned out to be some works by Avison. Apparently the discoveries go on, because two of Avison's workbooks appeared out of oblivion in 2000 and 2002; together they comprise more than 600 pages of music. These concerto arrangements of Francesco Geminiani's violin sonatas were in those workbooks.

This recording, then, constitutes something of an event in classical music. Avison apparently did not score an arrangement of Sonata 11, so Pavlo Beznosiuk wrote a concerto arrangement of it himself to make the set complete.

Geminiani was a great influence on Avison; indeed, Avison probably studied with him in London, as Geminiani was already living there when Avison moved there around 1725 at the age of 15. The two formed a close friendship that continued until Geminiani died in 1762.

This is a significant addition to the catalog of Avison's recorded music. The Avison Ensemble is doing good work in this respect, having already done a few recordings for Naxos of other Avison Concertos. This is a good recording, but I should probably include a note of caution for those who don't enjoy period ensembles, because this is clearly a period performance. Sometimes the intonation seems less than precise. Good sound and decent notes.

THE JOURNAL CULTURE MAGAZINE

It's a little surprising that the Newcastle-based Avison Ensemble and the Northallerton-based Divine Art haven't got together before this. But here they are with two double-CD sets out this month, both showcasing the region's 18th century musical heritage.

Charles Avison (1709-1770) was the main mover and shaker of both Newcastle's and Durham's music scenes, organising the first subscription concerts outside London. Aged 15, Avison went to London to further his career and met celebrated composer Francesco Geminiani, subsequently bringing the Italian style to the North-East.

The 12 Concerto Grosso arrangements of Francesco Geminiani's Sonatas for Violin and Basso Continuo, op. 1, are Avison's tribute to the maestro. The Italian style divides the orchestra into a group of solo players (the concertino) and the rest in ensemble (the ripieno), allowing for dramatic exchanges between the two and ample opportunities for the lead violinist to show off a virtuoso technique.

There's no shortage of the latter on these discs with Avison leader Pavlo Beznosiuk - who also arranged the missing Concerto no. 11. Remembering the concert in preparation for this recording at the Jubilee theatre in Newcastle, back in 2005, there seemed something almost cavalier about the way Beznosiuk threw his bowing arm into the solos. But the result is far from slapdash. His energy is

combined with meticulous tuning and an ear for a well-shaped phrase, lighting up the orchestra in what should prove a benchmark recording.

CDHOTLIST

Rick Anderson

Little-known until fairly recently, Charles Avison was one of England's greatest concerto composers. In the early 1700s he arranged eleven of Francesco Geminiani's violin sonatas in concerto grosso format, and these are performed very nicely here on period instruments by the Avison Ensemble under the direction of violin soloist Pavlo Beznosiuk. Avison's arrangements preserve all of the fire and elegance of the original pieces, and the Avison Ensemble gives them brisk and lively performances. Highly recommended.

ALBION MAGAZINE

Em Marshall

Another Avison disc presents his recently-discovered concerti grossi arrangements of Francesco Geminiani's Sonatas for Violin and Basso Continuo. Avison became acquainted with Geminiani in the mid-1720s in London, where Geminiani had been establishing himself as a top violinist, scholar and composer. The Italian composer became Avison's mentor and friend, and probably his teacher as well: in a letter to Avison, he wrote "You are my heir." In return, Avison copied, arranged, and promoted much of Geminiani's music. Whilst remaining generally faithful to Geminiani's formal structure and melodic lines, Avison occasionally includes some elements new to the Geminiani originals. Here the Avison Ensemble, a group formed specifically to promote the composer after the unexpected discovery of a collection of his music, record his arrangements of Geminiani's Op. 1 sonatas (No 11 of the twelve is missing, so it is included here in an arrangement by the Ensemble's director, Pavlo Beznosiuk.) The Ensemble perform this attractive music with flair and intelligence.